



Preferred Customer Savings  
FREE Money! Click Here!



# Tri-City Times Online

Serving the communities which form the "Gateway to the Thumb"

Home  
News  
Sports

Subscription  
Information  
Subscribe Now  
Current E-edition  
Login  
Log Out

Classifieds  
Browse  
Classified info  
Submit

Announcements  
Service News  
Grad News  
Business News  
Achievements  
Births  
Birthdays  
Engagements  
Anniversaries  
Weddings  
Obituaries

Inside The Times  
Local Columnists  
Letters To The  
Editor  
Our Opinion  
Calendar

Online Extras  
Archives  
Q & A  
Photo Gallery  
Submit Photo

About the Times  
About Us  
Advertising Info  
Newsstands

2008-04-30 ► Lifestyles ►

## Woodchucks, up close and personal

Goodland Township couple film the secret lives of burrowing creatures

by Catherine Brakefield



Joe Sam captured 'Mama Wilhelmina' with five of her seven chucklings in this photo. *photo by Joe Sam.*

April 30, 2008

Woodchuck, groundhog, marmot, or 'Monax,' whatever name you prefer, these small mammals are considered sacred to some Native American tribes who believe they are "a wise and sensible animal."

It may, then, be no coincidence that Groundhog Day is a celebrated holiday and the furry creature is the only animal to obtain recognition on our calendar.

For Susan Sam of Goodland Township, this information meant little, until the spring of 2003 when a female woodchuck dug her burrow below her front porch window.

As a published nature photographer, Susan is accustomed to watching wildlife. She freelances for Thomson Gale in their revised and updated version of 'Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia.' She's also won the 'Celebration of the Arts & Garden Purchase Award' for her photography entitled "Winter's Majesty". But neither Susan nor her husband, Joe, could predict the life-changing experience of meeting 'Mama Wilhelmina,' who'd chosen to make her home right near theirs.

"This little animal came on the property, and I wasn't sure what it was," Susan laughs. "I had to ask Joe what it was."

Susan has since made over 150 films and hundreds of photographs of these curious, interesting and fun-loving little mammals that sit up without being asked and give piggy back rides to their offsprings.

Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup> thru Thursday, January 12<sup>th</sup>

**WE BOUGHT A ZOO**  
Fri.: 5:00 & 7:30  
Sat. & Sun.: 2:00, 4:30 & 7:30  
Mon.-Thurs.: 7:00

**ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS: CHIPWRECKED**  
Fri.: 5:00 & 7:15  
Sat. & Sun.: 2:00, 4:00 & 7:15  
Mon.-Thurs.: 7:00

**ADVENTURES OF TINTIN**  
Fri.: 5:00 & 7:15  
Sat. & Sun.: 2:00, 4:15 & 7:15  
Mon.-Thurs.: 7:00

**GIFT CERTIFICATES AVAILABLE**  
Imlay City Cinemas 810/724-0348  
MOVIE LINE  
www.imlaycitycinemas.com  
Check showtimes weekly in the Tri-City Times & online at www.tricitytimes-online.com

We've Got **EVERYTHING YOU NEED** FOR YOUR BUSINESS

- ✓ Brochures
- ✓ Postcards
- ✓ Letterheads
- ✓ Labels
- ✓ Inserts
- ✓ Envelopes
- ✓ Invitations
- ✓ Flyers
- ✓ Announcements
- ✓ Carbonless Forms

**Page One Printing**  
P.O. Box 278 • 594 N. Almont Ave.  
Imlay City, MI 48444  
810.724.0254  
FAX 810.724.8852  
rjorgensen@pageone-inc.com

sunday

01 - 08 - 12  
09:10

site search

Search Text

Search

january

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

Keyword

Category ▼

Start Date ▼

End Date ▼

Search

**Imlay City Historic Depot District**  
Imlay City Downtown Development Authority  
Visit us today!

**imlaycity**  
Chamber of Commerce  
Visit us today!  
imlaycitymich.com

134 N. Main  
Almont  
810-798-8125  
**ALMONT DDA**  
www.almontdda.com

Susan's background also includes some very technical medical research and her expertise has provided the foundation to researching, writing and recording numerous findings on the woodchuck.

She and Joe have utilized almost every window in their tidy ranch home as an observation point to watch, wait and enjoy the antics of the woodchucks, as well as the deer, wild turkey, rabbits, birds and 'Rocky the Raccoon.' All have found a safe haven in the Sam's ten acre oasis located off Brown City Road.



Susan recalls the first time she met Mama Wilhelmina back in the spring of 2003 rearing her seven babies in front of her picture window.

"It's been a real learning process and an ongoing project," Susan says.

Joe helps out his wife with her woodchuck research, however, shrugs off his time saying, 'he's only the man behind the woman.' *photo by Catherine Brakefield.*

Through careful observation and photography, Susan learned many astonishing facts, some of which contradicted what she had read. For instance, 'Marmots-Social Behavior and Ecology' states that woodchucks are aggressive mothers, intolerant of their young, they chase away their offsprings.

"The offspring do leave, but it's not true that the female runs her babies off shortly after emerging from the nesting burrow," Susan says.

Susan has watched Mama Wilhelmina dig other burrows for her babies to stay in when her burrow got too crowded with her growing youngsters. Mama Wilhelmina spends many afternoons teaching them as well.

"On occasions, she takes them off into the woods," says Susan. "It's like they're going on excursions. They all return again."

#### extras

[e-mail this article link to a friend](#)

[letter to the editor about this article](#)

[print this article](#)

[facebook](#)

[twitter](#)

[digg it](#)

[share](#)

[Larger](#) | [Smaller](#)

Although it has been thought that the woodchuck does not mate for life, Susan has watched the same male return from 2005 through 2007. Susan and Joe have named him 'Papa Gregory.'

Susan explains that Papa Gregory has a very distinctive look. He has crooked teeth and part of his ear is missing.

The woodchuck's mating season takes place around the end of February and the beginning of March and Susan usually sees the babies coming out of their burrow around the end of May.

Susan explains that Papa Gregory is present and goes around the area and checks out all the burrows, as if he is patrolling the property. Mama Wilhelmina has a distinct way of calling for him.

"She gives her call and it won't be very long before he shows up," Susan says.

He also helps out with his family, Susan says, though she had read otherwise.

"Papa Gregory is very protective," she says. "It appears that his role includes keeping the area safe from danger which allows the female to raise and teach her young. He patrols, and visits the female and babies as well but we do not yet know the full extent of his role. If that isn't taking part in raising the family, what is?"

Susan explains that Papa Gregory has his own burrow and Mama Wilhelmina has her own burrow. Susan says she thinks the parents do this out of necessity.

"The nest area is very small, and it's safer, if an enemy comes in they won't

get the whole family."

This year, Susan and Joe have witnessed a new woodchuck on the premises.

"Something is going on," Susan says. "I have not seen Papa Gregory. Maybe he got too old or was killed, but I just haven't seen him."

The woodchuck's main predators are man, the red fox and the domestic dog.

Susan feels that the woodchuck is misunderstood, especially regarding their eating habits and the diameters of their burrows.

Susan has read various reports on the depth of woodchuck burrows, including that they are 10 or 12 feet below ground surface. They refer to Mr. Schoonmaker, author of 'World of the Woodchuck,' who excavated 11 dens. Based upon his work, Susan and Joe do not believe the chuck burrows are deep enough to worry about foundation issues, but they keep watch for signs of any problems.

Woodchucks will dig in the strangest places. Susan points to a hole in her pole barn she thinks was used as a practice hole for teaching the chucklings or, perhaps as a spy hole. Susan covered the escape hole up with plywood and Mama filled it with rags and other debris found in the barn, discouraging her chucklings from pursuing their diggings. Joe has found that a combination of used cat litter, ammonia and urine aids in discouraging unwanted spy holes or burrows.

Susan says they like to eat broad-leaf plants, grass, leaves from trees and, sometimes, her marigolds. However, so few are eaten that she hardly misses them. Susan has seen the chucklings especially enjoy hollyhock leaves.

"I heard that they eat up all the flowers and gardens," Susan says. "There have been so many stories about woodchucks, I don't know what to believe, and I'm just filming them to find out what is not true."

Susan and Joe have learned that one of the woodchucks' favorite flowers is dandelions.

"They like the flower and stems, but not the seeds," she grins.

Neither she nor Joe become upset about what the woodchucks choose to nibble on. The Sams choose not to fertilize their lawn and are careful with chemicals they use on their flowers and garden.

"We go to the store and we buy our food, but the animals have to search for theirs," Susan says. "They're trying to survive like we are."

Through Susan's efforts, people are better informed about the woodchuck. Susan has shown her films, pictures and documentations to students at Chatfield School in Lapeer. She has visited Dryden's Seven Ponds Nature Center and has corresponded with Joy Gold, technical information specialist from Department of Vertebrate Zoology at the Smithsonian. Susan has also researched numerous publications and Internet sites for woodchuck information.

Susan and Joe plan to continue to film, document and observe their woodchuck family, learning the truth about these often misunderstood and hard-working rodents.

"They're the only animal that we have a holiday for on our calendar," Susan says. "If you're going to have an animal on your calendar, we should bring more information to the people. They're a lot more than just a pest."

Email Catherine at

[tct@pageone-inc.com](mailto:tct@pageone-inc.com)

Thanks for visiting Tri City Times



*Preferred Customer Savings*  
**FREE Money! Click Here!**



