

**West Virginia**  
**Wildlife**  
**Series**

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*A Guide to Mammals of West  
Virginia*

*Eastern Chipmunk (Tamias striatus)*



**Volume 18**

## **Characteristics:**

The eastern chipmunk has reddish-brown fur on its back and sides and white fur on its stomach. It has two white stripes bordered by black on its sides and one black stripe on the center of its back. The eastern chipmunk has light stripes above and below its eyes and it has pouched cheeks that it uses to store and carry food.

## **Range:**

The eastern chipmunk can be found in southeastern Canada and most of the northeastern United States south to Mississippi and Virginia and west to North Dakota and Oklahoma. Home range is usually less than 100 yards. Populations range 2-4 per acre.

## **Habitat:**

The eastern chipmunk lives in open deciduous forests and at the edges of woodlands. It can also be found in bushy areas and in rocky areas like walls near houses and other buildings.

## **Diet:**

Most of the eastern chipmunk's diet is made up of nuts, acorns, seeds, mushrooms, fruits, berries and corn. It also eats insects, bird eggs, snails and small mammals like young mice. In winter, it stays in its den. The eastern chipmunk doesn't truly hibernate, but it does spend a lot of time sleeping. It may wake up every few weeks to eat the food it has stored.

## **Omnivores:**

Some animals eat both plants and animals. They are **omnivores**. Omnivores include mammals like [grizzly bear](#), [striped skunk](#) and [raccoon](#) and birds like the crow, the [blue jay](#) and the woodpecker. Because they will eat plants and animals, omnivores survive well in many environments. Some omnivores, like the [raccoon](#), the [opossum](#) and the seagull have no problem adapting to living near humans.

They often will dig through garbage cans, dumpsters and gardens to find food.

What did you have to eat today? If you are like most humans, you probably had meat and plants! Humans are omnivores too! Our teeth are designed to eat both meat and plants. Our front teeth help us rip into meat and bite into fruits and vegetables, and our molars help us grind up meat and chew fruits and vegetables. Many omnivorous animals also have teeth that help them eat both plants and animals.



### **Diseases common to Eastern Chipmunks:**

Lyme disease affects Eastern Chipmunks.

### **Communication:**

Eastern Chipmunks of both sexes vocalize prominently, using one of two chattering calls: a trilling chip-chip-chip repeated very rapidly (about 130 trills per minute) and a lower-pitched, slower chuck . . . chuck . . . chuck.

## **Life Cycle:**

Eastern chipmunks mate in early spring. The female usually has one litter a year with between three and five young. In some areas, a female may have a second litter. The young will come above ground when they are about six weeks old. First-year females not breeding in early spring may produce a litter late July-August. Babies don't open their eyes until they are 30 days old. When they are 2 months old, their mother weans them and they are on their own. A chipmunk can live to be 3 years old. About half of all chipmunks in any given year are young that were born in that season. Chipmunks in the wild live, on average, of 3 or more years in the wild and 8 years in captivity.

## **Behavior:**

The eastern chipmunk spends a large part of its waking hours gathering and storing food for the winter. Eastern chipmunks are also very vocal and can be heard chattering as they gather food. In fact, they get their name chipmunk from the "*chip-chip*" sound that they make! The Eastern Chipmunk hibernates from late fall to early spring, waking to eat every two weeks or so. Individuals may occasionally appear on the surface in the snow, especially in mild weather. Essentially a ground species, this pert chipmunk, like the gray and fox squirrels, often feeds on acorns and hickory nuts. It does not hesitate to climb large oak trees when acorns are ripe, and will also scale *Corylus* bushes to harvest hazelnuts. The cutting sounds it makes as it eats nuts can be heard for some distance.

This species is single-minded in its food gathering, making trips from tree to storage burrow almost continuously. It was estimated that over three days one chipmunk stored a bushel of chestnuts, hickory nuts, and corn kernels. Burrows, consisting of single tunnels or more complex systems, are up to 10 feet (3 m) long and less than 3 feet (1 m) deep. They may include enlarged cavities for

nests (made of pieces of leaves) and food caches, which are often large enough to last into the following spring and summer.

#### Did You Know?

- The eastern chipmunk has two fewer grinding teeth than other chipmunks.
- A chipmunk can carry nine large nuts at a time: four in each cheek pouch and one between its teeth. .
- Cheek pouches can stretch as it will awaken to dig into its hidden supply of nuts and seeds, stored during the summer and fall, almost to the size of the chipmunk's head. .The chipmunk stores only hard food that does not mold, such as nuts and cones.
- A chipmunk may store up to 8 pounds of food in its burrows.



*Baby Chipmunk*

#### **Identifying Chipmunk Scat:**

The droppings are somewhat round and average  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch long.

## Eastern Chipmunk Tracks:



Eastern chipmunks have 4 front and 5 back toes. They have claws, but the claws don't always show up on their tracks. Their front feet are roughly 1/2 inch wide and long, but can be a bit larger. Their back feet will usually be just a little bit longer (at least .7 inches). Chipmunks are so light that their tracks rarely show fine details. Chipmunks run on their toes, so the two heel pads of the forefeet seldom register; the hind feet have no heel pads. Their erratic track patterns, like those of their cousins, show the hind feet registered in front of the forefeet. A chipmunk trail often leads to extensive burrows.

Number of toes: 4 front - 5 rear

Front Foot: 1/2 in L x 1/2 in W

Rear Foot: 1 1/8 in L x 3/4 in W

Straddle: 3.2 - 4.2 in

Trail Width: 2 in

Slow Stride: 4 - 7 in

Running Stride: 7 - 9 in

### Definitions:

**Straddle** - The distance between the insides of opposing feet.

**Pitch** - The distance a foot angles in or out in relation to the animals' line of travel.

**Trail Width** - The distance between the outermost prints in any one pattern.

**Stride** - The distance from the foremost toe of one print to the foremost toe of the next print.

**Track Size** - The length and width of a track. (Sometimes used to determine species.)

**This series of Wildlife guides has been compiled and edited by Bill Church.**

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