

Is This A Groundhog?

Susan C. Sam* and Joseph M. Sam

*Corresponding author - goodlandgroundhog@yahoo.com

Not All Marmots Are Groundhogs.

The North American groundhog (*Marmota monax*) is the only species among the 15 recognized marmots that can correctly be called a groundhog.

Over many years, my husband and I have conducted extensive observational work focused on groundhogs, developing a deep familiarity with their physical characteristics and behavior. In reviewing a wide range of materials—including educational publications, wildlife videos, and stock images—I have identified a recurring pattern: other members of the squirrel family, particularly prairie dogs (*Cynomys* spp.) and non-North American marmot species such as the Alpine marmot (*Marmota marmota*), are frequently presented as groundhogs.

Accurate species identification is essential for ecological literacy and public understanding of wildlife. When a familiar species like the groundhog is consistently misrepresented, it can contribute to broader confusion about species differences and distributions.

This page highlights species that are commonly mistaken for groundhogs, including other marmots and closely related rodents, and explains how to tell them apart. Do not rely on color. Fur color can vary widely—even within the same species—due to molting, lighting, season, and natural individual differences. Some groundhogs may appear unusually light or dark. Color alone may lead to misidentification.



F. 1. Young groundhog who had recently emerged from the natal burrow

Groundhog photos by Woodchuck Wonderland

Groundhog—Reference Species



F. 2. Raggedy, an adult male groundhog. Note his short tail. Circled Images: Common features of groundhogs

Groundhog photos by Woodchuck Wonderland

Key Traits:

- Native to North America
- Typically weigh between **4 and 15 pounds**
- **20 to 25 inches long**, including a short tail
- Compact, stocky body
- Incisors are **white to ivory white**. As noted in Anatomy of the Woodchuck, **the labial surface of the incisors lacks pigmentation—distinguishing them from many other rodents.**
- Fur is usually **grayish-brown to reddish-brown**, with a dense two-layer structure for insulation
- Feet are typically dark brown to black
- Live in burrows, but **not in large colonies**
- Average lifespan is 2 to 3 years
- Found in **lower-elevation forests, fields, and edges**
- **True hibernators**
- Depending on their latitude, groundhogs typically hibernate for 3 to 5 months vs. about 7–8 months for high-altitude dwelling marmots
- Groundhogs have 8 nipples (mammary glands) while other marmot species have 10. There are four thoracic, two abdominal and two inguinal mammary glands.

Most Commonly Misidentified as Groundhogs

Prairie dogs (Ground Squirrels)



Prairie Dog
Gabor Heeres, CC BY-SA 4.0,
via Wikimedia Commons

Alpine Marmot (Marmota marmota)



Alpine Marmot
Böhringer Friedrich, CC BY-SA 3.0 AT,
via Wikimedia Commons

Key Differences:

- Much smaller — 12 to 17 inches long, 1–4 pounds
- Short, thin tail (less bushy than a groundhog's)
- Fur is sandy brown, cinnamon, or tan
- Feet are typically the same color as their fur, unlike the groundhog's darker feet
- Prefer flat, open grasslands
- Live in large, highly social colonies with interconnected burrows
- Do not hibernate
- Frequently seen sitting upright
- Commonly used in stock photos and often mislabeled as groundhogs

Often mislabeled as a Groundhog

How to tell the difference:

- Found in European mountain regions
- Thicker, fluffier coat and bushier tail
- Fur is a mixture of blond, dark gray, and reddish tones
- Adults are 17 to 29 inches long and weigh 4.2 to 17.6 pounds
- Highly social
- Average lifespan is 15 to 18 years
- Hibernate longer than groundhogs

Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*)



Yellow-bellied marmot
Dcrjsr, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Common

Often mislabeled as: Groundhog (especially in U.S. western content)

How to tell the difference:

- Found in western North America
- Weigh 3 to 9 lbs. — less than groundhogs
- Average lifespan is 13 to 15 years
- Yellow to orange coloration on chest and belly
- Known for frequent, loud, piercing vocal calls
- Live in colonies
- Often called “rock chucks”

Hoary Marmot (*Marmota caligata*)



Hoary Marmot
VJAnderson, CC BY-SA 4.0,
via Wikimedia Commons

Often mislabeled as: Groundhog

How to tell the difference:

- Found in mountainous regions of North America
- Bulkier appearance
- Frosted gray-white fur on shoulders and upper back
- Weight varies from about 8.3 to 20 lbs f or an adult
- Adults range from 24 to 32 inches, including the tail
- Live in colonies with a home range averaging about 35 acres vs. an average of about 2.47 acres for a groundhog.
- Lifespan ranges from 8 to 15 years depending upon predation

Himalayan Marmot (*Marmota himalayana*)



Himalayan Marmot, ©Christopher J. Fynn
Wikimedia Commons

Often mislabeled as: Groundhog

How to tell the difference:

- Native to Central Asia (not found in North America)
- Typically lives at high elevations in open, treeless terrain
- Winter burrows may reach depths of up to 10 m (32.8 ft)
- For comparison: Groundhog burrows are usually less than 6 feet deep
- One of the largest marmot species
- Total length, including tail, ranges from about 23.6 to 33.2 inches
- Weight is about 8.8 to 20.3 lbs
- Lives in colonies
- Thick, dense, woolly fur adapted for cold climates
- Distinct facial markings
- Average lifespan is 15 years vs. the groundhog average of 2 to 3 years

Why Misidentification Happens

- Marmots share similar body shapes and proportions
- Many species have overlapping brown and gray coloration
- Stock images and media often lack geographic context
- The term “groundhog” is often used loosely as a catch-all

Key Takeaway

Not every large, burrowing rodent labeled a “groundhog” is actually *Marmota monax*.

Accurate identification requires attention to geographic range, body features, and behavior, not color alone.

Sources for Further Reading

- Animal Diversity Web
- The Invisible Gorilla Experiment (as a concept reference)
- Mass Audubon
- SUNY ESF-Woodchuck
- Encyclopaedia Britannica
- Indiana Department of Natural Resources
- Nevada Department of Wildlife
- National Park Service
- Ohio DNR
- Mass.gov Division of Fisheries and Wildlife
- Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife
- Colorado Parks & Wildlife
- UCLA Newsroom-March 2022-Stuart Wolpert
- Wikipedia-Marmot
- Marmots of the World-UCLA
- The Marmot Burrow-UCLA
- At Cornell, groundhog is harbinger of health-Roger Segelken



Groundhog photo by Woodchuck Wonderland