



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

### April 28, 2023



California Ground Squirrel hand feeding

## California Ground Squirrels

California Ground Squirrels are small burrowing rodents found throughout California, as well as parts of Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and Baja California. They measure 11 to 14 inches in length, (including their bushy tails) and usually weigh 0.7 to 1.2 pounds. The squirrels have mottled fur that ranges from brown to gray, with light spots and flecks on the back. Ground squirrels are most commonly seen in areas with loose, well-draining soil that is easy to dig through. They live in colonies of individuals in underground burrows that can be up to 30 feet in length and have multiple entrances. Although they are primarily herbivorous and eat grasses, seeds, nuts, and fruits, they occasionally consume insects and other forms of protein. They are also known to store food in their burrows in preparation for the winter months.

The most common predators to California Ground Squirrels are rattlesnakes. Over the years ground squirrels have evolved to use a variety of techniques to reduce the predation from rattlesnakes. Female ground squirrels will chew and roll on old rattlesnake skins and then lick herself and her offspring to disguise their scent. Some adult ground squirrels have evolved to have varying levels of immunity to rattlesnake venom. If a snake gets close to a burrow containing babies, the mother will go outside the burrow to try to draw the attention away from her young. She will swish her tail around and pump it full of blood to heat it up. This will trick the rattlesnake into thinking they are facing a much larger predator, since the extra heat from her tail will fool the infrared-sensing pits on the sides of the snake's head. If the snake starts to go into the burrow the mother squirrel will actively attack the predator. If the snake is persistent, the adult squirrel may run into the burrow from a separate entrance and attempt to block the snake's path with dirt.

Ground squirrels are diurnal, meaning they are active during the day and sleep at night. They are social animals and often live in groups of up to several dozen squirrels. Members of the group will communicate with each other through a variety of vocalizations, body language, and scent markings. These different modes of communication allow them to convey information about their location, food sources, and potential threats in their environment.

Here at CWC we receive 50 to 100 California Ground Squirrels each year. Many of these patients are young, orphaned animals who have crawled from their burrows out of desperation. Mother ground squirrels are very attentive to their young and pay close attention to their offspring until they are independent. Because of this, it is easy to tell when a baby ground squirrel is orphaned and in need of help. Once young squirrels are fully mobile, they will start to make short trips out of the burrow under the watchful eye of their mother. If a person gets close to any ground squirrel above ground and the animal does not scurry back to safety, then something is wrong.



# **California Wildlife Center**

## **Patient of the Week**

### **April 28, 2023**

This was the case for two orphaned California Ground Squirrels who were brought to CWC in mid-April. Hospital staff assessed the squirrels and determined that they were both thin, dehydrated, and hypothermic. Although we do not know the exact cause of the abandonment, it is most likely that their mother was attacked by a predator or was hit by a car. After the initial intake exam, the young patients were immediately placed in a warm incubator. Technicians then provided fluid therapy and stabilized the animals. The California Ground Squirrels are currently being cared for in our Orphan Care Unit. Once they are old enough to survive on their own, they will be returned to the wild.

If you find a lethargic ground squirrel out in the wild, contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center as soon as possible. Since young ground squirrels are never left unattended, seeing one alone above ground is the telltale sign that human intervention is needed. You can do even more to help wildlife by donating at [cawildlife.org](http://cawildlife.org).