Chipmunks

Species: Siberian (or Asian) chipmunk and eastern American chipmunk Scientific names: *Eutamias sibricus* and *Tamias striatus*

Description

Chipmunks are small squirrels with black and white stripes on their faces, back and the sides of their body. They weigh between 70-120g, have a head to body length of 12-19cm and a furry tail about 11cm long.

These species usually live for four to five years in captivity, but may live for 10 years.

Life in the wild

Siberian chipmunks originate from Siberia and Asia, whereas the eastern American species is from northern USA and Canada. There are more than 20 different species of chipmunk that live in these regions and as far south as Mexico. Chipmunks are active during the day; they live on the ground where they dig burrows in which they make their nests, but they are energetic climbers and forage in trees and bushes as well.

Source of animals

Until a few years ago most chipmunks were imported from Japan or Korea. The majority are now captive-bred and of the larger Siberian (or Asian) species. There are also now many varieties, such as cinnamons and whites, which have been selectively bred in captivity. Only captive-bred chipmunks should be bought by prospective owners and from reputable breeders. Local veterinary surgeons may be able to give advice on this. Alternatively your local RSPCA animal centre may have chipmunks that need rehoming.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a chipmunk, it is important that any keeper finds out about the animal - including how to provide for that animal's needs when kept in captivity and how long it lives for. Only then can the keeper make an informed choice on whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is established before buying food and taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers and professionals for further advice such as a vet with experience of treating the species, and specialist UK organisations that keep this species in captivity.

Vet Care/costs/holiday cover

Chipmunks may need care and treatment by an experienced veterinary surgeon. The vet can advise on costs of consultations and many vets will charge lower consultation fees for examining small animals like chipmunks.

When planning to go away on holiday, arrangements need to be made to ensure someone feeds the chipmunks and checks on the animals and their enclosure every day.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy chipmunk will be lively with a shiny coat, bright eyes and no signs of diarrhoea around its tail. Discharge from its nose and signs of difficulty in breathing could mean the chipmunk has a respiratory infection. Wetness around its mouth could indicate overgrown teeth.

Why are chipmunks vulnerable in captivity?

Chipmunks can become stressed and then hyperactive if handled too much or not provided with sufficient space and environment enrichment to allow them to burrow and climb as they would naturally in the wild. Health issues to find out about

- Aspergillosis.
- Ringworm.
- Parasites.
- Stress.
- Dental disorders e.g. overgrown teeth.
- Respiratory infection.

When kept outside, chipmunks can be susceptible to parasites like fleas and harvest mites – veterinary advice should be sought if the chipmunk appears to be scratching persistently. Too much corn in the diet can also cause itchy skin.

Overgrown teeth can also be a problem if chipmunks are not given the right food or are not given fresh branches or cuttlefish bones on which to gnaw. Chipmunks sometimes bite each other and these wounds may need veterinary attention.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Chipmunks, even when tame, do not appear to enjoy being handled and dislike fast movements. Scoop them carefully into cupped hands. Never pick them up by the tail. Being agile and fast, chipmunks can be difficult to catch. Padded nets, the use of sliding doors to close the nest box when occupied, or even the setting of a live-catch squirrel trap are all suitable methods for capture. Heavy gloves need to be worn to avoid being bitten and care should be taken to not stress the animal so avoid chasing it around the enclosure.

The best carrying case is a small, enclosed, ventilated wooden box that is big enough for the animals to turn around inside. Bedding material from the chipmunk's nesting box should also be put inside to make it feel more secure and to give the box a familiar smell. Some moist seed and fruit can be put inside too for the short journey, such as when taking the animal to the vet

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

In the wild, chipmunks tend to be solitary although loose colonies form where territories overlap. In captivity, chipmunks generally fare better with companionship. Opposite sex pairs or a group consisting of a single male with up to three females can work well. Males kept together will usually fight and care should always be taken when introducing any new individuals to the group. The eastern American species must be housed alone.

Chipmunks can be kept either indoors or outside. If kept outside their home will need to be in a sheltered spot away from persistent draughts. They will need well-insulated, frost-proof nest boxes. Their home should reflect, as much as possible, their natural environment. It should be as large a possible – along the lines of a small aviary. A variety of hollow logs and pipes in which to hide, a range of branches with ropes to climb and a number of nesting boxes are key to a successful chipmunk home. Untreated wood shavings or sawdust make a suitable substrate, with shredded paper in the nest box providing bedding material and further insulation during cold weather.

Outdoor chipmunks may 'hibernate' for short periods if their home does not have adequate heating. Chipmunks will therefore need to lay down body fat to survive any cold periods when they do not feed.

An indoor chipmunk home must also be as big as possible with furnishings and substrates similar to those used for outdoor enclosures. It should be kept away from direct sunlight, radiators and other heat sources. Chipmunks are stressed by the high frequency sounds of television and must be kept in another room well away from them. They should not be exposed to tobacco smoke, aerosols or insecticides.

Chipmunks will also need a constant supply of clean water from a securely fixed drinking bottle with a stainless steel spout. Their diet should be made up of 50 per cent cereals like oats, wheat, barley, corn and millet sprays with unsalted nuts, such as pine nuts, along with washed, chopped fruit and vegetables. Suitable fruit and vegetables include: apples, pears, bananas, oranges, carrots, sweet potatoes, bean sprouts and tomatoes. Stones need to be removed from plums, peaches etc. Offering untreated seeding grasses and weeds (such as chick weed, seeding dock and shepherd's purse) also provides a natural food source. Chipmunks will eat about 30g of food each day, but they will store away extra food. This food store should be checked daily to remove any of the food that is going mouldy. Chipmunks will also eat their own faeces, which is normal behaviour and provides essential vitamins and beneficial enzymes. A clean cuttlefish bone put in the cage will provide a good source of calcium and when gnawed helps to wear down their teeth.

Chipmunks are very clean animals – they tend to use one area as a toilet and this needs cleaning at least once a week. Smaller indoor cages need thorough cleaning weekly and larger outdoor ones monthly. Four times a year a chipmunk home will need to be scrubbed down completely with a pet-safe disinfectant and then rinsed out with clean water before the chipmunks are put back inside.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.