

**Kidz' n Nature**

Creature Feature: Groundhogs!

*By Suzanne Kahn Eder*

February is a special time to celebrate groundhogs! While they snuggle in their underground burrows during these winter months, many of us dream of warm spring days. Groundhogs are one of a few true hibernators in Maine. Through the chilly winter months, a groundhog's body temperature falls to 40°F and it loses up to half of its body weight. Its heart rate slows from 80 to 4 beats per minute. That is just one beat every 15 seconds! Look at the second hand of a clock and count one beat for every 15 seconds. That is one very slow heart rate!

When not hibernating, groundhogs can be found in grassy fields munching ravenously on grass, clover, flowers, and other vegetation. If startled, a groundhog waddles quickly towards its burrow. These homes often have multiple entrances and exits for greater ease of escaping predators. Foxes, coyotes, and domestic dogs all prey on groundhogs. If you live in groundhog habitat and have a pet dog, make sure to have it on a leash when outdoors. This will protect the groundhogs and keep your dog safe, too.

Groundhogs live for up to 6 years in the wild. Empty groundhog burrows are prime real estate for other creatures in need of a home. When groundhogs die, skunks, raccoons, foxes, and rabbits all make use of their cozy dwellings. What an unexpected treat this must be for these animals!

As winter slips past, turn your thoughts to groundhogs sleeping snugly in their burrows. Venture out into the woods and fields with your family and friends. While you take in the sights and sounds of winter, think from the perspective of a groundhog. What spot would you choose for your winter hibernation? Soon enough spring will arrive and with it, the groundhogs.

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