

BACKYARD MAMMALS AT WEST

At West Point we are lucky enough to have a host of mammals just outside our front doors. On almost any given summer day we can simply step outside and see squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits and groundhogs. At night, other species such as raccoons, opossums and skunks wander about. In this brochure we have included a short description of each of these species with pictures and brief summaries of their appearance, ecology, habitat, range and diet. We also touch upon nuisance raccoon issues and how to best prevent these issues. We hope that this material will prove useful in identifying, better understanding and ultimately in living amongst these animals but this is by no means a comprehensive guide. For more information on these animals, visit the NYSDEC website at: www.dec.ny.gov.

RACCOON (*Procyon lotor*)



- The raccoon is a mid-sized mammal (1½ - 2½ ft long, weighing 10 - 50+ lbs.) and are found primarily in forests and urban/suburban areas.
- It has gray-brown fur, a black “bandit’s mask” and a banded bushy tail. It is also well known for its skilled front paw dexterity and nuisance garbage raiding.
- Raccoons are mostly nocturnal and can live alone or in small groups. They mate once a year in winter or spring. Litters average two to six kits.
- They live 5-10 years in the wild and range from S. Canada to Panama. They eat eggs, mice, turtles, frogs, invertebrates, nuts, berries and garbage.
- Raccoons have an enhanced sense of touch due to special cells in their front paw pads. This lets them better know their environment or “see” by hand.

FAQ: RACCOON PAWS & OPOSSUM TAILS

Q: How are raccoons so good with their front paws?

A: Raccoons have special adaptations that make them so dexterous - long fingers, hyper-sensitive paw pads, and a brain built to register touch and solve problems.

Q: Do raccoons really rinse their food? A: Raccoons may douse (dunk) food in water, not to clean it off but - some zoologists believe - to further enhance their sense of touch and better understand their food.

Q: Can opossums really hang by their tails? A: No. This is a myth. While opossums do use their tails to grasp things or help keep their balance, they do not hang from them. Their tails cannot support their full weight.

GROUNDHOG (*Marmota monax*)

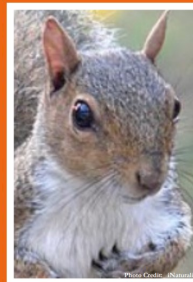


- The groundhog or woodchuck is a small to mid-sized mammal (1½ - 2+ ft long, weighing 5 - 15 lbs.) and found mostly in forests, fields, and residential areas.
- It has gray-brown fur, short ears and limbs and a bushy tail. They are a common sight at West Point and dig burrows up to five feet deep and up to twenty feet long.

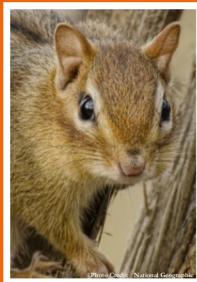
- Groundhogs are diurnal and solitary. They mate once a year in spring after emerging from winter hibernation. Litters average four to five young.
- They live five to six years on average and range from Alaska, throughout Canada, and the eastern U.S. As strict herbivores, they eat grass and herbs.
- Groundhogs are deep hibernators. They eat heavily in the fall and spend winter in a deep torpor, greatly slowing their body temperature and metabolism.

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

- A common squirrel is a small mammal (1- 1½ ft long, weighing 1 -2 lbs.) and found mostly in hardwood forests as well as in urban and suburban parks.
- It has gray fur with a pale gray-white underbelly and a gray bushy tail. Melanistic all-black squirrels are also occasionally seen (see front cover, lower left picture.).
- Squirrels are active from dawn to dusk. They mate twice a year, in spring and summer with three to four pups litters and eat seeds, nuts and fruits.
- The most visible mammal at West Point, they are adept climbers and - as it happens - foresters. Many nuts squirrels bury today become tomorrow's trees.



EASTERN CHIPMUNK (*Tamias striatus*)



- The chipmunk is a small mammal (about ½ ft long, weight about a ½ lb.) and found mostly in forests and fields, as well as urban and suburban parks.
- It has red-brown, pale black eye stripes and white body stripe that is bordered by black stripes that run down its back a furry brown and black tail.
- Chipmunks are active from dawn to dusk. They mate once or twice a year with litters of three to five young. They eat seeds, nuts and fruits.
- They are known for storing food - which they spend months carrying in their mouths to their burrows - and their calls - fast trilling chips and slow chucks.

VIRGINIA OPOSSUM (*Didelphys virginiana*)



- The opossum is a small to mid-sized mammal (1½ - 2 ft long, weighing 5-15 lbs.) and found mostly in lowland forests, fields and residential areas.
- It has white-gray fur, white head, pink nose, black eyes and ears and a bare tail. They are famous for “playing possum”, acting dead when threatened.
- It is nocturnal and solitary. It mates once a year in winter or spring. Litters average six to nine joeys, that must spend two months developing in a pouch.
- They live 3-7 years in the wild. Their range extends from Canada to Costa Rica. They mostly scavenge but also eat small animals, berries or garbage.
- Opossums look like large rats but as marsupials - the only ones in the U.S. - they are more closely related to kangaroos, koalas and Tasmanian devils.

FAQ: OPOSSUMS & RABIES

Q: Is it true that opossums cannot get rabies? A: No, this is no true. It is rare, due to the lower body temperature of opossums, but opossums can, in fact, contract rabies. Rabies is a risk with any species of mammal.

STRIPED SKUNK (*Mephitis mephitis*)



- The striped skunk is a small to mid-sized mammal (1½ - 2+ ft long, weighing 5-10+ lbs.) and is found primarily in forests, fields and residential areas.
- It has black fur, a white nape and stripes along each side, as well as a black and white bushy tail. It is known for spraying a strong musk when threatened.
- It is nocturnal and solitary. It mates once a year in winter and spring. Litters average four to six kits and range up to ten kits.
- They live about seven years in the wild, range from Mexico, throughout the US to Canada. Omnivores, they eat insects, mice, fruits, nuts and seeds.

EASTERN RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasurus ludovicianus*)



Red squirrels are small, red-gray squirrels that prefer coniferous or mixed hardwood forests and are rare to West Point. They have been reported here and so are worth inclusion but are more likely to be seen elsewhere. Less than a foot long and under a pound in weight, red squirrels are more aggressive and vocal than their much more common gray counterparts.

EASTERN COTTONTAIL (*Silvilagus floridanus*)



- The cottontail is a small rabbit (1-1 ½ ft long, 1-3 lbs.) found in forests, fields, and residential areas.
- It has gray-brown fur and a short fluffy white tail, which looks like cotton - the rabbit's namesake
- Cottontails can be active any time of day. They mate 3-4 times a year and average 4-5 kits per litter.
- They live 3-5 years and range from Colombia, through Mexico and the eastern U.S. to Canada.
- They are strict herbivores, eating grass, wild herbs and raiding gardens. In winter they browse twigs.
- Rabbits are lagomorphs, not rodents. They have two sets of large front teeth, not one set like in rodents.

KNOW YOUR TRACKS



NUISANCE RACCOON ISSUES

Q: What are nuisance raccoons? A: Nuisance raccoons are raccoons that enter human areas, usually for food. They alarm people, damage property, raid trash, and make a mess.

Q: What causes nuisance raccoon issues? A: Nuisance animal issues, raccoons included, usu. begin over food. have to do with food. Raccoons are attracted to trash, birdseed, etc.

Q: How can I prevent these issues? A: Always bag trash. When storing trash or other attractants, never overload and always securely close and, if possible, latch storage bins.

DISEASE

RABIES

Rabies is a viral central nervous system disease in mammals, transmitted in saliva, usu. by a bite from an infected animal.

Vectors: Any mammal can become infected /w rabies but its most often in bats, raccoons, skunks, coyotes and foxes.

Symptoms: no fear, hyperaggressiveness, self-mutilation. No coordination, drooling, paralysis, difficulty breathing.

Human health risk: serious; can be transmitted to humans and pets and is almost always fatal w/o post-exposure treatment.

DISTEMPER

Distemper is a viral nervous, respiratory, & digestive system disease transmitted via nose/eye secretions, urine, feces.

Vectors: Many mammals incl canids (coyotes and foxes), mustelids (weasels and skunks), raccoons, bears, and others.

Symptoms: nose/eye secretions, drooling, difficulty breathing, seizures, circling, paralysis, wasting, foot/nose hardening.

Human health risk: unknown to infect humans, but highly fatal to non-vaccinated dogs (~50% adult dogs, ~80% puppies).

Harvesting: These species are protected in NYS. They may be harvested in season per NYS Regulations. For more, see: www.dec.ny.gov. Hunting at West Point is coordinated thru and harvests reported at : www.westpoint.isportsman.net

BASIC WILDLIFE SAFETY REVIEW

Do these things to keep people and animals safe:

- **NEVER FEED WILDLIFE** - Nuisance animal issues, often begin over food. And so feeding wild animals is illegal.
- **KEEP YOUR DISTANCE** - Never approach or corner wildlife. Risks incl. disease, attack. Enjoy from afar.
- **REPORT ANIMAL ISSUES** - call a wildlife responder if human or animal well-being is a concern.

REPORTING WILDLIFE ISSUES

Know when and what to report and who to contact

- **WHEN TO REPORT:** Call right away If you see wildlife 1) being handled by people 2) being fed or baited. 3) hurt, sick or acting odd. 4) has been harvested illegally.
- **WHAT TO REPORT:** Be sure to say : 1) when and 2) where wildlife issue happened, 3) what the animal did 4) where animal (if known), 5) your name, phone number.
- **CONTACT:** West Point Game Wardens via the Military Police Sgt's Desk at: 845-938-3333 (anytime); Natural Resources: (845) 938-2314, -7122. (M-F, 0745-1630).

BACKYARD MAMMALS OF THE WEST POINT MILITARY RESERVATION

