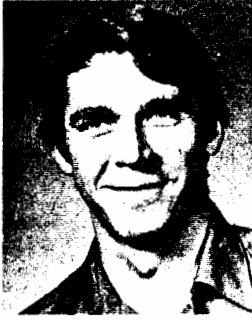


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Natural History Notes

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THE CHIPMUNK (II)



WESTERN CHIPMUNK
(*Eutamias quadrivittatus*)

In the previous issue we learned about the chipmunk's nesting habits, its appearance and how it got its stripes, but there's a lot more to this little animal.

Chipmunks feed mainly on nuts, grains and berries. They store the non-perishable foods, but berries and such are eaten immediately. Chipmunks may dig up and eat seeds or bulbs planted in your garden, but on the other hand they also eat some garden pests such as cutworms, millipedes and slugs. On some very rare occasions chipmunks will eat birds' eggs or frogs. During late summer and fall the chipmunk is busy, busy, busy collecting food for the winter. The chipmunk does not put on fat, so it must store food for its use during hibernation. The chipmunk carries food in its cheek pouches which can expand unbelievably. In one load a chipmunk carried 32 beech nuts, 31 corn kernels, 16 chinquapin nuts, 145 wheat grains, 60 sunflower seeds and 13 prune pits!!! The chipmunk gathers all the food it can — much more than it needs.

Not all of the food is stored underground. Some is cached under bushes, logs or rocks. Of these stored seeds, not all are recovered, so they sprout and grow. In addition, seeds are carried into

burned-out areas so a chipmunk may be considered a forester of sorts. Also, the digging of their tunnel aerates the soil which, in turn, helps prevent water runoff so it is also a soil conservationist.

While out of its burrow, a chipmunk is constantly watching out for predators. These include cats, foxes, owls, snakes, weasels and the like. When one of these is sighted, a chipmunk will give a loud "chip-chip" warning. When the chipmunk is suddenly frightened it will give a "chip-r-r-r-r" ending in a trill and run for cover, reaching a speed of 11 feet per second. The chipmunk's primary sense organ is its eyesight. In the wild the chipmunk lives two to three years on the average. If protected from predators it may live eight years.

Soon after the first hard frost the chipmunk heads into its burrow for its winter's hibernation. The western species will usually wait until winter has really settled in before they begin their hibernation. Generally a chipmunk hibernates alone but on occasion will share its burrow with another. During hibernation the chipmunk becomes torpid. This means it has lost all power of sensation or movement (temporarily). The chipmunk rolls up in a ball and becomes cold and stiff. Now and then the chipmunk awakens for a few hours or days. During this time it will eat some of its stored food and clean up the nest area. In the southern part of the country, chipmunks are active above ground all year.

The chipmunk may be easily tamed to eat out of your hand. However, caution should be used when feeding any wild animal. They may come to depend on you for a source of food and then suffer if it is cut off. Also, some wild animals are carriers of rabies. You don't have to be bitten by the animal to catch rabies. Just a drop of the infected animal's saliva getting into the bloodstream via an open cut is enough to do the job.

The chipmunk is a fascinating little animal. If you are lucky enough to have one living close by, you can have many hours of enjoyment just watching this little striped steward.