

## ON THE WILD SIDE

### Chipmunks: abundant and entertaining

Linda S. Kollett

Right now four chipmunks are in my garden vying for birdseed. One is actually on the squirrel-proof, but not chipmunk-proof feeder, two are foraging below the feeder and the fourth is poking around in another part of the garden. It is a tiny three-ringed circus.

They are cute and they are fun to watch as they scurry in and out of the brush or dash up the pole of the bird feeder. Their familiar chipping call sounds a lot like a bird. They use it as an alarm call and during mating.

Some say that this sound is why they are called chipmunks, although others say that the name comes from a Native American word meaning “red squirrel”, or another meaning “descends tree head first”. The chipmunks in New England are Eastern Chipmunks. They usually produce two litters of 2 to 5 babies, and thus are very abundant, especially in years when the autumn food supply was plentiful.

This seems to be a big year for chipmunks. You have probably heard neighbors talking about it. Searching for “chipmunk” online brings up numerous articles about how to control them. They can burrow under porches causing structural damage, and of course may consume flowers, bulbs and vegetables in your garden. Right now one of them seems to be practicing burrowing by making long paths in my mulch.



Many people have noticed the surge in the chipmunk population this summer. It is likely due to the bumper crop of acorns we had last fall.

Chipmunks do play a role in our ecosystem. They eat a wide variety of things, including fruits, berries, nuts and insects. The insect part of their diet may in fact have some agricultural benefit. (<http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/>), they play a role in seed dispersal, (Seed Fate; Predation, Dispersal and Seedling Establishment. CABI 2005) and their busy scurrying and chattering does provide entertainment value! Who can resist a smile at the antics of these small mammals?

Since they eat fungi, they even play a role in fungal spore dispersal, which can improve forest soil conditions and make it suitable for tree seedling survival. They also provide food for a number of predators including foxes, snakes, hawks, owls and falcons. An increase in chipmunk population is often followed by an increase in predator population.

Chipmunks are rodents in the genus *Tamias*, which means “storer”. They cache seeds, which is why we usually see them eagerly stuffing their cheeks with food and then running off. Temporary caching areas may be only a few inches underground and are visited frequently by the owner and by others. These seeds may be eaten or re-cached. This is

called scatter-hoarding. As winter approaches chipmunks begin larder-hoarding, moving seeds to burrows to build up stores for the winter. Chipmunk burrows are clean, about three feet underground and divided into separate sleeping areas and caching areas. The entrance is often located in a crevice or under a pile of rocks to conceal it from predators. Chipmunks are not true hibernators; they can't build up large enough fat stores to survive the cold months. Instead, they wake up periodically to eat from the cache and even forage if the winter weather is warm enough.

And then there is their role in seed dispersal. Seed producing plants are faced with the problem of distributing seeds. They can't just walk around. Several solutions have evolved and one variation depends on the rapid accumulation and caching of seeds by rodents and some birds. Caching puts the seeds a distance from the original plant at a good depth for germination. Usually some small percent of the cached seeds is not eaten and thus the seeds are able to germinate and grow into seedlings – a big help in the distribution of seed producing plants.

Chipmunks are native to the forest and the forest edge, but clearly they have adapted well to back yards. They don't like to be out in the open which is why we see them rushing out to gather food and then heading back to the safety of the brush. If your yard has plenty of chipmunk food and good cover, you will most likely have chipmunk visitors, especially this year after the bumper crop of acorns we had last year! Bumper crops of acorns and other nuts often lead to bumper crops of small mammals.

If they aren't actually doing any damage, enjoy them as entertainers in the complex New England ecosystem. And remember, the chipmunk population will most likely crash before long – watch the acorn crop this fall for an indication of what to expect next year in your local chipmunk population.

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