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# Natural History Notes



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## THE STRIPED STEWARD



EASTERN CHIPMUNK  
(*Tamias striatus*)

Very few people need an introduction to the chipmunk. It is one of the most familiar and enjoyed sights in this area.

A small rodent, the chipmunk belongs to the squirrel family, *Scuiridae*, and one of two genera, *Tamias* or *Eutamias*. *Tamias* is the eastern chipmunk and the genus *Eutamias* includes sixteen species of western chipmunks. Both genera are found in Wisconsin. The differences among the species include slight variations in color, size and habitat. The scientific name of the eastern chipmunk, *Tamias striatus* means "striped steward." A steward is the one in charge of the food.

Chipmunks are found almost everywhere in the United States. Their preferred habitat is dry, open woodlands, forest borders, rockpiles, hedgerows and old buildings. Basically, they look for shelter and plenty of food. Chipmunks are fairly tolerant of humans so they may be found in suburban areas. Water is necessary to the chipmunk and it may be observed drinking out of ponds, streams or birdbaths. A chipmunk is only moderately territorial, but becomes more so when it feels its food supply is threatened. They aren't nearly as protective of their nests or mates.

The chipmunk is distinctive in appearance. It has five dark stripes, two tawny stripes and two white stripes running down its back. There is a dark stripe at each eye with a lighter one above and below it. The basic color of the chipmunk is a rusty red, shading to a buff color underneath. During the winter the chipmunk's coat changes to a paler color. The tail is dark both on top and bottom and has an edging of light hair. Chipmunks are about 8-12 inches long including a 3-4 inch

tail. The western species have a proportionately longer tail. There is an interesting Indian legend to account for the chipmunk having gotten his stripes. It seems there was a meeting of all the animals, led by the porcupine, to determine if there should be all night or all day in the world. The chipmunk wanted light and the bear wanted darkness. As the chipmunk was singing for light, the day began to break. The bear was so angry he grabbed for the chipmunk who barely (no pun intended) escaped into his tunnel. The bear's claws scratched the chipmunk's back and to this day the chipmunk still wears the stripes left by the bear's claws.

The chipmunk excavates a main tunnel, up to twelve feet long by two inches wide. The tunnel entrance is dug out very carefully. The chipmunk doesn't leave any dirt or disturbance to mark the entrance and so make it obvious to predators. The tunnel goes straight down for about a foot and then levels out, veers downward again, twists and turns, and finally ends in a nesting chamber about twelve inches in diameter and six inches high. It is filled with dry leaves and grasses. Several side tunnels are dug out to use as pantries, an exit and waste disposal. The western chipmunks generally dig a less extensive burrow or may forego excavation entirely and nest in hollow stumps or logs.

In this area the chipmunk emerges from its winter hibernation sometime in March, but the time is dependent on the weather. The males leave their burrow first; the females emerge two to three weeks later. Mating occurs in April or May, again depending on the weather. About one month later, most commonly, four tiny, helpless, naked young are born. Four weeks after birth the baby chipmunks look just like smaller versions of the adults. During the second month of life the young "chippies" grow to full size. They usually stay with the mother for about three and a half months. There is some disagreement as to whether a chipmunk has two litters a year, or if the midsummer litter is the first for a chipmunk that didn't reproduce earlier in the spring.

The chipmunk is a very interesting little critter. We'll learn more about his eating and sleeping habits — and more — in the next issue.