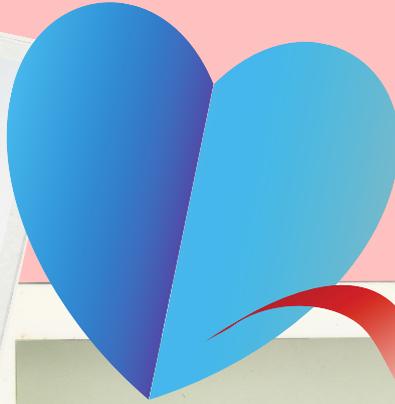


# Tales From Along the Trail...



*In Search of Spring for Groundhog's Day  
with Naturalist Cathy Ricks*



Are you in search of an early spring, more winter or groundhogs along the trail? When we last spotted our resident groundhogs, they were busy packing on the pounds in autumn, preparing for their long winter nap. Whether you call them groundhogs, whistle pigs or woodchucks, they love to dig and eat. Our sandy, glacial till soils along the Cuyahoga River and in the parks are excavated to create extensive tunnels, sun porches, underground rooms and several entrances for speedy escapes. Groundhogs are well-adapted for living underground. Their coarse, grizzly fur sheds dirt and their flat heads allow them to peek out of the burrow before surfacing. They share some unique adaptations with their relative the beaver: both have front teeth that continue to grow and both can close their noses and ears for protection. Groundhogs' noses are avoiding the flying soil as they tunnel while beavers', the water!



The high-pitched alarm that gives them the name whistle pig can easily be confused with a bird or squirrel.

The whistles send groundhogs diving into their holes; or they can be signals before they emerge. Their sharp, curved claws can scale your garden fences, propel them up a tree or help them do a "hog paddle" in the water.

Groundhogs create a hibernating room below the frost line and carry plant materials down to make it cozy. They even dig an indoor toilet room (without the convenience of indoor plumbing). They plug up their entrances with leaves and dirt before curling into a ball and going to sleep, and sleep and sleep. They are "true hibernators" with heartbeats plunging down to 5 times per minute, breathing slowed almost to a stop and their chilly body temperature just above freezing at 47 degrees.

The first groundhogs to emerge in February and March are the "Phils" defending their territory and looking for a "Phyllis." The woodchuck's winter fat reserves will be shrunken, and they will be 20-50 % thinner from their hibernation "sleep" work out.

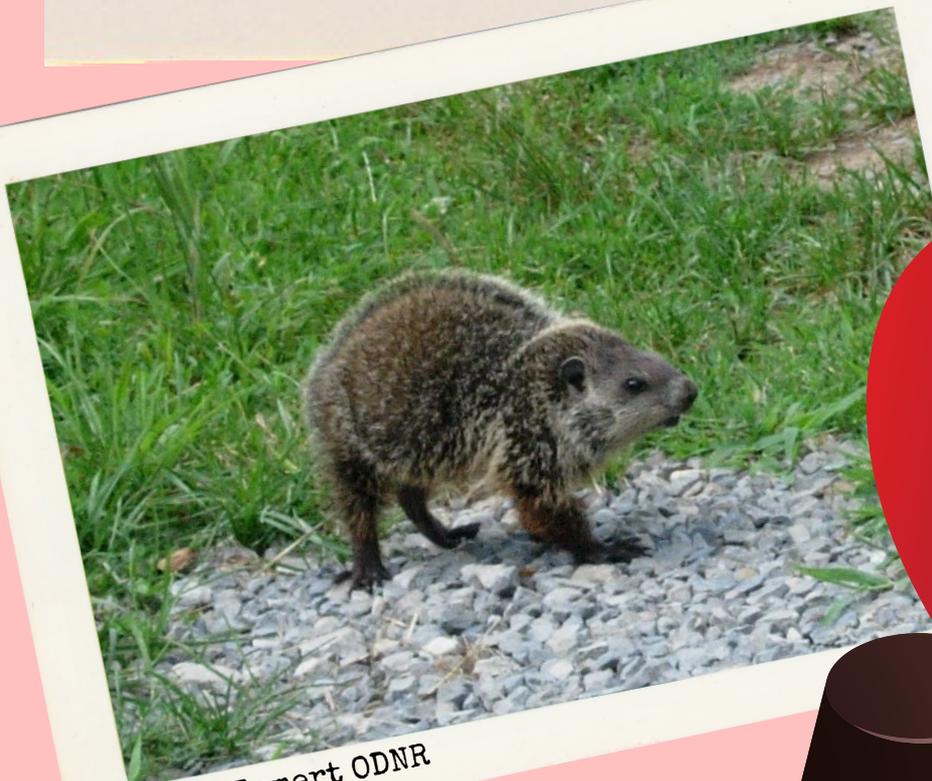


Females will hibernate longer than males, protecting their energy resources for giving birth and assuming single parenthood in April and May. Baby chucklings will emerge from the burrow to sample their first tastes of greens and sunshine just in time for summer. The chucklings will wrestle, pig out, and explore with mom before moving on to their own burrows in mid-summer.

Groundhogs are expert digging machines, moving their burrows close to food sources in summer and woodland areas for winter. Groundhog holes that are vacant are quickly rented by another apartment seeker like skunks, opossums or foxes. A fox den in Fred Fuller Park was a former groundhog hole.

As you take your early spring walks in the park, start looking up, down and all around for signs the groundhog's prediction was right. You may hear the songs of cardinals and titmice, and the drumming of woodpeckers. Watch the Cuyahoga River swollen with melt water and find the skunk cabbage emerging. Let us know what you discover on your own Tales along the Trail.

Happy Tales, Cathy Ricks.



Jamey Emmert ODNR

A red heart shape with a blue ribbon and a black groundhog burrow icon. The heart is split vertically, with the left side being a darker red and the right side being a lighter red. A blue ribbon with a white border is wrapped around the heart. Below the heart is a black icon of a groundhog burrow with a red tunnel leading to the surface.

Click here to  
watch "Happy  
Groundhog Day"  
YouTube video