

# Conservation Corner

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It seems as if our unspring has finally sprung and not a moment too soon. Last week Jill, upon returning from cleaning the cabin at Meredith Park, commented, "I saw two squinneys cross the road." What is she talking about, I wondered. As it turns out, squinney is a fairly common colloquial name, especially in the Des Moines area, for thirteen-lined ground squirrels. Let's feature this common roadside resident of Pocahontas County in today's encounter with nature.



The 13-lined ground squirrel is native to the prairies of north central America. Like other generalists who have adapted well to urban and agriculture expansion, their range has expanded north to Alberta and Saskatchewan, south to the Texas coast, west to Montana and Arizona, and east into Ohio.

The 13-liners have, you guessed it, 13 alternating brown and whitish lines upon their fur, thus their species name *tridecemlineatus*. They are members of the largest order of mammals, the rodents, whose 2,000 species make up 40 percent of all living mammals. Growing up, we called them striped gophers, but they are actually members of the squirrel family. Traditionally included in the large *Spermophilus* genus, recent molecular studies place in a new genus, *Ictidomys*, with three other species of ground squirrels.

The 13-liners grow about 11 inches in length, including their 4-inch black-striped tail, and weigh 5-9 ounces. They are omnivores, eating seeds, leaves, and grass as well as insects, small birds, and lizards, and may cache their food for later. Ground squirrels are strictly diurnal and most active at midday on warm, sunny days. They are an important prey species for hawks, owls, foxes, coyotes, weasels, and snakes to the tune of 90% predation loss before first hibernation.

These ground squirrels dig shallow blind-end emergency burrows but also deeper burrows for nesting and hibernation. Unlike their cousins the prairie dogs, they do not live in colonies. Prime short-grass habitat may contain 10 families per acre. The 13-liners mate in early spring. After a 28-day gestation, the female gives birth to 6-13 babies who nurse on 10 tiny nipples. The young grow up quickly, are weaned at four weeks, and soon head out on their own. The 13-liners have excellent senses of vision, touch, and smell. They talk to each other through alarm calls and whistles as well as special scents and greet one another by touching their nose and lips.

Did you know ground squirrels spend more time asleep than awake? It's true, ground squirrels spend 200 days or more each winter in the sack. They are what scientists call true hibernators, their temperature dropping to just above freezing and their heart rate slowing from 200 to 20 beats per minute.

Some people consider the 13-liners nuisance animals, especially groundskeepers of cemeteries and golf courses. But ground squirrels also benefit people by feeding on harmful weeds, weed seeds, and crop-damaging insects while their digging improves soil conditions by aerating the soil and recycling soil nutrients. Have you seen a squinney this spring?