

The Nature of Teller

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This month I thought I'd step away from the things in nature that can hurt you or your animals and explore the least chipmunk, *Tamias minimus*. They are found throughout North America, occupying much of the Rocky Mountain region and the western Great Plains. The term "least" has nothing to do with their importance and everything to do with their size. Of the four chipmunk species in Colorado (including the cliff, Uinta, and Colorado chipmunks) the least chipmunk is by far the smallest, averaging only 2.2 ounces, or about a quarter cup!



One of the first things to clear up is what differentiates chipmunks from other species in the squirrel, or Sciuridae family, which includes: tree squirrels, chipmunks, ground squirrels, marmots, and prairie dogs.

The easiest way to tell a chipmunk from a ground squirrel is that chipmunks have stripes on their faces, while ground squirrels don't. The least chipmunk can generally be distinguished from other chipmunk species by its small size, relatively long tail that sticks straight up when running, and five dark brown, or

black, stripes on its back with the middle one reaching from the crown of its head to the base of the tail. The sides of its body have an orange-brown tone, its belly is grayish white, and its tail is light brown with black-tipped hairs.

Least chipmunks prefer open areas such as forest edges and openings. They are commonly found near rock cliffs and river bluffs. If you've been on the trails outside Lion's Camp recently, you've likely experienced this highly energetic chipmunk scurrying amongst the rocks near the streambed.

They are most active between April and October. During the summer they make their nests from leaves and bark that are in rotting logs and tree cavities. They are quite adept climbers and I've seen them foraging on the very tips of shrubs and trees. When it starts to get cold, the least chipmunks will climb trees in search of a sunny spot for warmth. As winter moves in, they abandon their summer nests and establish new nests in underground burrows up to three feet deep where they line the nesting chamber with dried grass, bark, fur, feathers and soft vegetation.

Least chipmunks are diurnal (active during daylight) and spend most of their time gathering food in their cheek pouches, allowing them to carry multiple food items back to their burrows, where

they are eaten or stored for future use. They are not social and prefer to spend their time alone, unless mating, or when at campsites where they have no fear of humans and will gladly scavenge your food! During winter, they go into a state known as torpor, which is similar to a short, light hibernation; awakening frequently to snack on stored food supplies.

The males emerge in April, a couple weeks before the females, to prepare for mating. Females choose nursery nests while they are pregnant, which are often located in protected stumps, under logs, or in brush/rock piles, which are generally connected to chambers filled with cached food supplies. Two to six offspring are born after a gestation period of about 30 days. The young are cared for by the mother and weaned at 60 days, becoming independent six weeks later.

Tactile communication is important between mothers and their offspring, as well as between mates and rivals. In addition, visual and auditory signals are used to communicate. They use calls to advertize their ownership of a territory, to find mates, and when they feel threatened.

These chipmunks are “least” in size only and will provide a lot of entertainment if you take the time to observe their frenetic behaviors and feeding habits this time of year.

Sources cited:

Animal Diversity Web

National Museum of Natural History

Kaufman Field Guide to Mammals of North America

Mark J. Platten is the Colorado State University Extension Director for Teller County. Extension's focus is bringing the research-based information from Colorado State University to the community. Some programs include Colorado Master Gardeners, 4-H, Native Plant Masters, Agriculture, and Natural Resources. Mark can be reached at 686-7961 or emailed at mark.plattten@colostate.edu