

GETTING TO KNOW WILDLIFE - The Woodchuck and the Teddy Bear



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Well-known Canadian naturalist, Barry Kent MacKay, refers to woodchucks (*Marmota monax*) as the little ‘Mennonites of the Meadow’ because they are pacifists that live a peaceful life and do no harm to others. Sadly, though, they are often maligned simply because they have the audacity to want to share the planet with us humans.

Sometimes called groundhogs, the woodchuck’s only crime is digging. However, we need to keep in mind that its burrows serve an important purpose. They supply shelter for other wildlife such as foxes and skunks that are critical in keeping mice and insect populations in check. In nature, everything is connected and everything serves a purpose.

When the Centre did wildlife rehabilitation, we would receive

two to three dozen orphaned baby woodchucks each year. Most resulted when the mother was killed by a car or trapped and relocated. There would be three to four babies from a family that came in together.

On one occasion, though, we received a single youngster found by the side of a road. The rescuer searched but could find no other members of its family. The woodchuck was so tiny that it fit into the palm of the man’s hand. It was also very frightened, burrowing its head in the hope that we wouldn’t cause it harm.

Because she appeared so forlorn and alone, as we often did with single orphans, the staff gave the little woodchuck a teddy bear for comfort. It was love at first sight. She quickly became known as ‘Teddy’ for she clung to the bear at all times. Even though she was soon paired up with other baby woodchucks, she remained loyal to her teddy, carrying it around

everywhere. She only put it down to dig or to eat.

One of her ‘roommates’ obviously decided she was getting too big for her ‘security blanket’ and we’d watch as he would wrestle it away from her and toss it with disdain in a corner. However, she’d soon retrieve it.

Eventually, the woodchucks were moved to a large outdoor enclosure on a foster volunteer’s property that had a wonderful meadow with plenty of dandelions. We wondered, when it finally came time for their release, whether Teddy would take her bear with her but she didn’t. I guess she finally outgrew it.

Remember, this is the wildlife birthing season. If you have an animal around your home or garden, please be patient, as it no doubt has young nearby. The family will all soon move to a more natural area. See the website below for detailed information.

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