

March 2004

Edition



Featured: Woodchuck

NEBRASKA WILDLIFE REHAB, INC.

The Critter Chronicle

The 2003 Numbers Are In!

The 2003 numbers are in for Nebraska Wildlife Rehab, and we are very pleased with the number of animals that were rescued last year. Overall, 1,780 animals were helped by NWRI's rehabilitators, and the generous members & donors who made sure that every animal received by our organization could receive the proper diet and care.

The numbers of bats, rabbits, game birds and waterfowl cared for in 2003 stayed constant from 2002; however, we saw a sharp increase in the number of foxes, opossums, raccoons and woodchuck that were received. At the same time, the number of squirrels and songbirds received by the organization decreased from 2002.

There are many possible reasons for the deviation in numbers seen between 2002 and 2003. The first may be the most obvious, simple chance. We depend on the animals being found and brought to Nebraska Wildlife Rehab from the public. The second reason may be more of a cause for concern: people are calling Nebraska Wildlife Rehab to remove nuisance wildlife instead of educating themselves on how

better to live with the animals in their own backyards. The sharp increase in foxes and raccoons, and especially woodchuck and opossums, were due in part to so-called nuisance animal issues. As human populations encroach on wildlife habitat, the confrontations between humans and wildlife become more and more common. In the case of the foxes, two mothers with a cumulative total of 10 kits, were killed by farmers who did not want them on the property. It was later discovered that these mothers had babies, and these babies were brought to NWRI for rehabilitation.

We attribute the decline in squirrel numbers to simple year-to-year fluctuations, and possibly a leveling out of the cases of West Nile Virus, which brought us many sick squirrels in 2002.

The decline in songbirds is attributed to the fact that there are not enough rehabilitators to help them. During the 2003 wildlife season, most of the songbirds that would have come into wildlife rehabilitation had to be turned away, as we did not have a Team Leader,

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Local Elementary School Raises Money For Wildlife

In November, the children of Wake Forest Elementary School in Bellevue saved their pennies to help wildlife. The Kids in Defense of Nature (KIND) Club, supervised by teacher Patti Smith, sponsored a school-wide penny drive to benefit Nebraska Wildlife Rehab. The 400 children of Wake Forest came through for their furred and feathered friends, collecting 23,692 pennies, for a total of \$236.92. The donation made by the Wake Forest Elementary School KIND Club

could feed all of the opossums NWRI rescues in one year, or could even pay to repair a broken leg on a fox. Smith, who is a rehabilitator on NWRI's waterfowl team wrote that they were all "very pleased with the amount...collected." Nebraska Wildlife Rehab is also incredibly pleased with the generous donation of time and money given by the children of Wake Forest. We thank them for caring about Nebraska's native wildlife!

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A Message From Dana Miller—Nebraska Game and Parks

I'd like to take this time to introduce myself. I'm Dana Miller, Staff Supervisor with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Law Enforcement Division. I serve as the primary liaison between you and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. My ultimate goal for your organization and mine is to open a line of communication so that we are all serving the citizens of Nebraska and the wildlife in a more effective and efficient manner. I've been working with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission for over 7 years now. I grew up in the northeast corner of Colorado and attended Colorado State University. I worked as a Park Ranger and Police Dispatcher prior to moving to Nebraska and accepting my position as a Conservation Officer. I've been serving as a Staff Supervisor for nearly 3 years now. My husband, Conservation Officer Frank Miller and our two children, live and work in the Val-



entire area. Although Valentine is quite a distance from where you conduct your rehabilitation activities, don't ever hesitate to communicate with me through your team leader or directly. If you should have an immediate need, feel free to contact your area Conservation Officer and they can address the issue at hand. In order to get a hold of your area Officer you can call (402) 471-0641. I've stopped by and visited several of you to see what rehabilitation work you are doing and what animals you are working with. During my visits I asked each member "What one thing could I do to enhance our working relationship?" I would pose that question to all your membership. Feel free to pass along your response to me. I'd love to see if we can make it work. Thanks for this opportunity to introduce myself. I look forward to working with the NWRI.

Thanks to Our Many Friends and Donors

NWRI is deeply grateful to the following individuals, foundations, and businesses for their contributions to our work in providing medical management and compassionate care for the injured, sick, and orphaned wildlife that come to our volunteers.

*Vickey Anderson
 Jack and Lynne Baldwin & Staff
 Robert and Kim Baque
 Linda Campbell
 Larry Kavich
 Jerald and Sally McKenzie
 Cella Quinn
 Kuba Travnicek
 Douglas Cook
 Maria at SuperTarget -- 178th and West Center Rd.*

*Bruce Buehler, M.D.
 Greg Kluck
 Jack and Karen Prewitt
 Gregg and Losi Schellin
 Gail Walling Yanney
 Anita Wheeler
 Kathleen Wilczewski
 The Ashby Family
 Kathy Gross*

Featured: Woodchuck *Marmota monax*

The woodchuck, or groundhog, is one of the most common mammals in eastern Nebraska, but is still improperly identified by many people as a gopher or a beaver. Few people who do recognize the woodchuck realize this rodent is a member of the same family as the squirrel and the marmots. The name woodchuck comes from a Cree Indian word, *wuchak*, used to identify several different animals of similar size and color, including other marmots; it denotes nothing about the woodchuck's habits or habitat. The origin of its other name, groundhog, is obvious from the animal's squat appearance, waddling gait, and habit of living in the ground. In some areas of the country, this animal is also known as the whistlepig. This name comes from one of the warning noises that these incredibly vocal animals make.

Appearance

This woodchuck varies from 16 to 27 inches in length. It has short, powerful legs and a medium-long, bushy, and somewhat flattened tail. The long, coarse fur of the back is a grizzled grayish brown with a yellowish or reddish cast. Woodchucks weigh from 4 to greater than 15 pounds, being lightest in spring when they are just out of hibernation, and heaviest in fall prior to hibernation.

Habitat and Distribution

The woodchuck resides in pastures, meadows, old fields, and



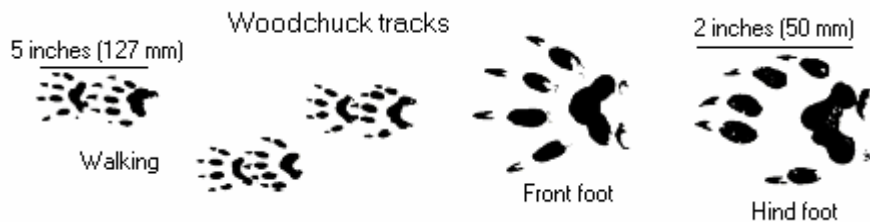
along the edges of wooded areas. As more and more trees are cleared in the urban areas, we see an increase in their numbers in the city, while the numbers of tree-dwelling mammals, such as raccoons, are decreasing in the same urban areas. When North America was first settled, woodchucks were relatively scarce, but as timbered areas were opened and woodland edge, fence rows and meadows increased, the woodchuck's range expanded and the animals prospered. Now, this species is common from east-central Alaska and British Columbia south to northern Idaho, east through most of southern Canada, and south to eastern Kansas, northern Alabama, and Virginia.

Woodchucks prefer to live along the edges where timbered areas are bordered by open land or along fence rows

and heavily vegetated gullies or stream banks. Here they dig their burrows. The main entrance is often located beneath a tree stump or rock and is usually conspicuous because of a pile of freshly excavated earth and stones. Side entrances are smaller and better concealed.

Habits

This sun-loving creature is active by day, especially in early morning and late afternoon. In late summer or early fall, the woodchuck puts on a heavy layer of fat, which sustains it through hibernation. It digs a winter burrow with a hibernation chamber, where it curls up in a ball on a mat of grasses. The animal's body temperature falls from almost 97°F to less than 40°F, its breathing slows to once every six minutes, and its heartbeat drops from more than 100 beats per minute to four. The woodchuck emerges in early spring (according to legend, on February 2, Groundhog Day, but much later in northern parts of its range). A male at once seeks a mate; its brief stay in the burrow of a receptive female is almost the only time that two adults share a den. A good swimmer and climber, the woodchuck will ascend a tree to escape an enemy or obtain a vantage point, but never travels far from its den. If alarmed, the woodchuck often gives a loud, sharp whistle, followed by softer ones as it runs for its burrow, from which it then peeks out. When agitated, it chatters its teeth, and it can hiss, squeal, and growl. In digging, the front feet and claws are used primarily, but the teeth may be employed to move stones or cut roots. The amount of subsoil removed in the course of dig-



Featured: Woodchuck (Continued from Page 3)

ging one burrow averages 716 pounds (325 kg). Digging is done so rapidly that a small burrow can be finished in one day, though upkeep is continued as long as the burrow is occupied.

Breeding

The breeding season begins in late February soon after the animals emerge from hibernation. Pregnancy lasts 31-33 days and the single, annual litter is born in April to early

May. At birth, the two to nine young are naked, blind and helpless. They measure about four inches long. The eyes open when the young are about 4

weeks old; although the babies come to the opening of the burrow at this time, they seldom venture outside until they are six or seven weeks old. By midsummer, the young are 20 inches long and weigh about four pounds. About this time, they may dig temporary burrows near the nursery which they use for a short period. Later, they move some distance away and establish their own homes. It is believed that the mother woodchuck digs the first den for each of her offspring to inhabit when they leave her home den.

Diet

The woodchuck is almost a complete vegetarian, eating leaves, flowers and soft stems of various grasses, of field crops such as clover and alfalfa, and of many kinds of wild herbs. Certain gar-

den crops like peas, beans and corn are favorites. Woodchucks occasionally climb trees to obtain apples, mulberries and other fruits which they relish.

Importance

The role of the woodchuck as a builder of homes for other animals is significant. Other mammals, including cottontail rabbits, Virginia opossums, common raccoons, skunks, and foxes, may use a vacant woodchuck burrow, sometimes enlarging it to create a nursery den.



Baby woodchuck rehabilitated in 2003.

The human hunter is the woodchuck's major enemy, but the automobile and large predators, especially the red fox, also take their toll. While an overpopulation of woodchucks can damage crop fields, gardens, and pastures, they are beneficial in moderate numbers. Their defecation inside the burrow, in a special excrement chamber separate from the nesting chamber, fertilizes the earth. Their digging loosens and aerates the soil, letting in moisture and organic matter while bringing up subsoil for transformation into topsoil (in New York State they turn over 1.6 million tons of soil each year).

Woodchucks are one of the few large mammals abroad in daylight, and many people get enjoyment from seeing them go about their daily activities.

Living With Woodchucks

The woodchuck's taste for garden and agricultural crops often places it in an unfavorable position with many home-owners and farmers. Sometimes woodchucks burrow into levees and create erosion problems.

Nebraska Wildlife Rehab fields many calls every year asking that we trap and relocate woodchucks that are raiding garden vegetables and perennials, or digging burrows under sheds and decks. Woodchucks, like most other animals, usually do not survive relocation, as they are unable to find food, water and shelter, and are unable to avoid predators, in a new environment. Also, demand for relocation of woodchucks usually peaks during the time when young woodchucks are still in the burrow. Relocating the mother means certain death to the young left behind. We try to work with each caller to determine the right solution for the situation. Some commercial garden repellants are effective in deterring woodchucks. Another solution is to plant a row of beans, or another tasty vegetable on the perimeter of the yard to distract the woodchucks in the neighborhood from the other vegetables or perennial flowers available deeper in the yard.



(Thanks to eNature.com, The Missouri Dept. of Conservation, and HogHaven—www.hoghaven.com—for the information contained in this article.)

Bird Migration by Dr. Jim Pease, Extension Wildlife Specialist, Iowa State University

Migration is the movement of animals from one place to another. We are all familiar with the migration of birds like the American robin that arrives in our backyards with the coming of spring. These birds have returned from the places where they spend the winter, to our area where they will nest and raise young birds.

People have been fascinated with this annual migration of birds for thousands of years. Aristotle was an ancient philosopher who wrote about the wintering habits of birds 3,000 years ago. He noticed that some birds traveled to warmer places to spend the winter. He also mistakenly believed that some birds like swallows hibernated to survive the harsh winter weather. This theory persisted for 2,000 years!

Today, we know that birds do not hibernate. But it does show how long people have been trying to understand the disappearance of many birds from northern climates in the fall. So what do we know now about migration? Where do the birds go? How? Why? Today, scientists know far more now about migration than they did even 25 years ago.

When you see flocks of birds flying overhead in the fall, they usually are flying south toward their wintering grounds. How far south they go depends on the type, or species of bird. Some birds travel farther than others. For example, in some species



females and young birds fly farther south than males. The largest group of birds that we see during migrations are called neotropical migrants. They got this name because these species of birds migrate in the fall all the way to Mexico, the Caribbean islands, and other Central American and South American countries in the tropics. This means these birds fly thousands of miles every fall and



spring. About 300 of the 650 bird species that nest in North America are neotropical migrants. They include warblers, vireos, orioles, hummingbirds, swallows, swifts, shorebirds, and some birds of prey. The neotropical migrants make up 50-70 percent of the bird species of deciduous forests and prairies in the central and eastern United States. Migration of birds through the United States follows some bird highways known as flyways. The four main flyways are the Pacific, Central, Mississippi, and Atlantic. These flyways run north and south. Many birds cross open ocean during their migration between North and South America. This means that birds need a lot of energy to migrate. This energy is stored in the form of body fat. Smaller birds can not store a lot of fat to use as energy during long flights. During migration, some birds lose as much as one-fourth to one-half of their entire body weight, so it is very important that they store up enough fat for energy. Just think how much weight you would lose if you lost half of your body weight! How smaller birds ever store enough to make these flights is still a wonder to scientists. It was once believed that little birds, like hummingbirds, migrated by riding on the backs of larger birds. However, this myth is not true. These little birds make it entirely on their own!

Scientists have been studying how birds find their way along these routes. To successfully migrate from wintering grounds to breeding grounds birds must be able to navigate (judge their position while traveling) and orient (determine compass direction). Birds do this by using a variety of different cues which allows them to find their way in different weather and habitat conditions. There are five main ways that birds navigate and orient themselves: 1) topographic features (things like mountains and rivers that can also influence wind direction), 2) stars, 3) sun, 4) earth's magnetic field, and 5) sense of smell.

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Bird Migration (continued from page 6)

Some birds need to stop to rest and feed during the day. This is when insects they eat are most active and available. These birds, then, migrate at night. They can find their way at night because they learn to follow the rotation of the stars. On cloudy nights, things like wind direction also help them to orient themselves. Other birds, like barn swallows, migrate during the day and feed on flying insects while they are in the air. That way, they are not limited to traveling at night because they can feed during flight.

When birds migrate is closely tied to why they migrate in the first place. Primarily, birds go south for the winter to find lots of insects and other food. However, these birds need more room and even more insects during the breeding season when they have a nest of young ones to feed. To solve this problem, the birds migrate north for the summer.

Some birds in trouble are the scarlet tanager, Swainson's thrush, ovenbird, and black and white warbler.

Why should we care?

* Many neotropicals--like warblers, vireos, flycatchers, and swallows--are some of our best insect controllers, eating tons of insects annually.

* Neotropical migrants--like thrushes, warblers, tanagers, and vireos--are among the most beautiful birds in the world, both in song and color.

* Neotropical migrants may be a indicators of the health of our environment. If their populations continue to decline, our quality of life declines with them. It is in our own best interest, then, to try to reverse it.

**Yes, I want to volunteer
and help our animal friends!**

Name

Street Address

City

State

Zip

Telephone

I would be willing to help with:

- fund raising
- membership
- programs
- supplies
- newsletter
- other:
- publicity/PR
- special projects
- education
- cage building
- animal care

Please mail this form to:

**Nebraska Wildlife Rehab, Inc.
P.O. Box 24122
Omaha, NE 68124**

The 2003 Numbers Are In! (continued from page 1)

or the volunteers, to care for them. We are facing the same problem this year if help is not found soon. In 2002, we helped 500 songbirds. In 2003, we were only able to help 67. Thankfully, we were able to keep the songbird hotline open, and to use that forum to educate the public. Hopefully this education helped stop some of the human interference that often causes birds to enter wildlife rehabilitation. Songbird rehabilitation presents a special situation, as baby birds need to be fed more fre-

quently than many of the other animals we rehabilitate; however, we hope that enough people can be found to help with these animals, so that we can increase the number of songbirds helped this year, and hopefully create a fully functioning songbird team once again. Please see page seven for a complete list of the animals that were helped last year by NWRI.

NWRI Animal Statistics for 2003

Bats

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Big Brown Bat | 226 |
| Hoary Bat | 7 |
| Little Brown Bat | 1 |
| Eastern Red Bat | 19 |

Carnivores

| | |
|---------|----|
| Bobcat | 2 |
| Coyote | 1 |
| Red Fox | 12 |

Gamebirds

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Bobwhite Quail | 2 |
| Wild Turkey | 1 |

| | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| <u>Virginia Opossum</u> | 252 |
|-------------------------|-----|

Rabbits

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Eastern Cottontail | 738 |
|--------------------|-----|

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| <u>Raccoon</u> | 116 |
|----------------|-----|

Reptiles & Amphibians

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Garter Snake | 4 |
| Tiger Salamander | 1 |
| Ornate Box Turtle | 2 |

| | |
|------------------|----|
| <u>Woodchuck</u> | 41 |
|------------------|----|

Squirrel

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| 13-Lined Ground Squirrel | 2 |
| Fox Squirrel | 185 |
| Franklin's Ground Squirrel | 1 |



Cluster of
big brown
bats in
captive
hibernation
Winter 2003

Songbirds

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| American Robin | 6 |
| American Crow | 1 |
| Barn Swallow | 4 |
| Common Nighthawk | 1 |
| Grackle | 10 |
| House Sparrow | 2 |
| House Wren | 1 |
| Killdeer | 1 |
| Golden-Crowned Kinglet | 1 |
| Mourning Dove | 10 |
| Rock Dove (Pigeon) | 24 |
| Starling | 5 |
| Yellow Warbler | 1 |

Waterfowl

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| American Coot | 3 |
| American Woodcock | 2 |
| American Bittern | 1 |
| Canada Goose | 14 |
| Double-Crested Cormorant | 1 |
| Great Blue Heron | 1 |
| Franklin's Gull | 1 |
| Least Bittern | 1 |
| Mallard Duck | 12 |
| Pekin Duck | 7 |
| White Pelican | 2 |
| Ruddy Duck | 1 |
| Virginia Rail | 3 |
| Wood Duck | 51 |

Three-day-old fox received in March of 2003



NEBRASKA WILDLIFE REHAB, INC.

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Phone: (402) 341-8619

Tiny lives leaving paw prints on our hearts.

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**We're on the web! See us
at <http://nwri0.tripod.com/>**

NWRI ... Nebraska Wildlife Rehab, Inc. ... is a 25+ year old, not-for-profit (501c3) organization whose mission is to **rehabilitate and release orphaned and injured wildlife, and through education, preserve and protect the natural habitat and species indigenous to Nebraska and the Great Plains. The means to accomplish this mission is to educate the public to an understanding of our Great Plains ecosystem and its component parts.**

Become a NWRI donor!
Please help give our wild friends a second chance.
All contributions are tax deductible .

Yes, I want to help. Enclosed is my check for:

\$25 \$50 \$100 Other _____

Name _____

Street Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ Email _____