



Groundhogs

A Groundhog is an animal that is also called woodchuck and whistle pig. Its Latin name is *Marmota monax*. Its common name, woodchuck, is derived from the Native American Algonquin name, “wuchak”, meaning “digger”. It is called whistle pig because it is chubby and makes a noisy whistle sound when warning of danger. *(Can you whistle?)*

A groundhog is a mammal; it has a backbone (it is a vertebrate), has fur, is warm blooded, gives birth to live babies (rather than laying eggs), feeds its babies milk (nurses), and other “mammal” things. *(Are you a mammal?)*

A groundhog is also a type of rodent and is in the same family as squirrels. Groundhogs are good at climbing trees like their squirrel relatives, even though you do not often see them there. *(Do you like to climb trees?)*

While awake in the day it is eating plants that grow mostly on the ground. At night, it is sleeping under the ground. In the fall, the groundhog may also be awake at night, as it needs to eat more food, to get as fat as possible before winter. Animals that are awake during the day and asleep at night are called “diurnal”. Animals that are asleep during the day and awake at night are called “nocturnal”. *(Are you diurnal or nocturnal?)*

Groundhogs can weigh up to 15 pounds and can live up to 9 years. Females will breed (have babies) when they are two years old. In the spring they can have as many as 9 babies, but usually have 4 or 5. After a gestation (pregnancy) of about 32 days, the babies are born underground between mid-April through mid-May and are only 3 inches long when they are born. The mother will nurse her babies for about 6 weeks, then, when the babies are around 9 weeks old, they are weaned (no longer drink milk) and now, eating only plants, they wander off to live on their own. Most babies stay within two miles of where they were born. *(How many siblings (brothers and sisters) do you have?)*

When groundhogs meet each other, they greet by “nose kissing”, that is, they touch noses and smell each other’s mouth. Each groundhog has its own special scent, and this helps them to identify each other. *(How would you greet someone?)*

Groundhogs live in many different kinds of places (habitats), where they can find the food, they like to eat and where there are also good places to hide and dig burrows. They, especially, like habitats where there are lots of open grassy places with bushes, just like on farms, in fields, gardens, parks, and around homes and schools. You may have a groundhog living in your yard. *(Do you live in the city, on a farm, in a housing plan?)*

Groundhogs eat many kinds of plants and can eat up to a pound of plants every day. Grass, dandelion, clover, goldenrod, aster, daisy, wild mustard, and wild onion are some of the plants they eat, and they even love apples, beans, peas, carrots and corn. Animals that eat only plants, are called herbivores (for humans, we say you are a vegetarian). *(What plants do you eat?)*

Animals that eat only meat are called carnivores. *(Do you eat meat?)*. Animals that eat only fruit are called fructivores *(What fruit do you like to eat?)*. Animals that eat only insects are called insectivores; Pennsylvania

bats are an example. Animals that eat meat and plants are called omnivores. *(Are you an herbivore, insectivore, fructivore, carnivore, or omnivore?)*

Groundhogs are rightly named “digger”, because they are one of the best tunnel builders around and they may dig several burrows: one for summer and one for winter. Their burrows (tunnels) can be up to 50 feet long and have many hallways leading to different chambers (rooms): a bathroom; a nursery; and one for hibernating. *(Do you have a bedroom and a bathroom in your home?)*

Though groundhogs can run up to 10 miles per hour and are a good, strong fighter if attacked, they generally do not go more than 300 feet from the entrance hole of their den. They also have more than one way in and out. It is important for them to have a back or side door to escape from predators coming in at the front door (predators are animals that hunt and eat other animals for food). Predators in our area that eat groundhogs would be fox, coyote, weasel, and black bear. Sometimes a hawk will kill and eat a small groundhog. *(Are you a predator?)*

Many animals cannot dig their own tunnels, so unused groundhog burrows are very important to animals that use these vacant homes for a safe shelter to live and raise their own families. Fox, coyote, turtle, snake, raccoon, opossum, skunk, and weasel are just some of the animals in our area that need groundhog holes to survive. *(Did you build your own home?)*

Groundhogs are one of only three types of mammals in our area that are “true” hibernators. Bats and jumping mice are the other two mammal types. (Reptile, amphibian, and many invertebrate species also hibernate). True hibernators are different from other animals that take long naps in the winter, such as black bear. True hibernators go through very dramatic physical changes compared to the “nappers”. A groundhog goes from a body temperature of 97 degrees, down to 40 degrees; a heart rate of 100 times per minute, to 4 times per minute. *(What is your heart rate and body temperature?)*

There are other special changes, and if disturbed while hibernating, it may take a groundhog 7 hours to awaken fully. Compare this to a black bear that only slows down like you do when you sleep at night. A bear may stay in its den most of the winter, living off its fat, but it can be easily awakened at any time. A groundhog usually hibernates from October to February. *(Do you hibernate?)*

In the United States, Groundhog Day is on February 2 every year, and it is a fun, folklore filled day, predicting the arrival of spring. Legend has it that on this morning, if a groundhog can see its shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter. If it cannot see its shadow, spring is on the way. Punxsutawney Phil is the most famous groundhog of all. Maybe, one day your family can travel to Punxsutawney Pennsylvania to meet this famous, weather forecaster. *(Who else tries to predict the weather?)*

Groundhog's Holiday

The second month, the second day
we know is Groundhog's Holiday.
The keeper of the local zoo
photographers, reporters too,
anxiously await together for
woodchuck's forecast of the weather.
Each year this time he leaves his hearth;
his home beneath good Mother Earth.
He wiggles out to see the sun
and sure enough, ask anyone,
should he perchance his shadow see,
back to his home again he'll flee.
And that sign is still the surest thing
six weeks must pass before it's spring!

Groundhog Day

Old Groundhog stretched in his leafy bed.
He turned over slowly and then he said,
"I wonder if spring is on the way?
I'll go and check the weather today.
If I see my shadow between eleven and noon,
I then will know that I'm out too soon.
I'll crawl back in bed for six weeks more;
pull up the warm covers and snore and snore.
But if no shadow gives me a scare,
I know that spring is in the air.
I'll wake my friends and wish them cheer,
with glorious news that spring is here."