The woodchuck, or groundhog, is one of the best known wild mammals in Missouri, but few realize this rodent is a member of the Squirrel Family. Its common name, woodchuck, is an anglicized corruption of an Indian name for this species. The origin of its other name, groundhog, is obvious from the animal’s squat appearance, waddling gait and habit of living in the ground.

**Description.** This common Missouri rodent varies from 16-27 inches (406-685 mm) in length; it has short, powerful legs and a medium-long, bushy, and somewhat flattened tail. The long, coarse fur of the back is a grizzled grayish brown with a yellowish or reddish cast. Woodchucks weigh 4-14 pounds (1.8-6.3 kg), being lightest in spring when they are just out of hibernation and heaviest in fall prior to hibernation.

**Distribution and abundance.** When North America was first settled, woodchucks were relatively scarce, but as timbered areas were opened and woodland edge, fence rows and meadows increased, the chuck’s range expanded and the animals prospered. Now, this species is common everywhere in Missouri except in the Mississippi Lowland where it is rare. In the latter locality, the water table is so close to the surface that denning sites are limited mostly to dikes and levees.
Habitat and home. Woodchucks prefer to live along the edges where timbered areas are bordered by open land or along fence rows and heavily vegetated gullies or stream banks. Here they dig their burrows. The main entrance is often located beneath a tree stump or rock and is usually conspicuous because of a pile of freshly excavated earth and stones. Side entrances are smaller and better concealed. The tunnels lead to an enlarged chamber, 3-6 feet (.9-1.8 m) underground, which contains the nest.

Habits. By the end of October, most woodchucks are curled up in a profound sleep in their underground nest. So deep is this sleep that even if an animal is warmed up, it requires several hours to awaken. Woodchucks usually hibernate all winter, although during periods of mild weather, some individuals may awaken.

In Missouri, emergence from hibernation begins as early as the first week of February, but severe cold weather may delay this. As the daily temperatures rise and plant growth increases, the chucks spend more and more time above ground. During this period, the main activity is feeding and basking in the spring sun.

In digging, the front feet and claws are used primarily, but the teeth may be employed to move stones or cut roots. The amount of subsoil removed in the course of digging one burrow averages 716 pounds (325 kg). Digging is done so rapidly that a small burrow can be finished in one day, though upkeep is continued as long as the burrow is occupied.

Foods. The woodchuck is almost a complete vegetarian, eating leaves, flowers and soft stems of various grasses, of field crops such as clover and alfalfa, and of many kinds of wild herbs. Certain garden crops like peas, beans and corn are favorites. Chucks occasionally climb trees to obtain apples and pawpaws which they relish.

Reproduction. The breeding season begins in mid-February soon after the animals emerge from hibernation. Pregnancy lasts 31-33 days and the single, annual litter is born toward the end of March. At birth, the two to nine young are naked, blind and helpless. They measure about four inches (101 mm) long. The eyes open when the young are about 4 weeks old; although the kits come to the opening of the burrow at this time, they seldom venture outside until 6 or 7 weeks old. By midsummer, the young are 20 inches (508 mm) long and weigh about four pounds (1.8 kg). About this time, they may dig temporary burrows near the nursery which they use for a short period. Later, they move some distance away and establish their own homes.

Importance. Woodchucks formerly were trapped for their fur, which was used for cheap fur coats. The flesh of young and lean animals is good food.

The role of the woodchuck as a builder of homes for other animals is significant; because of this, the woodchuck occupies an important niche in the wildlife community. Skunks, foxes, weasels, opossums and rabbits all use woodchuck burrows for their dens. Also, because tremendous quantities of subsoil are moved in the course of burrow construction, the countless generations of woodchucks have contributed much to the aeration and mixing of the soil. Woodchucks are one of the few large mammals abroad in daylight, and many people get enjoyment from seeing them.

The woodchuck's taste for truck garden and agricultural crops often places it in an unfavorable position with farmers. Sometimes chucks burrow into levees and create erosion problems.

Management. Where woodchucks are too plentiful, they can be killed in their burrows by poisonous gases, but poison should only be handled by a competent person who is acquainted with state and federal laws. Trapping with wire-mesh box traps is preferable to using steel, leg-gripping traps, since the woodchuck is such a strong animal it often pulls free from the latter. Hunting with guns can control the local population and provide some sport as well.