

T2
Outdoors

Woodchucks a sure sign of spring

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Correspondent

Apart from the arrival of the crows and the cheer-up song of the friendly robin, a sure sign of spring is the appearance in the fields of the woodchuck.

This chunky, near cat-sized, short-tailed mammal can now be seen scurrying across the last patches of melting snow or foraging on the sunny slopes of last year's pasture.

And forage they must do at this season, for the grass and plant shoots on which they thrive do not always appear as early as these impatient groundhogs.

Looking for a meal? Actually it's the male woodchucks that come out first and they immediately begin looking for a mate and a good meal.

However, at this season with the lack of tall grass cover and leafless shrubs and trees, they are especially vulnerable.

While many chucks now end up in the jaws of the fox and coyote, in a few months this will not be the case.

If, for instance, the fox den is close to the woodchuck's hole, the predator will leave this family of groundhogs entirely alone. Later, when the young fox kits are learning to hunt, they will have young woodchucks nearby to practice on.

I have seen a male fox bring woodchucks from several fields away, and leave those from the nearby hole run free.

A woodchuck burrow is a long underground passage extending anywhere from 20 to 40 feet in total length.

It has the usual pile of loose dirt around the main entrance, but no visible earth about the second opening, a well-concealed emergency exit.

'At five weeks, young woodchucks romp around the entrance. A sharp warning whistle sends them scurrying.'

The site of a woodchuck burrow is chosen wisely, with high ground and sunny slopes the priority. Often a deserted woodchuck hole later becomes a burrow for a fox, a den for a cottontail rabbit, or a haven for a skunk.

Crop fields adjacent to wooded areas are favorite den sites.

During the long winter hibernation period, woodchucks live off the layers of fat they build up in late summer.

So, while a male woodchuck may weigh 10 pounds when he goes into hibernation, the same animal at this season weighs a

little over six pounds.

A month from now when the dandelions are showing their yellow heads, four or more young will be born in the depths of the earth's cavity.

In order to keep them confined to the natal chamber before weaning, nature keeps their eyes closed for the first four weeks.

Mother's warning whistle: At five weeks of age, the young woodchucks can be seen romping around the entrance, where a sharp warning whistle from mother sends them scurrying below.

Like many other animals and birds, the father is seldom seen nearby after the young are born.

The youngsters stay with their mother until about mid-summer, when they must learn to fend for themselves and find a new territory.

In the lush greenery of the summer landscape food is not the problem that predators are.

Where woodchucks are very numerous, especially in closely cultivated farmland, they do create problems.

Their extensive burrows present a potential danger to the legs of horses and cattle, while their stripping of corn and other sprouting grain causes local crop loss.

In some places a fine chicken wire fence is needed to save the

beans and lettuce plants in the garden.

But controlling and reducing its numbers does not mean its total elimination.

For how less interesting would our landscape be without the brown form of a squat woodchuck sitting sentry-like beside its mounded fox-hole.

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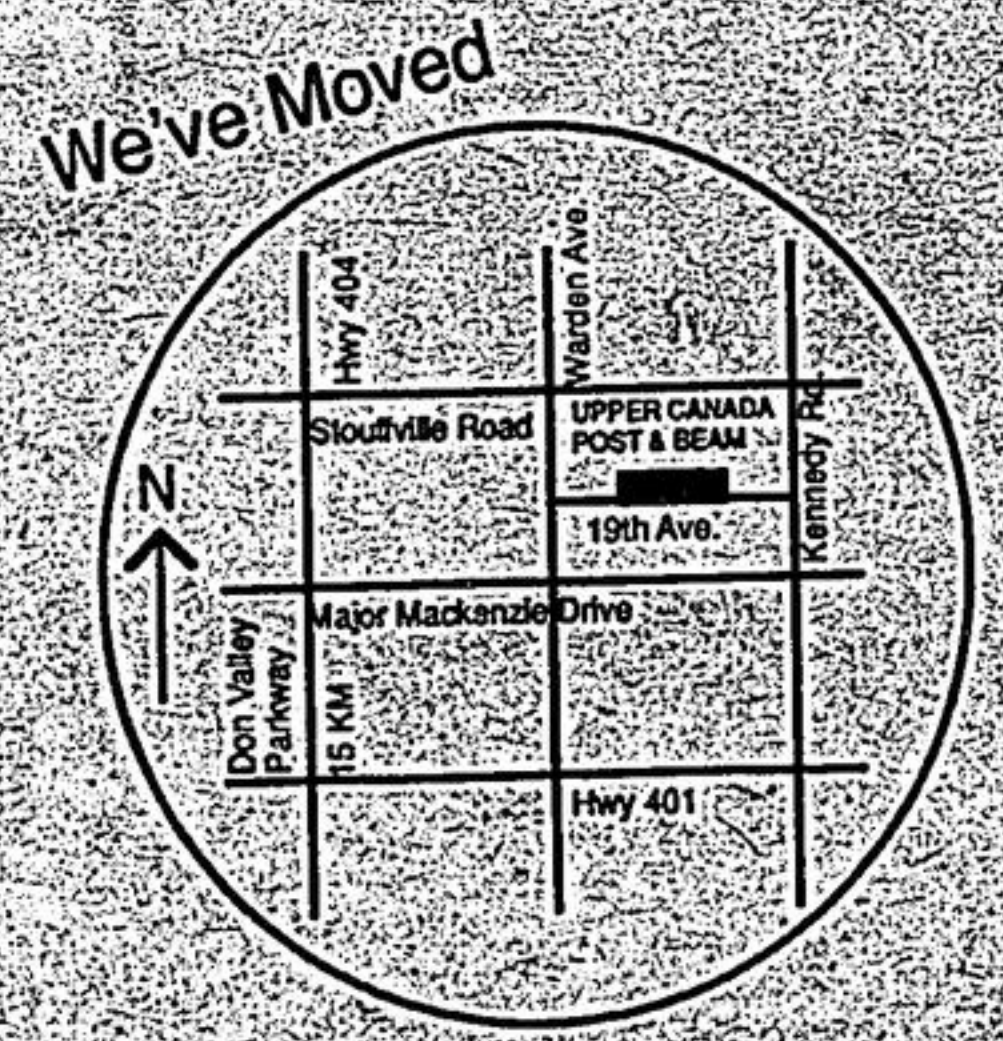
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