

NATURE DETECTIVES

Choppers and Hoppers -- Who Are We?

We are cute to some and pests to others. You can find us almost anywhere in the world. We live in water, on trees, and even underground. Some of us are social and live in large colonies with aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. Others usually live alone. Some of us are so small we could fit in the palm of your hand. Others are so big that two or three of you could barely lift us. Can you guess who we are? We are rodents.

Mice and rats, squirrels and chipmunks, beavers and muskrats, porcupines and prairie dogs are all rodents. In spite of our differences, we have one thing in common.

Our **incisors** are sharp and chisel-like. And, they grow constantly just like your fingernails. You use clippers to trim your nails. We eat to trim our teeth. Constantly gnawing and grinding on woody plant material like bark, nuts, and roots wears down our teeth.

Do you think a cat or a dog is a rodent? Do they gnaw on bark or roots? Look at their teeth when they yawn. Do they have two pairs of long, sharp incisors in the middle of their mouth? Check it out.



Can you find the rodent in this picture?

Watch Those Acrobats

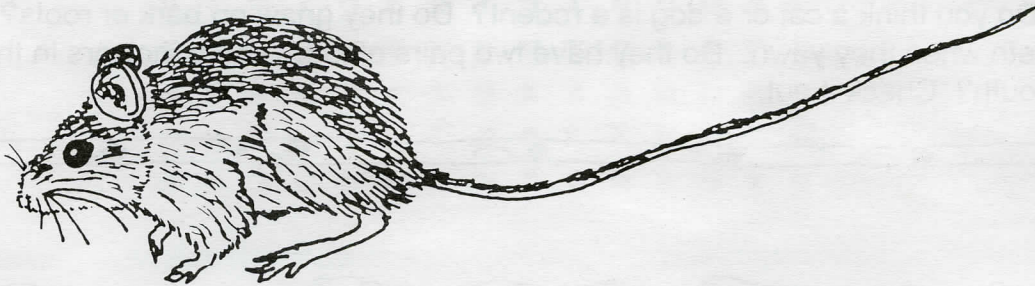
We love to jump around tree tops. Watch us run and chase each other up and down trees and across power lines. We enjoy acrobatics and use our bushy tails for balance. We are squirrels.

Our strong incisors help us break and eat nuts. We hide extra food in the fall and then dig it up to eat in the winter. How do we remember where we hid it? Well, we just hunt around our favorite spots. If we forget to dig up the nuts we had hidden, tiny plants emerge in spring. We have planted a little squirrel garden!



Gone in a Flash

All you see is a bounding flash and a long tail disappearing into the weeds. We are hard to see because we are tiny. We are about as long as this sheet of paper, but half our length is tail. Our long tails help us steer. We weigh about as much as a teaspoon. We eat grass, seeds and insects. And, we are the smallest **hibernating** rodent. We are jumping mice. If you are very lucky you may see one of us at Pella Crossing.

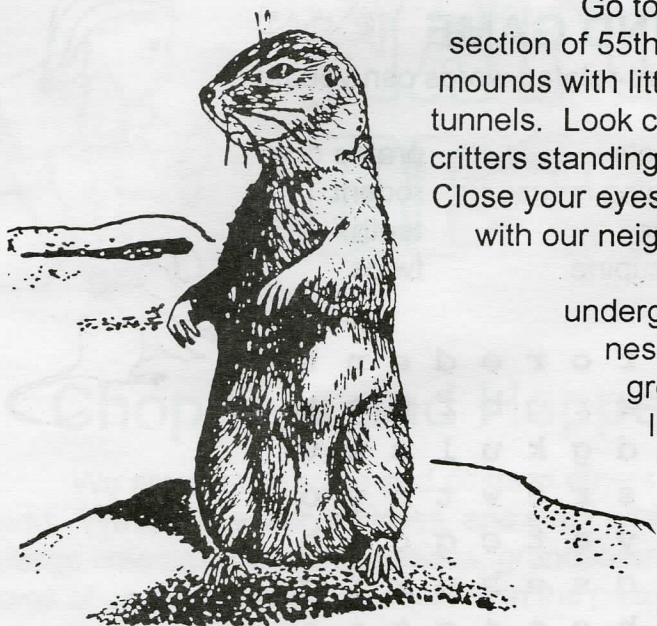


Who Peeled Off the Bark?

Hike up Bald Mountain and you may notice some bark scattered under a pine tree. Look up and you may see that the trunk or a limb has all the bark scraped off. You may even notice some teeth marks on the exposed yellow **cambium**. Who could have done that? Look closely and you may see a dark lump sleeping all alone on a nearby tree. Be careful though, I am a porcupine. If you get too close, I will lash my tail to defend myself and you will end up with a handful of prickly quills.



Who Made These Mounds?



Go to Hall Ranch, Rabbit Mountain or the intersection of 55th and Arapaho. You will notice dirt piled into mounds with little holes in the middle. The holes lead to tunnels. Look closely and you may see some little brown critters standing on their hind legs with their noses in the air. Close your eyes and listen. You will hear us yip-yapping with our neighbors. We are prairie dogs.

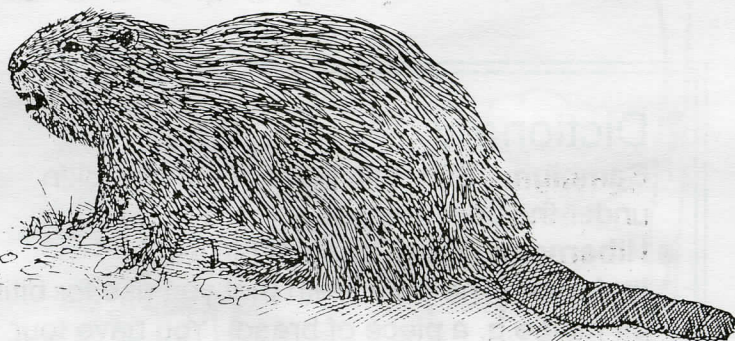
We live with our relatives in large towns underground. Each family lives in its own little nest. These nests are connected by underground tunnels. After we move out, animals like snakes, mice, or burrowing owls sometimes move into our homes. We come above ground for fresh air, to romp with friends, or to eat. The mounds that you see are actually lookout posts for us.

We sit on them and look around for signs of danger like a hungry hawk or a sly fox.

The Wonderful Builders

While hiking by a stream, have you ever noticed some cone-shaped tree stumps that look like sharpened pencils? You may even have seen some branches piled up in the stream. The pile forms a dam which makes a little pond. This little pond is used by ducks, fish, herons, muskrats, and us. We usually have a house with rooms built into the pile of branches. Who are we? We are beavers.

It takes us half an hour to chew down trees as big around as your head. We eat the bark and leaves. Then we tow the big branches to the stream and pile them up to make a dam. You may not see us because we work at night.



We are rodents but we have webbed feet like ducks and frogs. Our webbed feet help us in swimming. Our wide, flat tail helps us balance when we stand up to chew trees. We also use it to steer in the water. And, if we slap the water with it other animals know that there is some danger nearby. Come see our dam at Sawhill Ponds.



WORD FIND GAME



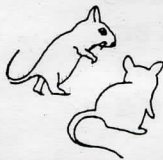
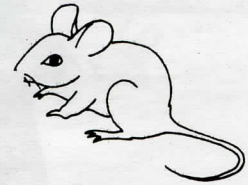
How many of these rodent-related words can you find?



bark
beaver
colony
grass

insects
jumping mouse
lodge
porcupine

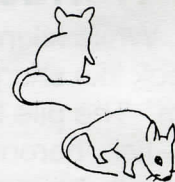
prairie dog
rodent
teeth
twigs



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m e o d t w b f o r o d e n t
w i x b e a v e r q b f p t s
e j j z h f u d g k u l s x v
d a e u y c i s r e w t h y o
s c r e m z t y a t c q c e h
g k i t f p n d s e h u x r g
d r b m l o i b s e o g t i o
t a p h l e v n u t m o k e d
p b c o m k i d g h p x g r e
c b c e r j w f a m n d p w i
w i y a v c s k d t o s q u r
v t b r g z u i j l n u p s i
r k g w c o y p v r q i s m a
x j e s s k t b i z a h n e r
s t w i g s f r s n k y p t p
d t j i s w l n t e e z d r g
    
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*Answers to this puzzle
can be found on page 11*



Dictionary

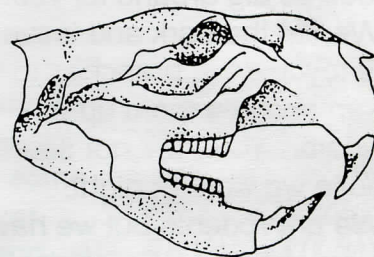
Cambium: Soft, thin layer of growing skin under the bark of trees.

Hibernate: Sleep through the winter

Incisors: The front teeth that you use for biting off food e.g. a piece of bread. You have four incisors each on the top and bottom of your jaw while rodents have two each.

Molars: The teeth on the side of your mouth that you use for chewing your food.

Rodent: An animal with two paired incisors that grow constantly. They all have a big gap between their **incisors** and their **molars**.



Beaver Skull

Nature Detectives: Adaptable Rodents

Join us for a hike to look at how different rodents adapt to life in the foothills. See page 9 for details.