

I hate to be a party pooper but no real groundhog is sticking his head out of his burrow on Feb. 2nd. They can't do it for two reasons: 1) They're hibernating. 2) The door to the burrow is shut! Let me explain.

True hibernation, according to many experts, is a prolonged state of suspended animation when a mammal reduces its pulse and breathing rates to barely discernible levels. This sluggish metabolism also lowers the animal's body temperature from perhaps 90°F to 39°F. That said, not everyone agrees on which animals hibernate and which don't, but we'll get to that later.

Everyone does agree that our groundhog is a true hibernator. Its body temperature drops from 98°F to 38°F while its heart rate decreases from 80 beats minute to just 4 or 5 beats a minute. In addition, a woodchuck's respiratory rate slows from 25 to 30 breaths per minute to one breath every five minutes.

Groundhogs start to accumulate excess fat in August and September for utilization while they hibernate. Adults begin hibernating in October while yearlings and juveniles wait until November. Hibernation usually ends in mid-February to early March.

Although woodchucks can lose up to one third of their body mass while hibernating, not all of their stored fat will be used during this time. In fact, some of that fat helps the now-active animals get by in early spring when food is still scarce.

Whether it is spring or fall, woodchucks are always gnawing on plants. So like other rodents, they have incisors that are continuously growing. If you are constantly chewing it certainly is handy to have constantly growing teeth unless you are hibernating for months at a time. Not to worry, the woodchuck's teeth stop growing during hibernation.

Some processes, such as digestion, continue during hibernation. This means that every few weeks the groundhog needs to take a bathroom break and no, this is not how Groundhog's Day got started.

You see, woodchucks have indoor plumbing. To be more precise, they have a dedicated toilet chamber in their burrow. Speaking of which, woodchucks plug the entrances to their burrows just before hibernation begins.

Which brings us to the confusing case of chipmunks. According to some authors, chipmunks do hibernate. However, Donald Hoffmeister author of *Mammals of Illinois* makes a convincing case that chipmunks are not true hibernators. He writes, "Unlike hibernators, eastern chipmunks do not put on fat during the fall, do not reduce their metabolic rate for long periods of time, and are active at various if not all times during the winter."

For those of you who care for lawns or gardens, the mention of chipmunks and woodchucks might prompt a grumble or two. But if you can be objective for a second, think about what these two critters are often eating.

I expect you'll agree that groundhogs prefer herbs and grasses while chipmunks gather seeds and nuts. Now, which of these foods would best survive winter storage?

Is it any wonder that the woodchuck stores its greens as fat on its back while the chipmunk maintains a food cache in its burrow.



So then, the chipmunk is able to raid the frig when it gets hungry which would be difficult to do in a state of suspended animation.

It is also difficult to unplug your burrow and see your shadow while still hibernating. So, if you're counting on a real mammal's shadow to predict the winter weather to come; Happy Rabbit Day! No, wait a second, that's Easter. Happy Deer Day! Oh dear, that might be confused with Valentine's Day. O.K. I got it. Happy Coyote Day!

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