

# Ask a Naturalist: Is it strange to see groundhogs in February?

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By Doug Hitchcox

February 23, 2020

*Editor's Note: We're pleased to introduce a new column, which will run every two weeks in the Outdoors section. Send us questions ([email protected]) about the plants, animals and natural world all around you, and Maine Audubon Staff Naturalist Doug Hitchcox will select two or three questions to answer in each column.*

## Groundhogs in February?

I was shocked to see my neighborhood woodchuck struggling through the deep snow a few minutes ago. I've never seen them before mid-March; I'm thinking about climate change. I know USM had a study going for a long time and wondered if you'd heard of any other untimely sightings.

Thanks,

Susan D., Portland

Hi Susan:

I'd guess that the groundhog you saw was not quite fully awake. A few years ago, we had one here, at Maine Audubon's Gilsland Farm in Falmouth, that was roaming around in mid-January, following some warm weather and a decent bit of rain.

Even though Groundhog Day is behind us, in Maine we don't typically see groundhogs emerge from hibernation until mid-March. Groundhogs are considered "true hibernators," meaning when they burrow underground for the winter, their body temperature will drop to nearly match the ambient temperature in their burrow, as low as 35 degrees (obviously staying above freezing), and their respiratory rate and heart rate drops, to as slow as four beats per minute.

To survive several months underground in this "sleep," groundhogs pack on as much weight as they can in the fall. Despite those drops in their metabolism, a hibernating groundhog will still lose as much as 50% of its body weight. One of the major reasons they hibernate is that food



Woodchuck pups at Maine Audubon's Gilsland Farm in Falmouth. If you see a woodchuck emerge in winter, should you blame climate change? *Photo by Ariana van den Akker/courtesy of Maine Audubon*

is scarce or inaccessible in the winter. If a groundhog wakes from its hibernation, its metabolism will rise and that causes it to burn its fat reserves faster. Without access to food, it can be very risky for groundhogs to spend too much time awake in winter.

But winter arousal is not always a bad thing! Dr. Chris Maher of the University of Southern Maine has been studying the groundhogs, or woodchucks, as they're also called, at Maine Audubon's Gilsland Farm since 1998, and was helpful in setting us straight when we worried about our January sighting in 2016. That winter was very mild, with occasional rain, similar to what we are currently experiencing. Dr. Maher explained the groundhog's burrow likely flooded from the rain/melt, and it had come above ground to do some housekeeping, gather some new bedding material, or maybe look for some food. Throughout an average winter, groundhogs will drop in and out of hibernation — though they don't usually come above ground. She said that during these brief periods of activity, the groundhog's brain never fully "wakes up" so the animal is still in a state of semi-hibernation. Pretty neat!



If the hoot you hear sounds like "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" there's a barred owl in the vicinity. *Photo by Doug Hitchcox/courtesy of Maine Audubon*

### **Owl songs at night?**

We've been hearing a lot of crazy calls and sounds in our backyard during the night. Someone finally told us it was probably owls calling, maybe for mating. What owls would we be hearing in winter?

Nancy C., Cape Elizabeth

Late winter is actually one of the best times to be on the lookout, or at least keep an ear open, for owls. Owls are arguably the most intriguing family of birds: Their forward-facing eyes give them human-like faces but their nocturnal lifestyles make for only rare encounters.

We don't typically think of owls as "singing," but those deep hoots you hear at night are exactly that. Birds sing to attract or communicate with mates, and to defend territory. Despite their low detectability, we have three owls that are common breeders in Maine: barred owl, great horned owl, and northern saw-whet owl. These are three very distinctive owls visually, but here are a few tips for telling them apart in the darkness of the night, when you are more likely to hear them.

Great horned owls are 'hooters,' giving a series of very low-frequency notes that often follow a pattern sounding like "Who's awake? Me too." This mnemonic is most helpful for remembering the rhythmic cadence, so don't be confused if the bird adds an extra hoot or two somewhere in the phrase. Our other hoot-owl is the barred owl, which gives a slightly higher-pitched "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" A nice thing about barred and great horned hoots being given at low frequency is that the sound waves travel very long distances.

The pint-sized northern saw-whet owl has a very distinctive series of whistled "toots" that it gives in quick blasts, each given just under one second apart. The saw-whet's song is more likely to be mistaken for a truck backing up than any other owl in Maine.

These three owls are widespread across the state, so no matter where you are, step outside one of these quiet nights and see if you can detect the distant song of these remarkable hunters.

*Have you got a nature question of your own? Email questions to [\[email protected\]](mailto:[email protected]) and visit [maineaudubon.org](http://maineaudubon.org) to learn more about volunteering, classes, bird walks, and other programs about wildlife and habitat.*

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