

Canadian Natural History.

The Woodchuck.

(Arctomys monax.)

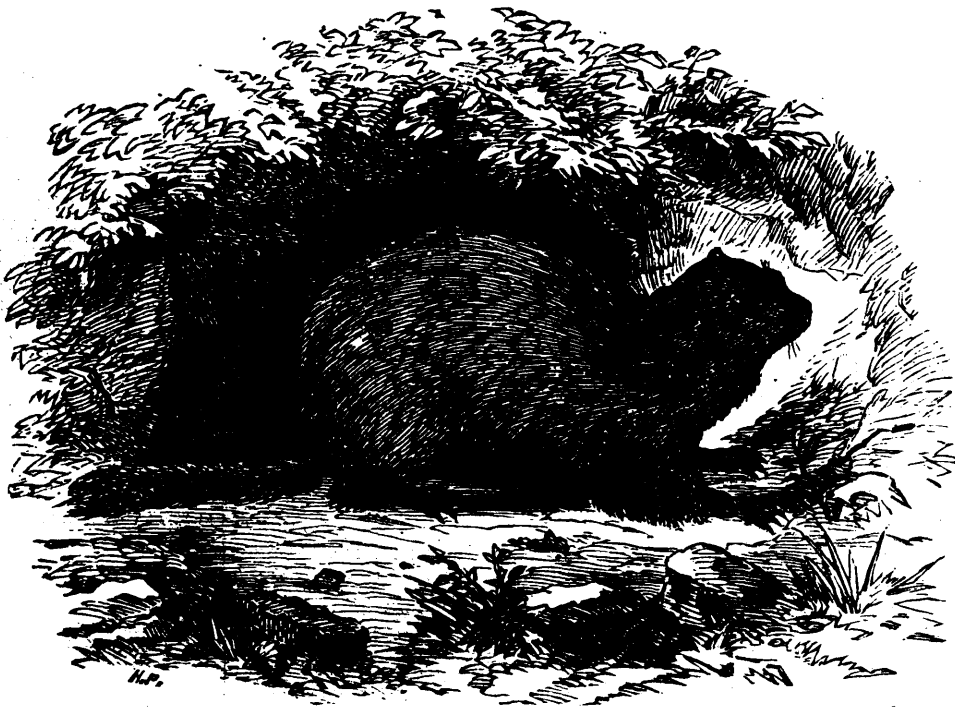
THE Woodchuck, or Ground Hog, is well known in Canada and the United States, in some parts of which it is even more abundant than with us. Those who are familiar with its appearance will recognize the fidelity of the accompanying illustration, which was drawn from a fine specimen in the Toronto University Museum. It belongs to the natural order RODENTIA, or gnawing animals, and is closely allied to the marmots of Europe and other parts of the old world. Its body is stout and rather clumsy in appearance, compared with the agile forms of most of the creatures in the same order. The head is broad, conical, and tapering suddenly to the snout, which is blunt and somewhat truncated. The ears are short, broad, and round, covered with short hairs within and without. Eyes black, of moderate size. It is furnished with numerous whiskers, about two and a half inches long. The toes are well divided and long. The claws are longest on the fore feet, and slightly curved. The thumb is rudimentary, with a small nail. The hind feet are semipalmate, and the claws channelled towards the tip. The tail is somewhat bushy, and expanded or blunt at the extremity. The fur is composed of short wool mixed with coarse hairs, which are longest on the shoulders and shanks. In the head and feet they are short, sub-rigid and depressed. The colour of the fur is subject to variation, though the prevailing hue is a reddish gray, the short fur being dark brown at the base and ferruginous at the tip; through this appear long, stiff hairs, which are black for two-thirds of their length and white at the tip. The summit of the head is a uniform reddish brown; the chin and space around the nose are greyish, while the nose itself is brown.

The average dimensions of the animal are as follows: length of the head four to five inches, body about twelve inches, and tail, including the fur, six or seven inches. The colour of the young is subject to still greater variety than that of the adult animal. The woodchuck is common over a large portion of North America. In some places they appear to select the pine forests for their abode, whilst in others they seem to prefer cleared lands and old pastures. They feed on clover and other succulent vegetables, and are said to be specially fond of field peas. Hence they are in ill repute with most farmers, and notwithstanding their inoffensive disposition, receive little mercy at their hands. The gait of the creature is awkward and slow, but its extreme vigilance and acute sense of hearing prevent its being often captured, though when surprised at a distance from its burrow it falls an easy prey to the most inexperienced hunter. It forms deep and long burrows in the earth, to which it flies upon the least alarm. Sometimes a number of these burrows will be found within a comparatively limited space, as the animal is more frequently social than solitary. The burrows contain large excavations, in which are deposited stores of provisions. It hibernates during the winter, having first carefully closed the entrance to its subterranean retreat. It is said to bring forth four or five young at a litter. It is susceptible of domestication, and is remarkable for its cleanly habits.

A Good Word for the Robin.

THE following extract from Mr. E. A. Samuel's valuable work on the "*Ornithology and Oölogy of New England*," will, we trust, be the means of retrieving the character of our old friends the much maligned Robins, and save many of them from being murdered in cold blood.

"Perhaps none of our birds are more unpopular with horticulturists than this; and I will here give the observations of different scientific men, and my own, to show that the prejudice against the bird is unjust and unfounded. Mr. Trouvelot, of Medford, Mass., who is engaged in rearing silkworms for the production of silk, is troubled by the Robin to a degree surpassing most other birds. He has a tract of about seven or eight acres enclosed, and mostly covered with netting. He is obliged, in self-defence, to kill the birds which penetrate into the enclosure and destroy the worms. Through the season probably ten robins, for one of all other birds, thus molest him; and of scores of these birds which he has opened and examined, none had any fruit or berries in their stomachs—nothing but insects. It



is to be understood that this was not in a part of the summer when berries were unripe; on the contrary, it was all through the season. His land is surrounded with scrub-oaks and huckle-berry bushes. These latter were loaded with fruit, which was easier of access to the birds than the worms; but none was found in them. He says they came from all quarters to destroy his silkworms, and gave him more trouble than all the other birds together. He said, that in his opinion, if the birds were all killed off, vegetation would be entirely destroyed. To test the destructiveness of these marauders, as he regarded them, he placed on a small scrub oak near his door two thousand of his silk-worms. (These, let me say, resemble, when small, the young caterpillar of the apple-tree moth.) In a very few days they were all eaten by Cat-birds and Robins,—birds closely allied, and of the same habits. This was in the berry season, when an abundance of this kind of food was easily accessible; but they preferred his worms. Why? Because the young of these, as well as of most other birds, must be fed on animal food. Earth-worms assist in the regimen; but how often can birds like the Robin, Cat-bird, Thrush, etc., get these? Any farmer knows, that, when the surface of the ground is dry, they go to the subsoil, out of the reach of birds; and it is not necessary here to say what proportion of the time the ground is very dry through the summer. Cater-

pillars, grubs of various kinds, and insects, therefore, constitute the chief food of these birds; and of these, caterpillars and grubs being the most abundant and most easily caught, furnish, of course, the larger proportion.

In fact, the Thrushes seem designed by nature to rid the surface of the soil of noxious insects, not often pursued by most other birds. The warblers capture the insects that prey on the foliage of the trees; the fly-catchers seize these insects as they fly from the trees; the swallows capture those which have escaped all these; the wood-peckers destroy them when in the larva state in the wood; the Wrens, Nuthatches Titmice and Creepers eat the eggs and young that live on and beneath the bark; but the Thrushes subsist on those that destroy the vegetation on the surface of the earth. They destroy nearly all kinds of grubs, caterpillars and worms that live on the green-sward and cultivated soil, and large quantities of crickets and grass-hoppers before they have become perfect insects. The grubs of locusts, of harvest-flies, and of beetles, which are turned up by the plough or the hoe, and their pupæ when emerging from the soil; apple-worms, when they leave the fruit and

crawl about in quest of new shelter; and those subterranean caterpillars, the cutworms, that come out of the earth to take their food;—all these, and many others, are eagerly devoured by the Robin and other Thrushes. The cutworms emerge from the soil during the night to seek for food; and the Robin which is one of the earliest birds to go abroad in the morning, is very diligent at the dawn of day in hunting for these vermin before they have gone back into their retreat. The number of those destructive grubs is immense. 'Whole corn-fields,' says Dr. Harris, 'are sometimes laid waste by them. Cabbage-plants, till they are grown to a considerable size, are very apt to be cut off and destroyed by them. Potato-vines, beans, beets, and va-

rious other culinary plants, suffer in the same way.' The services of the Robins, in destroying these alone, would more than pay for all the fruit they devour. Indeed, during the breeding season, a Robin is seldom seen without having in his mouth one of these caterpillars, or some similar grub, which he designs for his young; and as the Robin often raises three of those broods of young during the year, his species must destroy more of this class of noxious insects than almost all other birds together. In my own gardening experience, I have had my full share of cutworms; and I have always noticed the Robin, Brown Thrush, and Cat-bird busy early in the morning,—almost before other birds are out of their feather-beds—figuratively speaking—catching the vermin and eating them, or carrying them for food to their young."

SNOW BIRD AND SPARROW.—A correspondent sends us some inquiries respecting the Snow Bird, having written evidently before the issue of our Feb. 1, No., and will find the information he seeks in the brief account there given of this interesting and familiar winter visitor. He alludes to an idea prevalent in many parts of the country, that the Snow Bird is only the common Hedge Sparrow in a winter dress. This is clearly an erroneous notion. The Sparrow is nearly allied, and is often found in company with the Snow Bird, but they are perfectly distinct. The variation in the plumage of the Snow Bird at different seasons is comparatively slight.