

Arboreal Woodchucks?

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On a warm summer afternoon several years ago my brother Jim and I were canoeing on a favorite stretch of the Galien River. The Galien is located in the extreme southwestern corner of Michigan's lower peninsula and empties into Lake Michigan. It is a small, sluggish river which passes through many relatively untouched oak-hickory and beech-maple woodlands. The diverse flora and fauna of the area make it a naturalist's paradise. Great blue herons would take flight as we rounded a bend and would resume their fishing safely out of sight until our canoe again surprised them several meanders downstream. Brilliant red cardinal flowers were occasionally seen along the banks.

In a small tree not one hundred and fifty feet from our craft, a small brown animal tumbled to the ground from a height of about twelve feet and scurried away. The animal did not climb down from the tree. Instead, it bounced from branch to branch on its short trip to the ground. The animal was none other than *Marmota monax*, the woodchuck. I was rather excited about our find and later found that at least two other authors had seen a woodchuck in a tree (Bailey 1926, Rue 1969). Several weeks later, I again saw a lone woodchuck scamper down from a small tree on another stretch of the Galien.

The woodchuck, popularly known as the groundhog, is a rodent and belongs to the squirrel family, Sciuridae (Hall and Kelson 1959, Walker 1968). This diurnal rodent is sixteen to twenty inches long, weighs five to ten pounds, and is usually brown or yellowish-brown (Burt and Grossenheider 1964). The woodchuck is mainly terrestrial but does dig a subterranean burrow with at least two entrances. One of the entrances is always easily recognized because of the large amount of earth in front of it. The hole itself is also large and serves as a good distinguishing characteristic. The woodchuck will eat many types of herbaceous plants depending on their availability in the area (Bailey 1926). It will also eat bark, twigs, and buds of small bushes and even insects on occasion (Rue 1969).

In 1972, I moved to North Dakota to do graduate work in biology. At the University of North Dakota Forest River Biology Station near Inkster, North Dakota, where I carry on my research on forest ecosystem functions, I saw a small mammal scurry along the underbrush one day in the summer of 1974. It looked exactly like a woodchuck but, I didn't think that their range extended this far west. I found out however that their range does include a large portion of northeastern and a small portion of southeastern North Dakota (Bailey 1926, Burt

and Grossenheider 1964, Caras 1967). Later that summer I again found what was in fact the woodchuck I had seen earlier. This time, it was twenty feet off the ground in a dead basswood tree. At first, I thought it was dead because its head hung limply over the side of the tree trunk. When it heard my approach though, it quickly came to "life." On most sunny afternoons throughout the summer, this woodchuck would climb into this same tree and sun itself for several hours.

The woodchuck is a true hibernator and I'm sure most of us by now are familiar with the old adage that if the groundhog sees its shadow on the second of February after emerging from its burrow, winter will last for another six weeks. If at any time in the future you see a groundhog's shadow on February second but cannot locate the groundhog, it may well be that it is in a nearby tree.

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