

# MOUNTAINS

## Beyond the shadow of the woodchuck



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist



The woodchuck is the largest ground squirrel in the deciduous forests of the eastern United States. COURTESY OF TIM PARKER

Whether you call him a woodchuck or a groundhog — whether you consider her precious or a pest — you must admit this charismatic critter has captivated minds and hearts around the globe due to having something few other animals enjoy, its very own holiday.

Indifferent about what these toothy creatures are called, Smokies Supervisory Wildlife Biologist Bill Stiver admits we do not know how many are in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“They prefer open fields and forest or road edges,” he said. “Most of the park is forested so their habitat is limited to the fields, streams, and meadows around Cades Cove, Oconaluftee, the road shoulder along the Spur, and similar places.”

Weighing between five and 13 pounds, and measuring from 16 to 26 inches in length, *Marmota monax* is “the only member of the genus *Marmota* found in the East, in contrast to the five species that reside in the West,” according to “Mammals of the Smokies” published by Great Smoky Mountains Association.

The book goes on to describe this mammal as “the largest ground squirrel in the deciduous forests of the eastern United States. The woodchuck’s range then extends from Maine to North Dakota south to Oklahoma and parts of Mississippi to North Carolina and northwest South Carolina.” This rodent is conspicuously absent, however, from Florida and the coastal plain from Mississippi to North Carolina.

The woodchuck — as they are often called in older literature of the Southern Appalachians — forages mostly at ground level, feasting on herbaceous vegetation such as grasses, clover, dandelion, stonecrop, vegetable gardens, and fruits like blackberries. They also like to munch on bark and the buds of trees and shrubs. A groundhog’s teeth can grow 1/16th of an inch in just one week!

Groundhogs make complex burrow systems with several nest chambers and rooms for storing their waste. They have a 32-day gestation period and deliver four to nine young, which are called kits or cubs. Typically, these rodents live two to six years in the wild, and populations can spread out to one individual per ten acres. If threatened, they may climb trees. An alarmed woodchuck will stand upright on its hind legs next to its burrow entrance and utter a sharp whistle — hence the moniker whistle-pig.

Why do they hang out right beside the road without seeming to even notice the cars and trucks noisily whizzing by?

“The road shoulder provides the habitat, or grasses, they need to thrive,” said Stiver, “and they become habituated to the traffic.”

Given the Pennsylvania Dutch superstition of the groundhog emerging on

Feb. 2 and the legend Punxsutawney Phil has become, something everyone wants to know is: Do groundhogs in the Smokies region actually hibernate?

Stiver says: “Yes. Their heart rate drops to as low as four beats per minute, their temperature drops to below 68 degrees, and they will lose more than 30 percent of their body weight during hibernation.”

He went on to say there has been a noticeable decline in the groundhog population in Cades Cove since he joined GSMNP in 1991. “This is most likely due to an increase in predators and changes in habitat.”

Lots of folks consider groundhogs and their progeny pests because they get into the garden and help themselves, pilfering everything from lettuce and carrots to corn and beans. Even Thoreau in his “Walden” chapter “The

Bean-Field” wrote: “My enemies are worms, cool days, and most of all woodchucks.”

But the woodchuck does provide some benefits for our environment.

“They are a source of food for predators like bear, coyote, foxes, and birds of prey,” Stiver said. “Plus, other animals—opossums, rabbits, skunks, foxes, snakes, amphibians, and box turtles—use their burrows for shelter. They are a natural part of the ecosystem in the park.”

*Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.*

## Cooper visits clinic pushing to overcome vaccine hesitancy

**Bryan Anderson**

ASSOCIATED PRESS/REPORT FOR AMERICA

PITTSBORO — North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper on Thursday visited Piedmont Health SeniorCare in Pittsboro to gather ideas about how to help overcome the reluctance of some to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

The federally qualified health center that administers doses with an emphasis on serving racial and ethnic minority groups said it first worked to overcome hesitancy within its own ranks through greater education.

“One of the first things that we had to do was to build confidence with our staff, said Misty Drake, the 43-year-old chief operating officer at Piedmont Health. “There was a lot of hesitation just with our frontline staff ... We actually started with a town hall where it was a multidisciplinary group of team members that talked about the science.”

After gaining increased buy-in from staff, it became easier to boost participation in an underserved community.

“It’s easy for us because we’re already servicing marginalized communi-

ties and they trust us to be able to give them the right information that they need in order to make the best decision for themselves,” Drake told Cooper.

Since vaccines first became available in the state last month, only 11% of first-dose recipients have been Black, according to state data. U.S. Census data shows that racial group accounts for 22% of the state population. Hispanics account for 10% of the state population but just 2% of people who have gotten their first dose. Meanwhile, white people have gotten 82% of the vaccine supply, despite representing 71% of the population.

In a brief news conference with reporters after the conclusion of his tour, Cooper acknowledged the state needs to do more to replicate the success that the health center in Pittsboro has seen.

“We try to make sure that these vaccines are being distributed equitably, and we wanted to come and see that,” Cooper said. “A lot of it is established trust that these doctors and nurses and staff members have already established.”

Reginald Tyson, a 50-year-old pastor

at Big Zion AME Zion Church in Oxford, spoke with Cooper during the tour. He believes hesitancy is driving the lack of vaccinations among Black people. Tyson got vaccinated last week and said he’s seen skepticism among relatives who want to see others vaccinated first to ensure it is safe.

“One of the things that they are saying is that their caution is due to the fact that they want to see the results or impacts of people who have already gotten it,” Tyson said. “I think here at Piedmont Health they’ve managed to spread the word pretty quickly.”

He said the clinic has done a good job engaging with the community through outreach to local churches. Asked by reporters how the state plans to overcome concerns about racial, ethnic and geographic inequity, Cooper replied, “The entire country has to do better on this.”

Cooper emphasized the state’s desire over the last week to clear its backlog of first doses through large vaccination clinics. One mass event was held last weekend at Charlotte Motor Speedway, where nearly 16,000 people got vaccinated. As many as 30,000 people could

get vaccinated this weekend at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte.

“We wanted to make certain that we got all of our first doses off the shelf, and the state had gotten a little behind on that, particularly when we were concerned that we might have our allocations cut, which would be bad for everybody across the board,” Cooper said. “We could not tolerate that.”

With the backlog mostly exhausted now, Cooper said the state will work harder to ensure vaccines are getting into the arms of people in minority communities.

“We need to really concentrate on the equity piece, which is one of the reasons why we are here today.”

Cooper and state Health and Human Services Secretary Mandy Cohen learned that a South African variant of the virus has hit its southern neighbor. They said they are acting as if the variant is already here.

“While we have not yet identified that variant here, just like with the U.K. variant, we’re operating as if it’s here already because we knew that this virus moves fast,” Cohen said.

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