

Canku Ota

(Many Paths)

An Online Newsletter Celebrating Native America

February 8, 2003 - Issue 80

Origin Of The Groundhog Dance

Cherokee Legend



Seven wolves once caught a Groundhog and said, "Now we'll kill you and have something good to eat."

But the Groundhog said, "When we find good food we must rejoice over it, as people do in the Green-corn dance. I know you mean to kill me and I can't help myself, but if you want to dance I'll sing for you. This is a new dance entirely. I'll lean up against seven trees in turn and you will dance out and then turn and come back, as I give the signal, and at the last turn you may kill me."

The wolves were very hungry, but they wanted to learn the new dance, so they told him to go ahead. The Groundhog leaned up against a tree and began the song, Ha'wiy'ëhì', and all the wolves danced out in front, until he gave the signal, Yu! and began with Ha'wiy'ëhì', when they turned and danced back in line. "That's fine," said the Groundhog, and went over to the next tree and started the second song. The wolves danced, out and then turned at the signal and danced back again.

"That's very fine," said the Groundhog, and went over to another tree and started the third song. The wolves danced their best and the Groundhog encouraged them, but at each song he took another tree, and each tree was a little nearer to his hole under a stump. At the seventh song he said, "Now, this is the last dance, and when I say Yu! you will all turn and come after me, and the one who gets me may have me." So he began the seventh song and kept it up until the wolves were away out in front. Then he gave the signal, Yu! and made a jump for his hole. The wolves turned and were after him, but he reached the hole first and dived in. Just as he got inside, the foremost wolf caught him by the tail and gave it such a pull that it broke off, and the Groundhog's tail has been short ever since.

Groundhog/Marmot (*Marmota monax*)



The Delaware Indians considered groundhogs honorable ancestors. According to the original creation beliefs of the Delaware Indians, their forebears began life as animals in Mother Earth and emerged centuries later to hunt and live as men. The groundhog, known also as woodchuck, is a burrowing and hibernating mammal. The groundhog is a marmot (*Marmota monax*). Native to North America and commonly found in Canada and eastern United States. Most closely related to squirrels, woodchucks actually can climb trees and also swim.

Range: Groundhogs are widely distributed in North America and are particularly common in the east where they are found from Alabama and Georgia in the United States to northern Quebec and Ontario. In the west, their range extends northward to Alaska, through southern Yukon and Northwest Territories. Groundhog distribution is spotty everywhere on the edges of the range.



Description: The groundhog is a shy, reclusive animal that lives in empty fields. The

groundhog has a thick and and coarse reddish brown fur coat. Its has an elongated head with sharp rodent-like teeth. It has a squat body, short legs and a solid muscular frame. An adult has a length of 15 inches with a tail 6 inches long. Each paws has very sharp claws. The claws are used to dig and are used in combat when males fight to protect their territory and to determine which of them will mate with the females. During the latter part of summer and autumn it will increase its body weight by nearly 50 percent in fat to prepare for its long hibernation. The groundhog also gathers and places stores of food in their burrow for the winter months. The groundhog is mainly a herbivore, eating seeds, roots and other plant material. The groundhog has excellent eyesight. It has a very nervous disposition, ready to flee to its burrow at any sign of danger.

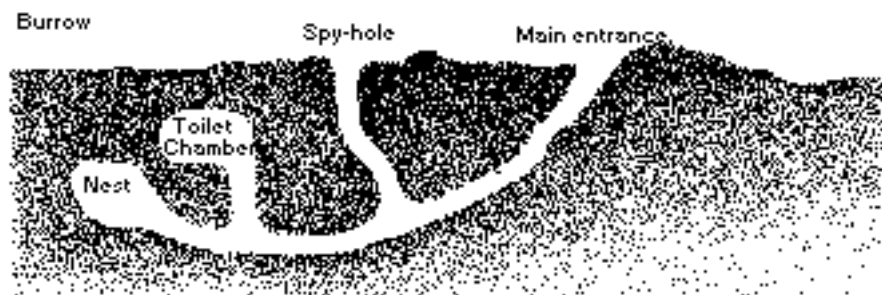
Because groundhogs are burrowing mammals, their feet have sturdy claws and their legs are thick and strong. Their forefeet, the principal ones used for digging, each have four well developed claws, and the hindfeet have five. They escape from enemies by diving into burrows, which may account for the fact that their top running speed does not exceed 15 km per hour.

Habitats: The groundhog prefers flat empty fields. They dig long and deep burrows. They lay dried leaves and hay in their sleeping chamber. The entrance of their burrow has a non-obstructive view of the sky and their immediate surrounding. They rarely venture very far from their burrow.

Groundhogs tend to avoid damp or swampy areas. They prefer open areas such as fields, clearings, open forests, and rocky slopes. They generally dig their burrows in areas where luxuriant grasses and other short-growing plants provide food.

Summer burrows are often in the middle of pastures and meadows, and the animals will have a denning burrow, used only in the winter, in woody or brushy areas nearby. Winter burrows, whether separate or part of a groundhog family's main burrow system, are usually deep enough to be located below the frost level.

Burrows usually have a main entrance, one or more "spyholes" for added safety from enemies, and separate toilet and nesting chambers. The same nest is used for sleeping, hibernation, and as a nursery. It is made of dry grass in a chamber that may be 45 cm wide and over 30 cm high.



Breeding: In the spring the males fight to determine which of them will mate. The young are born in the burrow and will remain inside for a month. Young

groundhogs are born in April and May following a gestation period of 30 days. One litter, usually with four young, is produced per year. Groundhogs are blind and helpless at birth, about 10 cm in length and about 30 g in weight. At about 28 days old, their eyes are open, and they are covered with short hair. They are weaned when they start to emerge from the burrow at five to six weeks of age. The young are almost fully grown by the end of summer. Groundhogs have been known to live for 10 years, although the average life span is probably much less than that.

Enemies: The groundhog's main enemies are eagles, snakes, bears, wolves, felines and man.

How Much Wood? Many experts and non-experts have tried to answer the age-old question and tongue twister, "How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?" Or, is the question actually, "How much ground would a groundhog grind if a groundhog could grind ground?" The answers vary from "none" to "it all depends on the woodchuck's size, lifespan, etc." But, the most common answer is "about 700 pounds.

Compared to beavers, groundhogs/woodchucks are not adept at moving timber, although some will chew wood. A wildlife biologist once measured the inside volume of a typical woodchuck burrow and estimated that - if wood filled the hole instead of dirt - the industrious animal would have chucked about 700 pounds worth.