

## **Living With Wildlife- Chipmunks**

By Kate MacNeil

Education Coordinator, Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre – [www.wildlifeinfo.ca](http://www.wildlifeinfo.ca)

I remember going camping as a young child and we had accidentally left some potatoes in a paper bag under our picnic table. We woke to discover the potatoes had been expertly diced during the early morning and now sat in a pile near the entrance of a small hole. We then spotted the culprit busily working, taking mouthfuls of hash browns into its burrow.

The Eastern Chipmunk (*Tamias striatus*) is well known for its preoccupation with food. In fact many campgrounds are home to chipmunks that regularly beg visitors for seeds and nuts. It seems anytime I watch chipmunks, their actions can be divided into a few categories, zipping around looking for food, chasing another chipmunk away from food, stuffing food into its cheek pouches or scurrying away to stash the food that is bursting from its cheeks. Now I like food so this is definitely an animal I can relate to!

The difference being that chipmunks have a good reason for their food fascination, the caching of food is vital for them to survive winter. During the cold, winter months chipmunks remain within their tunnel system and enter a state of torpor, which means their metabolism, body temperature, breathing and heart rate are reduced and therefore requires less energy for the animal to survive. Chipmunks will periodically awaken to eat some of their food cache of nuts and seeds in order to sustain themselves.

In addition to housing the food stores, the chipmunk's elaborate underground tunnel system also has a nesting area as well as multiple entrances. Entrances can be very well camouflaged by leaves, roots, logs or rocks. The burrow system will even have a work hole that the chipmunk will use to remove the excess soil. After excavation is complete the hole will be sealed up.

Although chipmunks can climb they spend most of their time on the ground and it is for this reason they are very vulnerable to being caught by cats in an urban setting. Other predators include raccoons, weasels, foxes, hawks and ravens.

The Eastern Chipmunk has unmistakable black and white stripes on its back. When we did rehab at the Wildlife Centre we referred to these as racing stripes, because the speed at which the babies would zoom out of their cages reminded us of a Formula One racer. These stripes help the chipmunks camouflage by allowing them to blend within the shadows cast by trees.

For more information about local wildlife check out our website at [www.wildlifeinfo.ca](http://www.wildlifeinfo.ca).