

## WOODCHUCKS or ROCKCHUCKS

The Extension office is again receiving numerous calls regarding troublesome Rock Chucks. Damage often occurs on farms, in home gardens, orchards, around buildings and in irrigation systems. Aggressive burrowing may lead to weakened foundations, gnawing on underground power cables, and often damaged irrigation systems. Uncontrolled, their population can increase rapidly.

A USDA Factsheet identifies this creature as a member of the squirrel family. They are often called Wood Chucks, Ground Hogs, or Whistle Pigs. They are usually grizzled brownish gray in color, weigh about 5 to 10 pounds, have yellowish-white incisor teeth and long curved claws on their forefeet that are well adapted for digging. Their eyes, ears, and nose are located toward the top of their head, which allows them to remain concealed in their burrows while they check for danger over the rim or edge. Although they are slow runners, rock chucks are very alert and quickly scurry to their dens when sensing danger.

In general, these marmots prefer open farmland or brushy areas adjacent to open land. Burrows are commonly located in fields and pastures, along fence rows, roadsides, near building foundations or the bases of trees. A common habitat for Rock Chucks in Cache County is near bridges or along waterways that have chunks of broken concrete or large rocks that are used to hold banks. Aggressive burrowing often causes washouts in irrigation systems and proves quite costly before repairs can be made.

Rock Chuck burrows can be distinguished by a large mound of excavated earth at the main entrance. The main opening is approximately 10 to 12 inches in diameter. There are two or more entrances to each burrow system, which are often well hidden and difficult to find. The burrow system serves as home to the Rock Chucks for mating, weaning young, hibernating in winter, and protection when threatened. These animals maintain sanitary den sites, replacing nest materials frequently. A burrow and den system is often used for several seasons.

These creatures prefer to feed in the early morning and evening hours. They are strict herbivores and feed on a variety of vegetables, grasses, and legumes. When not feeding, they may bask in the sun during the warmest portions of the day. They are often observed dozing on stone walls, on large rocks, and on fallen logs close to the burrow entrance. Rock Chucks are pleasant neighbors, unless their numbers get out of control and damage begins to occur.

Rock Chucks are among the few mammals that enter into true hibernation. Males usually come out of hibernation before females and sub-adults and may travel long distances in search of a mate. A single litter of 2 to 6 young is produced each season. When weaned in late summer the young strike out on their own, often occupying abandoned dens or burrows. The life span of a Rock Chuck is about 3 to 6 years.

In Utah, Rock Chucks are considered game animals with no legal protection. In damage situations, control methods must be used to limit destruction. If shooting is allowed in a given area and can be accomplished safely, these varmints can often be controlled by hunters or landowners. A variety of calibers can be used, but .22 caliber centerfire rifles are most popular. Occasionally shotguns are used,

but gauge, range and shot size should be considered. The objective is to remove the animal as humanely as possible without wounding it.

Another means of control is the use of commercial gas cartridges. They are specially designed cardboard cylinders filled with slow-burning chemicals. They are ignited and placed in burrow systems, after all entrances have been sealed. As the gas cartridges burn, they produce carbon monoxide and other gases that are lethal to Rock Chucks. Gas cartridges are a General Use Pesticide and are available from the USDA-APHIS –ADC Pocatello Supply Depot (208-236-6920). Half a case of 50 Gas Cartridges sell for approximately \$75. Directions for their use are on the label and should be carefully read and closely followed. There are no toxicants or repellents registered for Rock Chuck control.