

Woodchuck (*Marmota monax*)

Groundhog, Marmot

Local status: COMMON

Local Sightings/Collections:

2330 +/-210 years BC	Westdale Plain site (Ministry of Culture data)
1100 – 1300	Pergentile site (Ministry of Culture data)
Early 1500s	Buddy Boers and Hanes sites (Ministry of Culture data)
1640	Freelton site (Ministry of Culture data)
1795 - 1914	Botanical View Estates site (Ministry of Culture data)
1947 - 1949	“Abundant in suitable habitat throughout the County” (Warren <i>et al.</i> 1951)
1976	Common (Ecologistics 1976)
1991	Common (found at 42 areas) during the NAI (Heagy and Ross 1995)
2001 - 2002	Common “with a preference for agricultural areas” (Vlasman 2003)

Also found outside Hamilton at the Walker site (1620 – 1645) and Cayuga Bridge site (prior to 825), both in Haldimand, the Porteous site, Brant (825 +/- 90 years) and the Crawford Lake site, Halton (1420 – 1504).

The woodchuck seems to have always been here. Although it is often thought of as an animal of open fields, its habitat includes woodlands and brushy areas. Thus, archaeological records dating to pre-European settlement times when Hamilton had considerably more forest are not surprising. In addition, there were over 3600 hectares of prairie and oak savanna prior to settlement (Goodban *et al.* 1999). This species has even adapted to urban life as records of 10 individuals from the Stelco heavy industrial area in May, 2004 indicate (Smith 2004). There is general consensus based on anecdotal evidence that woodchuck numbers have declined across southern Ontario. One popular theory is that coyotes are responsible, although disease has also been suggested (D. Sutherland, pers. comm.)

Description	Brown, with reddish to blackish hairs grizzled with brown hairs. Prominent bushy tail, small ears, short legs, dark brown or black feet and white incisors.
Adult body length	42 - 82 cm
Tail length	10 - 15 cm
Average weight	7 - 10 cm
Hind foot length	2 - 6.4 kg

The woodchuck is a diurnal species that can be found in a variety of habitat types including pastures, meadows, old fields and wooded areas. Its range encompasses much of central to southern Canada, east-central Alaska, British Columbia and the northeastern United States. Large burrow openings (20 to 30 centimetres) with piles of dirt just outside indicate the presence of woodchucks.

Following a gestation period of approximately 28 days, females produce one litter of four or five young each year in April or May. Dispersal from the natal den occurs at only two months of age. Woodchucks put on a heavy fat layer in the fall to sustain them through their winter hibernation. They awake in late winter, with males immediately beginning their search for a mate. The mating period is the only time when males and females share burrows.

Woodchucks eat grasses, clover, alfalfa, plantain and corn, often causing great damage to gardens. They also have favourable impacts. These mammals fertilize the earth by defecating in special excrement chambers separate from the nesting chamber. Their digging loosens and aerates the soil and mixes in moisture and organic matter. They also bring up subsoil for transformation into topsoil. The main threats to woodchucks are humans (most notably hunters and vehicle drivers) and predators such as the red fox.