

Chippers

The Eastern Chipmunk
Tamias Striatus

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It's autumn glory time in Western Maryland. You're enjoying a leisurely backwoods drive on a sparkling Sunday afternoon, with sunshine popping in and out among the trees, when you realize that the sun isn't the only thing catching your eye. A chipmunk dashes out of the woods, then stops and stands on its hind legs, right in front of your vehicle, as if daring you to pass on by. You can't help but admire the spunk of this little critter, which soon tires of this game and zips back into the woods.

This busy fellow wasn't intentionally trying to interrupt your Sunday drive. He's on a serious mission to gather as much food as he can possibly stuff into his fur-lined cheek pouches so he can stash his goodies in his special winter cache. So it's not surprising that he's a bit territorial, after all that work.

This scenario repeats itself numerous times, with variations, during your journey. You're beginning to wonder if there's a population explosion of the *Tamias Striatus*, commonly known as the Eastern Chipmunk, in the area. But what you're likely seeing is a demonstration of these creatures' obsession with food when the same chipmunk keeps crossing your path. The term "*Tamias*" indicates that these small members of the Family *Sciuridae*, or squirrel family, come from the genus of "storers." If their favorite

treats like nuts, seeds and berries are plentiful and the weather is mild, these "chippers" are especially busy as they harvest nature's bounty.

As diurnal creatures, chipmunks are most active during two periods of the day, morning and late afternoon. Most of their time is spent foraging along the ground but they'll climb trees for food, too.

Deciduous forests with beech and oak are their favorite habitats. In fact, the Eastern chipmunk's territory covers about one-third of the United States, extending throughout much of the East to the Mississippi River.

During the winter, chipmunks hibernate, yet they do not live off their body fat. When you think about it, have you ever seen a fat chipmunk? Instead, they periodically awaken during the winter months, go to their cache cupboard for a bite, then head back to bed, which is usually an underground nest or a hollow log.

With spring come the babies, usually in litters of three to five. They make their debut on the forest stage after about eight weeks. If they manage to outwit predators like long-tailed weasels, hawks, owls and house cats, they can reach 10 inches in length (including the tail) and weigh a whopping two-to-four ounces.



Sporting flashy coats with broad stripes along their backs, chipmunks like to make noise while they work, usually in the form of high-pitched whistles and chirps or lower “chuck” sounds – hence the nickname “chippers.” In the mountains of Virginia, West Virginia and North Carolina, they and their squirrel cousins are sometimes called “chickarees” or “fairy diddles.” Closer to home, in Western Maryland, some people call chipmunks “Grinneys.”

For some homeowners, their cute appearance doesn't make up for their sometimes annoying habits of munching flower bulbs, raiding bird feeders or invading attics. After all, these critters are rodents. But most people enjoy watching them scamper about enough to have given them special names in different parts of the country.

Given their appeal, it's not surprising that Hollywood has had some fun with animated versions of these little animals.

If you're willing to admit you're old enough to recall Disney's “Chip ‘n’ Dale” cartoons, you'll recall that those two rascals had two basic goals: finding or keeping a home and finding or keeping food. But they couldn't resist having a little fun as they pursued these goals, especially at Donald Duck's expense.

Then there's Alvin, perhaps the most famous chipmunk, with his sidekicks Theodore and Simon. Their “Chipmunk Song” broke sales records in 1958, with 4.5 million sold within seven weeks, and earned creator/vocalist Ross Bagdasarian, otherwise known as David, two Grammys. During the 1960 Presidential race, Alvin felt cocky enough to throw his hat into the ring with Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon. Kennedy's response: “I am pleased to know that I have at least one other worthy opponent.” Although Alvin was defeated, the next year he and the boys went on to record “The Chipmunks Sing the Beatles,” with the Fab Four's blessing.

What other critters could pull off such a coup?

Sources: Jim Mullan, Regional Manager for the Wildlife and Heritage Service in Western Maryland. Dr. Ronald Barry, professor of biology at Frostburg State University. The Humane Society of the United States.



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