

plains pocket gopher *Geomys bursarius*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Family: Geomyidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

The plains pocket gopher has black fur on most of the body with tan or black belly fur. A white patch is present under the chin. The short, stubby legs have white feet. The enlarged, long claws on the front feet are for digging. The hairs on the side of the toes are used for brushing dirt away. The sensitive tail is able to act as a “feeler” while backing up in the tunnel underground. The lips can be closed behind the front teeth to keep dirt out of the mouth while digging. There are two grooves in the middle of both front incisors. The plains pocket gopher has tiny eyes and ears. Males are larger than females.

BEHAVIORS

The plains pocket gopher may be found in the central one-third of Illinois, specifically near the Mississippi River in St. Clair and Madison counties, east and south of the Illinois River and from the Kankakee River to the Indiana border. This rodent lives in well-drained soil with many tuberous-rooted plants. Plains pocket gopher mounds are often seen along the shoulders of roads. The plains pocket gopher feeds on the leaves, roots and stems of alfalfa, clovers and dandelion and any tuberous roots that are available. Special pouches in its mouth are used for food transport. It spends most of its life underground in burrows that it digs. Digging is done with the front feet. When loose dirt piles up under the body, it is kicked back into the tunnel by the hind feet. The mounds seen at the surface are areas for removing excess dirt from this animal’s digging. This dirt is pushed out of the tunnel by the head and front feet. When cleared of loose dirt, the exit is closed with soil. This animal is solitary, only coming together with other gophers in the mating season, which occurs from February through June. Litter size varies from one to seven.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

none

Woodland Habitats

none

Prairie and Edge Habitats

black soil prairie; edge

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