



March 21, 2008

BATTLING THE WOODCHUCK

How much wood can a woodchuck chuck? Apparently more than you think because look at the size of the dirt mounds these critters can make near your home, garage or an older outbuilding foundation. Saline County has perfect habitat for the woodchuck and I received several calls last week from people wanting to immediately send them to woodchuck heaven.

The woodchuck is most frequently encountered in early morning or late afternoon, a momentary glimpse of a stocky animal galloping low along the ground, mostly concealed by shrubs or ground vegetation. A closer examination will reveal trails that lead to a den site where one or two holes mark the entrance to underground tunnels and a nesting chamber. The most characteristic feature of a woodchuck denning site is a large accumulation of soil at the mouth of the hole. The soil is generally freshly deposited and shows a considerable number of tracks. This elevated mound of soil has been removed by the woodchuck from the subterranean chambers and serves to deflect rain from burrow as well as providing a place to bask or watch for predators.

There will be a second hole well hidden that are used as escape routes whenever the conspicuous front entrance is entered by a predator. Denning sites can be in no-till fields, generally in dry soft soils on slopes, under roots of dead trees, or within a crevasse in a rock outcrop or near building foundations. Holes and tunnels made by woodchucks are used by a host of smaller mammals including rabbits, skunks, weasels, mice, opossums, and wood rats, and other larger mammals enlarge them for their own dens.

The food of woodchucks is principally grasses, green plants, and foliage of native trees. They also feed on fruits and vegetables from your garden. The principal natural enemies of woodchucks are the red fox, coyote, bobcat, eagles large hawks and owls. Longevity of this rodent is from five to six years. Its burrow system is its defense; once lodged in it the woodchuck is almost impossible to dislodge. It will grind its teeth, fight ferociously, and call in a high-pitched squeal, thus the nickname "whistle pig."

There are no registered poisons you can place in the holes. Small smoke sticks may not work because of the size of the holes, plus you don't want that sulfur smell in a building or sparks to start a fire in a building. Trapping is the best alternative we have other than shooting in rural areas. You can call a commercial company to remove them by fumigating or trapping or learn how to trap them yourself. If you become successful trapping one, have a plan how you are going to handle the situation without getting a finger bitten! Because ground hogs forage during the day, sometimes you can pack the hole with gravel or wire and they move on to another location.

The best video I have seen on trapping woodchucks and tricking them in the evening or at night was made by Extension Educator Dennis Ferraro. I have placed it on the front page of our website this month. You must have the free real player software installed on your computer, I have added a link to that also. To see the video go to www.saline.unl.edu. Further resources are available on the world wide web at <http://icwdm.org> which is the University Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management.



Extension Specialist Steve Vantassel spoke at the Milligan Grassland Day program this year and has direct field experience with catching woodchucks. His contact information is 402-472-8961 or email svantassel2@unl.edu.

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