

Round-tailed Ground Squirrel

SCIENTIFIC NAME: The round-tailed ground squirrel, *Spermophilus tereticaudus*, belongs to the squirrel family, Sciuridae. The scientific name originates from Latin and Greek. *Spermo* translates to “seed” and *philus* to “loving” in Greek. The name is appropriate for the species because seeds are an important part of this squirrel’s diet. In Latin, *tereti* means “rounded off” and the *caudus* is the “tail,” which has an obvious connection to the species’ common name.

DESCRIPTION: Round-tailed ground squirrels are relatively small animals whose grayish-brown coloring tends to match the sandy soils where they live. The grayish-brown coloring of the fur on top fades to a paler shade below but does not have any distinguishing markings or stripes. The fur is molted once in the spring and once in the fall.

There are two characteristics that make these squirrels unique. The first, and most noticeable, is the long, slender, rounded tail. The other is the long, broad, hairy hind feet. The claws, and small ears set low on the head, help these squirrels live underground in a semi-fossorial lifestyle. On average, they weigh 5–6½ ounces and are 8–11 inches long. They are commonly mistaken for gophers or prairie dogs, but gophers don’t forage above-ground and prairie dogs are much bigger.

DISTRIBUTION: Round-tailed ground squirrels make their home in northern Mexico and the deserts of the southwestern United States, including Arizona and California. In Arizona, they can be found in western and southern areas of the state.

HABITAT: Low, flat areas in open, sandy habitat are where round-tailed ground squirrels choose to reside. They often are seen in fields and along roads and parking lots. The squirrels live either in burrows



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they dig themselves or in unoccupied burrows dug by others. Burrows, which typically are 3 feet deep, often are found at the base of mesquite or creosote bushes.

BIOLOGY: Round-tailed ground squirrels live in a semi-colonial social group, sharing a burrow system but with individuals

defending a personal burrow. The colonial lifestyle allows them to communicate with each other when predators are present through a whistle alarm call.

Common predators of this squirrel are hawks, eagles, foxes, badgers, bobcats and snakes. Green vegetation, seeds and insects — the main sources of food — provide them with water as well. They are active during the day, with activity concentrated during the morning and evening in times of extreme heat.

One can find these squirrels out and about from January until September. They don’t actually hibernate, but spend their colder winter months in torpor. They emerge in January and breed soon after. Gestation typically lasts 25–35 days. These squirrels average six or seven young, which are weaned within five weeks. Young are born hairless with closed eyes and ears and weigh less than .25 ounces. They are sexually mature at 10–11 months.

The males disperse while the females remain where they were born. Males typically dominate a colony during the breeding season from January until March. Females are dominant while raising the young in March and April. The maximum lifespan for this squirrel is 9 years.

STATUS: The status of the round-tailed ground squirrel is generally stable. The species is vulnerable to agricultural and urban development, but over all, it is still common within its native range.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Currently, there are no special management needs for the round-tailed ground squirrel. Populations should be monitored to ensure that their numbers remain stable. 🦨

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