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Sunflower Nature Notes



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Greetings to the Staff at Sunset!

Welcome to the fourth newsletter of nature happenings around our Sunset offices!

We welcome contributions from other staff here at Sunset of photos and/or stories about your nature adventures at Sunset!

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Spotlight on Nature

If a woodchuck could chuck wood...

By Betsy Betros, Environmental

Did you know---

The groundhog-woodchuck-whistlepig are all the same species of rodent and are in the marmot family. Marmots live in rocky and mountainous areas and if you've been to the Rocky Mountains, you've undoubtedly seen them.

The groundhog/woodchuck is an animal of the lowlands and are common along the creeks and woodland edges in Johnson County.

They are primarily vegetarian, but will feed on grasshoppers, insects, snails and other small animals.

They have short but powerful limbs and curved, thick claws for digging.

They are covered with two coats of fur: a dense grey undercoat and a longer coat of banded guard hairs that gives the groundhog its distinctive "frosted" appearance.

They have exceptionally dense cerebral bones, allowing them to survive direct blows to the head that would cripple other mammals of the same body mass.

One of their common names, whistle pig comes from the alarm whistle they call out to warn others of danger.

One or more individuals can be seen standing erect, looking for danger while others are feeding.

They live in and hibernate in burrows and can move an estimated 35 cubic of dirt to dig their burrow!

They can swim and climb trees!

Groundhogs breed from early March to mid or late April. Young are born in April/May and leave the den in five to six weeks.

Th popular tongue twister--How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?--is just

that, a tongue twister as woodchucks don't do anything with wood. The name comes from an Indian name, wuchak.

(Info source: Wikipedia)

Lisa Morehead with HSA took these photos of a woodchuck checking out the Sunset offices!



Creature Feature

By Dan Lekie, Johnson County K-State Research and Extension

Several raccoons live around the Sunset Offices taking advantage of the storm sewers, intermittent creek and wooded area to meet their life requirements. Raccoons are commonly found in urban areas. We have not been able to get a photograph of one, so if you get a photograph of one of our raccoons...send it our way and we will put it in a Sunset Nature Notes edition!



Raccoon
(Procyon lotor)

A raccoon's fur is a grizzled gray color or sometimes black with silver tips. Raccoon fur can range from a light brown to reddish, to a dark black color. The coloration depends on geographical location and habitat; they are either gray, reddish brown, or buff. The tail is bushy with between five and six dark and yellow-gray rings, and the popular coloration of the face includes the "bandit's mask." This black mask shape across the eyes is the most recognizable characteristic of the raccoon. The raccoon has a stocky body with a broad head, pointed nose, and medium-sized ears. The adult raccoon ranges from two to three feet in length, with about one-third of that being the tail. Raccoons have dexterous forepaws that resemble slender human hands, allowing them to grasp objects.

Mature raccoons range in weight from eight to over 45 pounds! Wow!

The breeding season occurs from late January through mid-March. On average the gestation period lasts about 63 days. One to seven young (average 3-4) are born in April or May. The young are called kits. Raccoons generally only have one litter per year. Females reach breeding maturity at 10 months; however the male does not reach maturity until his second year. The female provides the main support for her young and will be very aggressive in protecting her litter. The raccoon is a mostly nocturnal animal and spends most of its days in its dens.

Raccoons are opportunistic omnivores, meaning they eat both plants and animals. The raccoon's diet varies depending on the availability of food. Most habitats

offer an abundance of plants for the raccoon, and they utilize a variety of fruits and nuts. They also forage around water searching for crayfish, fish, frogs or insects. This lends to the misconception that the raccoon will wash its food prior to eating, instead of washing food the raccoon is actually in the water turning the stones in an attempt to locate food. In urban areas they will also scrounge through trash and are also known to eat the remains of animals they find on the roadside.

Raccoons prefer to live in woodland areas near water and use many den sites within their home range. Den sites include hollow trees, abandoned burrows and nests of other animals, buildings or caves.



Please send us your stories and adventures with nature here at Sunset. Photos are especially always welcome!!

Cool Insect Spotted at Sunset!

By Chelsey Wasem, Johnson County K-State Research and Extension



American Carrion Beetle - *Necrophila americana*

Rotting vegetation and dead animals may not sound good to you, but to the American carrion beetle, that's lunch! I found this beetle near the front door of the Sunset Building last week, which is quite appropriate for a GREEN building. Carrion beetles are one of nature's best recyclers. They scavenge in search of dead animals, garbage, and other insects to feed on. The beetles help to break down these materials into useful soil nutrients.

This particular species of carrion beetle is black, stout, about a half inch long, with a yellow-white pronotum, the part of the body behind the head that looks a lot like a shield. Here's an interesting fact: the American carrion beetle emits an awful smell from its rear end when frightened. Fortunately, I didn't frighten the beetle when I picked it up because I didn't notice any smell.

After mating, the adult female lays her eggs in the animal's corpse that she is feeding upon. The eggs hatch into small larvae which also begin to feed on the dead animal.

The American carrion beetle is one of many insects on the CSI team: Crime Solving Insects. The life cycle is very well known and allows forensic entomologists (bug dorks like myself) to use these insects and others to investigate the time of death of human remains.

Cleaning up garbage and animal corpses is a dirty job, but carrion beetles are happy to do it.

*What's Blooming!
In the Gardens*

