



## DO YOU KNOW.....ABOUT RODENTS?

By Alicia Eastham, Staff

One of the surest signs of fall is the sight of hundreds of grey squirrels searching frantically through the fallen leaves for acorns or raiding your birdfeeders for seed. They take these tiny morsels and bury them in the ground, estimating (often quite accurately) how deep they need to dig in each type of substrate for their food to be adequately chilled and stored. Some scientists estimate that squirrels bury over a hundred pieces of food a day and remember roughly 80% of the locations of their stashes. They even know which types of acorns germinate immediately, and “neuter” these prior to burying them. Squirrels use their extra-sharp incisors and dexterous little claws to accomplish these important preparations for winter. These characteristics are typical of the rodent family of animals- the most diverse and widespread of all the mammals.



juvenile flying squirrel

One of the most adorable and charming of our local rodent population is the southern flying squirrel; a small, nocturnal animal that many people are not even aware of. They are quite common in our region inhabiting old-growth forests, living in communal groups inside cavities of trees. Flying squirrels spend most of their lives high up in trees, resorting to ground travel only when desperate. They are able to spread their skin flaps, located along their length of their bodies, and glide up to 50 feet from tree to tree, thus earning their name. Flying squirrels are somewhat difficult to spot, being extremely shy and strictly nocturnal but if you spot one, you will know him by his large round eyes, grey and brown fur and large skin flaps under his arms.

One rodent that is definitely not shy is the groundhog, or woodchuck. The second-largest native rodent in our area,



juvenile groundhog

they can often be observed strutting around in the patches of grass near highways, fields in parks and schools, and maybe even in your backyard. Despite their considerable size (they can grow as large as 7-10 kg), they subsist largely on grasses and leaves. Groundhogs are extremely powerful animals and are not afraid to show it - they have been known to charge dogs when threatened. So keep Spot away from one if a groundhog moves onto your property and you object to its presence! Eviction can be accomplished safely for everyone by throwing a Pine-sol soaked rag into their burrow; like most animals, they find that smell distasteful and will move out on their own.

Our area offers several of the more charismatic rodents- ranging in size from field mice to groundhogs. All are vital to the ecology of our environment- they spread seeds and nuts to diversify and expand our forests, they predate on insects, they aerate the soil with their burrows and tunnels and they provide a huge food source for many of our native predators. Far from being the pests that they are often portrayed as, they are important cog in a complex natural cycle, and Second Chance is proud to rehabilitate and release several hundreds of them every year. Rodents are intelligent, adaptable and often quite cute - with a little understanding and appreciation, you can enjoy them as the beneficial neighbors that they are.

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