

Woodchuck Ecology and Management

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Woodchucks, a.k.a. groundhogs, are common suburban mammals occurring throughout NH. In general, woodchucks prefer open woodland and the surrounding wooded or brushy areas adjacent to open land. Burrows are located in fields and pastures, along fence rows, stone walls, roadsides and near building foundations or the base of trees. The woodchuck's compact, chunky body is supported by short strong legs that can move up to 200 pounds of soil per year. Occasionally woodchuck burrowing and feeding activities conflict with human interests. Woodchucks are strictly plant eaters consuming over a pound per day and, like most garden pests feed on a wide variety of species. They prefer, beans, carrots, peas, greens, alfalfa, clover and grasses. They will also consume tomatoes, broccoli, squash and other garden plants. Fruit trees and ornamental shrubs are damaged by woodchucks as they claw or gnaw woody vegetation. Excavated burrow systems present hazards to farm equipment, horses and livestock. Gnawing and burrowing activity has caused damage to underground cables, causing power outages and damaging navigational aids at airports. Burrowing can weaken earthen dams, dikes and foundations. Human health and safety is also a concern as raccoon rabies has been confirmed in woodchucks.

Woodchucks make their subterranean homes near their food source, which might be a vegetable garden. Non-lethal methodologies to reduce woodchuck garden damage include: exclusion (fencing), habitat modification, trapping, frightening devices and repellents. Woodchucks may be removed through trapping, gas cartridges or shooting. Control is typically enhanced through an integrated approach which incorporates multiple strategies. Fencing may be electric, non-electric or a combination. As woodchucks can climb, electrified fencing will provide the best non-lethal protection, placing a minimum of two wires approximately 4 and 8 inches off the ground. Battery and solar powered chargers are available and both are quite portable. Non-electric barriers, using traditional fencing material should be at least 3 feet tall bending the top foot outward, consist of a tight and strong wire mesh and be buried up to a foot deep forming an outward "L" to prevent burrowing under. Adding a single electric wire 4 inches off the ground and the same distance from the non-electric fence has proven to enhance effectiveness and be an effective burrowing deterrent.

Live-trapping is a possibility however, the potential of exposure to rabies as well as probable death to a translocated woodchuck should be considered. Placing a trap baited with apples, carrots, lettuce and preserves directly at a burrow entrance using materials to funnel the woodchuck into the trap is the most effective live-trapping methodology. Early spring, prior to females giving birth and when alternative food sources are scarce is the optimal time to conduct live-trapping. Suitable habitat to translocate a woodchuck must be identified and landowner permission secured. Although a popular recommendation, translocation of wild animals is not a

biologically sound practice in many situations given low survival rates, stress and animal movement. Furthermore, the AVMA, National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians and Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists oppose relocation of mammals because of the risk of disease transmission.

Harassment and frightening devices provide only temporary relief at best. Scarecrows and other effigies can provide some relief if moved frequently. Pyrotechnics are ineffective and no repellents for woodchucks are registered with the EPA. Predator urine (bobcat or coyote) may provide some relief. Habitat modification or the removal of brush and thinning of wooded or overgrown areas is recommended to reduce the attractiveness of denning sites adjacent to gardens.

A common method of woodchuck control is the commercial gas cartridge. Gas cartridges are ignited, placed in burrow systems, and all entrances sealed. As the gas cartridge burns, carbon monoxide and other gases are produced that are lethal to woodchucks. As other animals will utilize woodchuck burrow systems inhabitant confirmation should be conducted prior to treating a burrow. Woodchucks are not protected in NH and may be removed by shooting. Extreme caution and safety are required, and local shooting ordinances must be adhered to. Conibear traps are effective in some situations. Conibear traps are body gripping devices that kill an animal that attempts to walk through it almost instantly. Sizes 160 and 220 are appropriate for woodchucks. Care must be taken to avoid non-target capture. Do not assume that Should further assistance regarding a woodchuck conflict be required contacting a nuisance wildlife control operators that specialize in wildlife damage management is recommended