



The Chat

October 2025

CHAPTER MEETING

Tuesday, October 28

7:00 PM

Lions Field House - 270 Elkhorn Road (Hwy 67), Williams Bay, WI

Free and open to the public!

"The Work of a Wildlife Rehabilitator at Fellow Mortals Wildlife Hospital"

By Yvonne Blane and Members of the Fellow Mortals Wildlife Hospital Staff

Wildlife Rehabilitation is still a very young field. Although professional organizations have existed since the early 1980's, there are still many states that do not require any formal training or qualification prior to allowing individuals to house and care for wild creatures in their homes. Fellow Mortals' founders played an instrumental part in bringing wildlife rehabilitation into the professional sphere in Wisconsin, working with legislators and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to make sure that wildlife rehabilitation's unique non-consumptive "use" was properly addressed in the Captive Wildlife Act, passed in 2003, which paved the way to establish standards and regulations relating to the practice of wildlife rehabilitation in Wisconsin.

Fellow Mortals is currently one of the largest wildlife hospitals in the state and the nation, yet it operates much the same as it did when first organized by its founders and run out of their home. Our operating model is the same as that applied to nurses tending to human patients: consistency is important for patient well-being and results in better care. Where other similar-sized facilities employ volunteers for animal care, who may only see the animals one day a week for a few-hour shift, wildlife admitted to Fellow Mortals receives care from a limited number of knowledgeable and experienced professionals who see the animals nearly every day. Where other facilities admit wildlife and then transfer it elsewhere for care, wildlife admitted to Fellow Mortals stays at the hospital from admit to release.

Fellow Mortals' operating principles are based on one simple belief: individual life is precious. Following that principle means that providing professional care is the first imperative and professional care costs money. Where most other facilities have given up on the idea of funding professional staff, Fellow Mortals does not accept that professional care is an "option," but believes that it is just as important as providing proper nutrition and caging.

Belief is not enough to raise funds, however, which is why the professional care provided to the wild creatures brought to Fellow Mortals wouldn't be possible if not for the extraordinary compassion and commitment of the wildlife rehabilitators who work long hours 365 days a year for a fraction of what they would make elsewhere as qualified wildlife biologists, veterinarians and in other professional categories. Fellow Mortals is a living philosophy, and our staff and interns work every day to put that philosophy into practice through rehabilitation, education and research. Our goal is to inspire other rehabilitators and facilities who see the possibilities in our approach.



Fellow Mortals Wildlife Hospital Co-founder
Yvonne Wallace Blane

About the Speaker

Yvonne has been a wildlife rehabilitator and educator since co-founding Fellow Mortals with Steve Blane in 1985. Yvonne graduated magna cum laude from University of Wisconsin with a B.A. in English and Earth Sciences. Other areas of interest and education include paralegal work, accounting and organization development. Yvonne has been licensed by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since 1988.

Yvonne has written and presented papers for both the national and international wildlife rehabilitation association and published in their journals. Past president of the Wisconsin Wildlife Rehabilitators' Association, former board member of the Illinois Wildlife Rehabilitators' Association, member of the Ethics Committee of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators' Association, she served as elected Chair of the Wildlife Rehabilitation Advisory Council to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources from 2013-2019, and currently serves on user advisory councils for Guidestar and Global Giving, organizations dedicated to increasing and encouraging transparency in the international non-profit arena.

Yvonne has handled over 60,000 wild birds and mammals to date, with specialties in captive care of Common Nighthawk and the use of wild unreleasable birds for conspecific fostering of wild orphans, a field which Yvonne helped to pioneer with the late Marlys Bulander, of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with her first wild foster in 1989. Yvonne currently acts as Executive Director, Director of Rehabilitation, Grantwriter, Social Media and Online Fundraising Professional and Advanced Wildlife Rehabilitator. Utilizing her training, education and legal and administrative background, she also writes and edits the organization's newsletter, promotional, fundraising, social media, and educational materials.

Leave Them For The Birds

Being a little untidy with our yards and gardens is good for wildlife!

As we prepare our yards and gardens for the Winter season, we should try and keep in mind the needs of the different species of wildlife that call these places home. Birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and a multitude of insects may use areas of your property as overwintering habitat.

Leaving some flowers and ornamental grasses uncut to serve as a food source and sheltering spot can go a long way in helping our local wildlife cope with the challenges of a Wisconsin Winter.

As you may know already, it's also really helpful for certain species of insects to leave some leaves on the ground. Take a look at the chart below to learn more about which plants benefit native birds during the Winter season.

9 PLANTS NOT TO CUT IN FALL

Birds Need Them for Winter



1. Coneflowers
(Echinacea)



2. Black-Eyed Susans
(Rudbeckia)



3. Sunflowers
(Helianthus)



4. Joe-Pye Weed



5. Goldenrod



6. Ornamental
Grasses



7. Sedum



8. Asters



9. Native Shrubs

How much wood?

By Janice Bain

“How much wood can a woodchuck chuck?” is the start of a fun tongue twister that spills from the mouths of our youth amidst much laughter. As adults, the thought of woodchucks (English term) groundhog (American term) evokes vehement emotions, laughter not being one of them. Oh no, it's going to eat my vegetables. Oh no, it's going to make holes all over my yard. Oh no, it's going to destroy my patio. The list goes on.

First off, all the above could happen, although it would take many groundhogs many years to cause structural ruin. Before we condemn this proud rodent of the group of large ground squirrels known as marmots, we need to consider how they enhance the world. Just for fun, I'll throw in other facts to broaden the scope of your knowledge of this underappreciated animal. The groundhog—*Marmota monax*—is in the family *Sciuridae* (the squirrel family). See how I sprinkled some facts in? Sneaky, I know.

Groundhogs bear many names: woodchuck, land beavers, ground-pig and even whistle-pig. That's just a small sampling. When early colonists roamed the land, Native Americans called them, “wuchak”. The closest translation the colonists could make phonetically was “woodchuck”. Comically, “wuchak” means “the digger” and has nothing to do with chucking wood; regardless, the name stuck.

Groundhogs are industrious rodents, akin to an architect and an engineer rolled into one. They are adept burrowers. They use their strong limbs, thick claws and shovel-shaped heads to dig and excavate the dirt out of their complex underground tunnels. Moving up to 700 pounds of dirt in a day requires skills; they use their hard head like a shovel and the dirt removal is managed one mouthful at a time. If you find a hole, about a foot wide, with the signature pile of dirt outside it, you have found the main entrance. They often dig one to four auxiliary holes from the same burrow sometimes called “escape holes” or “spy holes.” These holes don't have a mound of dirt near them, thus helping to conceal their access points from predators. A groundhog may peek out of an escape hole to survey the surroundings. If they sense danger, they will use their four long incisors to whistle a warning to other groundhogs. Groundhogs also whistle to attract mates. This whistling ability branded them with the moniker “whistle-pig.” Interestingly, their incisors grow 1/16th of an inch each week and also wear down 1/16th of an inch each week due to the foods they eat.

Burrows are dug as far as 6 feet below the surface and may reach up to 65 feet (including extra chambers); temporary burrows may be shallower and less complex. Winter burrows, usually dug in wooded or bushy areas, always fall below the frost line and are used for hibernation. These winter burrows remain at a stable temperature well above freezing throughout the winter.

Groundhogs prefer to dig their summer burrows in a field (or your yard) that has ample food, and wooded margins. The urban yard is extra appealing because their main predators—foxes and coyotes—are less of a threat. They fear mid-to-large sized dogs and may avoid these residences. When threatened by a predator, groundhogs will run to the nearest entrance hole and seek safety. If that isn't possible, they will climb a tree. They also climb to survey their surroundings. Though they prefer to stay dry, they are accomplished swimmers and will hit the water when forced by a predator.

Here's a fun water related tidbit: Groundhogs are not known to drink water. They get their fluids primarily from the juices in the plants, the dew and the rain droplets on the plants. Groundhogs lick their chops over the watery center of a sunflower.



Burrows often have multiple “rooms” called chambers that branch off the main tunnel; each has a unique purpose. A chamber can serve as a nursery, a living area, an eating area, a latrine, a sleeping area and even as a drainage chamber. Abandoned holes often become new homes to foxes, rabbits, rats or snakes. Benefits of the extensive tunnel system are numerous. Besides aerating and loosening the ground, they redistribute nutrients, minerals and moisture. The process of digging brings deeper, nutrient-rich soil to the surface and moves surface organic matter deeper underground. Microorganisms in the soil reap the benefits of this reorganization. Groundhogs have everything covered when it comes to living a great underground lifestyle; they have designed and engineered a complex tunnel system to meet all their needs while simultaneously improving the surrounding ecosystem.

Okay, it's time to deliver on those promised “contributions to society” of which I boasted. Yep, you'd be surprised, they are numerous. Let's start with the most renowned contribution: Groundhog Day, held Feb. 2 each year. Surely you are familiar with Punxsutawney Phil in Pennsylvania and his annual weather forecast. Famous he may be, but poor Phil didn't anticipate the exacting competition brought on by Wisconsin's weather prognosticating groundhog. Jimmy the Groundhog resides in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, and in 1948 began his career announcing the arrival of an early spring or the six-week continuation of winter; he boasts an outstanding accuracy rate of 60% compared to Phil's lowly 39%. Jimmy's prediction on Feb. 2 marks the last day of Frozen Fest, a five-day festival held in Sun Prairie.

The celebration took hold when Margaret McGonigle, a promoter of the virtues of Sun Prairie, heralded the artwork of Ira Bennett, of Eau Claire, Wisconsin to promote the community. The groundhog was adopted as a symbol for Sun Prairie and made its first appearance on a postcard donning Ira's artwork. The theme snowballed into the formation of a Groundhog Club, which went on to create a fun spoof of the holiday and add to its intrigue. They sought all people born in February to apply for a special honor. If you were born on Feb. 2, you were eligible to be a groundhog. If you were born on other days in February, you were deemed a woodchuck. Folks from all over the country joined in the fun and for a nominal fee, received their groundhog or woodchuck birth certificate. The media, local politicians and anyone else hoping to witness the forecast arrived at sunrise. TV and radio stations awaited the news on the arrival of spring.

Wisconsin Congressman Glen Davis said that the Wisconsin's Groundhog Day observance was “legitimate” over Punxsutawney Phil's. Not to be outdone, Punxsutawney's congressman responded with an equally frivolous response. Such “important information” from our congressmen is and was all recorded in the Congressional Record! In 1952, the Punxsutawney newspaper described Sun Prairie as a “remote two cow village buried somewhere in the wilderness...”. In response, Sun Prairie deemed itself the Groundhog Capital of the World. Good natured ribbing continues to this day.

The fame of groundhogs grew dramatically with the cinematic debut of the heartwarming movie “Groundhog Day.” Stuck in an everlasting time loop, fictional weatherman Phil Connors (Bill Murray) is forced to relive Groundhog Day repeatedly until he learns to become a better human being. The popularity of this movie launched a spike in tourism at the annual Punxsutawney Groundhog Day celebration; attendance jumped from 5,000 to 35,000 attendees; score one for Punxsutawney. Interestingly, the movie wasn't even filmed in Punxsutawney, it was filmed in Woodstock, Illinois. If you pay attention, you may spot the sign for “Woodstock Jewelers” in the background of a downtown scene. The groundhogs used for filming weren't always nice. Bill Murray was bitten twice and had to have precautionary rabies shots. Despite their bad behavior on set, groundhogs used their cinematic talents to relay life's lessons on becoming a better human.

Way back in 1955, an unsuspecting farmer and amateur historian named Albert Miller of Avella, Pennsylvania, stumbled upon what turned into a fabulous groundhog gift to humanity. Miller came across the main entrance of a humble groundhog burrow near a sandstone rock shelter. Examining the voluminous dirt pile excavated by the groundhog, he noticed bones, a flint knife and other objects. He sought expert advice from Archaeologist Dr. James Adovasio. For the next six years, Adovasio and his team conducted a full-scale excavation, unearthing nearly 2 million artifacts and revealing evidence of a sophisticated, nomadic hunter-gatherer society. The artifacts put human occupation as far back as 19,000 years, significantly older than any previous archaeological finds. This discovery dramatically changed our understanding of human migration into the Americas, and to this day provides evidence of the earliest-known human habitation in North America.

Let's cover one last noteworthy groundhog contribution, it's in the medical field. Groundhogs bear a virus very similar to humans known as "woodchuck hepatitis B virus (WHV)". WHV attacks groundhogs the same way our hepatitis B virus (HBV) attacks us. Due to the similarities of both viruses, scientists have been able to conduct research on the groundhogs and develop medicines and a vaccine.

Groundhog hibernation habits have also been the focus of research. Their body temperature drops from 99 degrees to as low as 35 degrees, their heart rate drops from 100 to as low as 4-10 beats per minute, and they take just one breath every six minutes during hibernation. Studying these metabolic and physiological adaptations can help further research regarding management of reduced metabolism and blood flow in humans. This could aid in the health of those suffering from hypothermia, both intentional and accidental. It could also help medical professionals in learning to slow down bodily functions during complex surgeries or for those who have sustained serious injuries. It could even be helpful in preparing humans for long-duration space travel. These medical studies using groundhogs are just the tip of the groundhog contribution iceberg.

It's time to pull it all together regarding our esteemed groundhog.

Groundhog cons:

- Garden menace
- Ankle twisting holes, enough for a golf course - watch out cows, horses and kids!
- Destabilization of patios, foundations and concrete slabs

Groundhog Pros:

- Ecological contributions: Improve the soil and underground ecosystems. Provide housing for other animals after they abandon their burrows.
- Meteorological contributions: Important enough to warrant its own holiday, also adding to the whimsy in our society.
- Entertainment contributions: Brought us “Groundhog Day,” a movie to inspire one to be a better human.
- Archeological contributions: Led to the finds that took human occupation in the Americas back 19,000 years.
- Medical contributions:
 - Used for studies leading to life-saving medicines and preventative vaccines surrounding Hepatitis B.
 - Used for studies of metabolic states with several real-world medical applications.

It's all been laid out, it's time to see if your troubled attitude toward groundhogs has softened, at least a touch. Menace to society, national treasure or just a rodent to be tolerated? I'll leave it for you to decide.

Online sites I visited to research groundhogs:

- Photo: Public Domain
- <https://www.terminix.com/blog/education/woodchuck-vs-groundhog/>
- <https://biologyinsights.com/how-far-do-groundhogs-burrow-and-how-deep-are-their-tunnels/>
- <https://popular-archaeology.com/article/return-to-meadowcroft/>
- <https://reflectionriding.org/nature-center-news-updates/groundhogs>
- <https://cityofsprairie.com/840/Groundhog-Day#:~:text=Sun%20Prairie%20was%20described%20in%20Groundhog%20Capital%20of%20the%20World.>
- <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107048/trivia/>
- https://www.google.com/search?q=premise+of+groundhog+day+movie&og=premise+of+Groundhog+day+movie&qs_lcrp=EqZiaHJvbWUqBwgAEAAyqAQyBwgAEAAyqAQyCAgBEAAYFhgeMq0IAhAAGIYDGIAEGI0FMq0IAxAAGIYDGIAEGI0FMq0IBBAAGIAEGKIE0gEKMTA5MDVqMGoxNaqCDLACAfEFDauatAtVr0zxBQ2rmrQLVa9M&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8
- <https://www.wtaj.com/news/groundhog-day/things-you-might-not-know-about-groundhog-day-the-bill-murray-movie/#:~:text=The%20premise%20of%20Groundhog%20Day,day%20he%20dreads%20E2%80%94%20Groundhog%20Day.>
- <https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/discover-meadowcroft-meadowcrofts-own-groundhog-day/>
- SciShow: The real science of groundhogs <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkPRwoVjI4>
- <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/1996/02/cornell-groundhog-harbinger-health>
- Cornell Chronicle (Cornell University)
- By Roger Segelken, February 1, 1996

Field Trip

Wednesday, November 12, 2025

10:00 AM – 12:00 PM (Noon)

Peterkin Pond

W2311 County Road B, Lake Geneva (Town of Bloomfield), WI

Open to the public and free to attend!



Join us for an outing to Peterkin Pond. This body of water is a 24 acre seepage lake that is surrounded by wetlands. The pond and the surrounding wetlands are owned and managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Access to the property is off of Hwy B in the Town of Bloomfield. This field trip will consist of a fair amount of walking, standing or sitting outdoors. The focus will be on migrating Waterfowl and Cranes. We will meet by the entrance sign along Hwy B that is across from Speckman Leedle Road at 10:00 AM. For more information about the property and to view a map, please visit the website listed below by clicking or tapping on this link: <https://apps.dnr.wi.gov/lakes/lakepages/LakeDetail.aspx?wbic=745200>

Please contact us and let us know if you are interested in attending this field trip.

<https://lakelandaudubon.com/contact> Call or Text: +1 (262) 729-9702

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Bird Walks

Saturdays

11:00 AM - 1:00 PM

Big Foot Beach State Park

N1550 S Lakeshore Drive, Lake Geneva, WI

Meet in the main parking area to the right of the entrance station a little before 11:00 AM. A state park sticker (\$28, \$13 if age 65 or older) or daily pass (\$8, \$3 if age 65 or older) is required to enter Big Foot Beach State Park.

Sundays

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

White River County Park

6503 Sheridan Springs Road, Lyons, WI

Get out and enjoy one of the best parks Walworth County has to offer. We'll walk the trails and be on the lookout for birds and other critters. We'll also watch for plant blooms and other interesting elements of nature. Meet at the kiosk by the parking lot a little before 11:00 AM.

Please contact us and let us know that you are interested in attending a walk.

<https://lakelandaudubon.com/contact>

Call or Text: +1 (262) 729-9702

The Chat is the newsletter of the Lakeland Audubon Chapter of the National Audubon Society, P.O. Box 473, Elkhorn, WI 53121. Subscription is \$15 per year for printed copies sent by US mail.