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Townsend's Chipmunk

Tamias townsendii

by S.K. Headley and S. Sells

Do you know how to tell the difference between a chipmunk and a squirrel? Here's a hint: look at their faces. Chipmunks, unlike squirrels, have stripes along their heads and faces. Some squirrels have stripes on their body, but there are no squirrels with striped faces.

Townsend's chipmunks are shyer than other chipmunks, so watch carefully for them. Listen for their call—a fast, high-pitched series of “chip, chip, chip.” It may sound like a bird's call muffled by bushes. Their call sometimes is used to warn of

intruders such as people, predators, and other chipmunks. If you are lucky, you might see a chipmunk sitting on a stump or log. Sometimes they sun themselves on low branches. Or you might see them running up a tree or into a burrow with their tail held straight up.

Townsend's chipmunks are considered ecologically beneficial because they spread the spores of fungi around the forest on their feet and in their feces. As fungi grow, they help the forest by providing nutrients to the trees.

When forest companies replant trees after logging, they sometimes consider chipmunks to be a problem because they eat Douglas-fir seeds. In reality, by caching, or storing, the seeds they collect, chipmunks sometimes plant new trees.

Other animals eat chipmunks. Predators such as long-tailed weasels and minks eat Townsend's chipmunks. Other predators include house cats, bobcats, foxes, martens, skunks, hawks, owls, and snakes.

House cats eat chipmunks, so watch your cat! Put a bell on your cat's collar to warn chipmunks and other animals that your cat is nearby.



Chipmunks sometimes can be seen scurrying up a tree trunk or sunning themselves on a branch.

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Species description

The Townsend's chipmunk is a rodent. The term rodent means to gnaw.

Townsend's chipmunks are dark brown with five dark and four lighter stripes on their back. The middle stripe is very dark brown, with alternating light and dark stripes on either side of the center stripe. There are three brown and two gray stripes on their face. The sides of the body are reddish brown. Their long, bushy tail is dark brown to blackish on top and brown below.

In the Coast Range and the western valleys, the light-colored stripes are cinnamon brown. In the Cascade Range, the light-colored stripes are dull white to cream.

Townsend's chipmunk is the largest chipmunk in Oregon, at $8\frac{3}{4}$ to 11 inches long, including a 3- to 5- inch tail. They weigh 2 to 4 ounces. They live as long as 7 years, possibly more. Townsend's chipmunks live in underground burrows that are about 2 inches across and 5 feet long. In places where it snows, chipmunks usually hibernate in the winter after putting on extra body fat. In the Coast Range, where there is less snow, Townsend's chipmunks usually do not hibernate.

Look for chipmunk tracks.

Their front feet leave small round tracks with four toes.

Their hind feet leave about

$1\frac{1}{4}$ inch tracks with five toes. If you are lucky enough to spot a chipmunk's tracks,

you might be able to follow the tracks to a burrow!

Townsend's chipmunks are diurnal, meaning they are active during the day. They tend to stay hidden in thick vegetation. To escape danger, they may climb trees or dive into their burrows. When they run, they hold their tail straight up in the air.

Chipmunks have cheek pouches like hamsters. They stuff their cheek pouches full of seeds to take back to their burrow. You may see them picking up seeds under a birdfeeder.

Female chipmunks usually give birth to three to six young in their burrows in May and June. Newborns are about 2 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and weigh only $\frac{1}{10}$ of an ounce, about as much as a dime.

The young are born with their eyes closed. They do not have hair or teeth, but they do have well-developed claws. They begin growing hair immediately, and their stripes are visible after 4 days. Their eyes open after 4 weeks.

Mother chipmunks nurse their young until about the time they leave the burrow in July or August. The young chipmunks will be old enough to have their own litters the following summer.





Where they live and why

Townsend's chipmunks are found in southwestern British Columbia and western Washington and Oregon. In Oregon, they are found from the Cascade Range to the coast.

Townsend's chipmunks live in dense hardwood forests and humid coniferous forests (forests with evergreen trees such as firs, hemlocks, and pines). Within coniferous forests, they like riparian areas along streams, or chaparral areas with dense shrubs. Townsend's chipmunks

sometimes live in more open areas along the ridges of mountains.

Townsend's chipmunks eat a variety of foods. In the summer and fall, they eat berries such as blackberries, salal berries, and thimbleberries. In the late fall, they eat acorns, huckleberries, maple seeds, thistle seeds, grain seeds, grass, roots, and conifer seeds. In the winter, they search for fungi, which they find by smell and dig up to eat. Chipmunks also eat insects, especially beetles.

Creating habitat



Before changing the natural habitat, see what is already there. Leave thick ground vegetation, bushes, and trees that produce berries, seeds, or nuts. Chip-

munks also like old-growth trees and dead trees called snags. Because it takes a long time for these habitat elements to develop, it is important to preserve them.

You can plant vegetation to provide more cover and food sources. You could add berry plants native to your area, tanoak, bigleaf maple, California laurel, Douglas-fir, hemlock, or spruce.

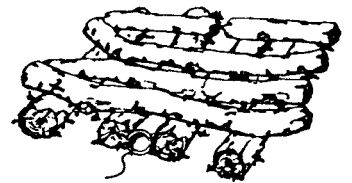
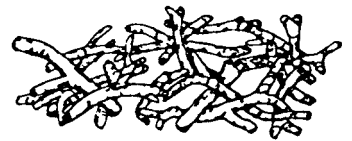
To make a chipmunk feeder, place a flat tray on the ground. Scatter natural foods such as nuts and berries on the tray. Put the feeder in an area near cover so the chipmunks can escape from predators.

You can also make brush pile shelters for chipmunks. Place logs about $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 foot apart, and then build another layer perpendicular to the first. On top of the

logs, pile pruned branches or other woody materials from your yard. Alternatively, you can make a rock pile by using large rocks at the base and then piling more rocks on top. Fallen leaves can be piled over the top of brush and rock piles to encourage animals to hibernate there.

Make the piles away from roads in a warm, sunny location if summers are cool, or in a partially shaded location if summers are hot and dry.

Limit the use of pesticides in your habitat area, since some chemicals can harm chipmunks and other animals.






You can make a brush or rock pile to provide habitat for chipmunks.



When chipmunks run, they hold their tail straight up in the air.

Fun facts

-  Chipmunks have stripes on their heads, while squirrels do not.
-  Chipmunks stuff their cheek pouches full of seeds to take back to their burrow.
-  Chipmunks sometimes enter buildings. Cover holes and cracks with thick wire mesh screens to keep them out.

Learn more!

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