

Watchable Wildlife in the National Parks



U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service



Caribou, Denali National Park Rick McIntyre, NPS



Canada geese, Gateway National Recreation Area. Don Riepe, NPS

The Watchable Wildlife Program

Nearly everyone likes to see wildlife. Whether it is backyard birds crowding a feeder or an Alaskan brown bear catching salmon, we delight in watching these other creatures that share the planet with us. It's even more rewarding if this simple interest broadens into an understanding of animals' lives and a care for the environment that sustains both them and us.

The Watchable Wildlife Program is a cooperative, nationwide effort to build on the interest in wildlife to achieve a better future for it. For decades, federal, state, and private agencies and organizations have worked in their own ways to conserve wildlife. Business people are recognizing the economic potential of wildlife watching. And thoughtful individuals everywhere have seen the need to preserve our diverse biological resources both for practical reasons and for the quality of human life. All these elements of society have now joined hands under the banner of Watchable Wildlife.



Young ospreys on a nesting platform, Naval Radio Transmitter Facility, Annapolis, Maryland. Parts of many U.S. military installations are open for wildlife watching. Mike Bryan, U.S. Navy



Waterfowl watching, DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, Iowa. Since 1903, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been managing wildlife refuges throughout the nation. Today, some 330 refuges, many with trails, observation platforms, visitor centers, and other facilities, are open to the public for wildlife viewing. Jim Frates, USFWS

Wildlife viewing opportunities are being publicized through production of state wildlife viewing guides. These are developed by state committees that select and describe many of the best sites in the state, both public and private, for viewing wildlife. The sites are picked for their wildlife, safe access, and ability to accommodate visitors without disturbance of animals or their environment. In size and configuration the sites range from a few acres to long roads or trails to entire parks, forests, refuges, or sanctuaries. Brown highway signs with a binoculars logo indicate the location of these Watchable Wildlife sites.

As of September 1991, guides had been published for the states of Oregon, Montana, Utah, and Idaho, with many more in preparation or under discussion. Defenders of Wildlife coordinates preparation of the series. The program partners, such as the National Park Service and other agencies, contribute material for the guides. The guides may be purchased in bookstores and elsewhere, including Defenders of Wildlife (see For More Information, below).

The Watchable Wildlife Program aims not only for enjoyment of wildlife but also understanding of its habits, its relation to the environment, and its management. So once you get to a Watchable Wildlife site, you will usually find some interpretation of the wildlife and its habitat. This interpretation may be a simple sign, a wayside exhibit, or even a visitor center with displays, audiovisual programs, and staff to answer questions. Some sites, however, provide more of a wilderness experience, where you learn on your own, by walking and observing.

The ultimate goal of the Watchable Wildlife Program is to help maintain viable populations of all native animal species by building effective, well-informed public support for conservation. As we further develop our country, wildlife will be squeezed out unless we insist, individually and collectively, that wildlife in all its diversity be conserved. This means preserving some natural areas, like parks and forests, while using the rest in ways that allow an abundance of life forms to continue.



A National Park Service ranger introduces youngsters to a bit of beach life at Assateague Island National Seashore, Maryland. The NPS has programs for interpreting wildlife and its environment throughout the diverse National Park System. NPS

The Joys of Wildlife Watching

Wildlife watching is more than a momentary pleasure. Seeking wildlife can bring you refreshment of body and mind. It can sharpen your senses, increase your outdoor skills, teach you about relationships of living things to the earth. Ultimately, it can give you a spiritual bond with all life and all nature.

Don Riepe, NPS

A Memorable Memorandum

On December 3, 1990, representatives of 13 organizations gathered in Washington, D.C. to sign a memorandum of understanding pledging to cooperate in carrying out a Watchable Wildlife Program. The signatories to this agreement were the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Forest Service, Army (two offices), Navy, Air Force, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Defenders of Wildlife, Izaak Walton League, National Audubon Society, and National Wildlife Federation. One signer commented that never in his long career had he seen so many different organizations formally join to work toward a single conservation goal. All these groups either manage extensive areas of wildlife habitat or work in other ways for the conservation of wildlife. Defenders of Wildlife initiated the idea and continues to play a leading role in developing the program.

Goals of the Program

The partners in Watchable Wildlife are seeking to achieve three immediate goals:

- Enhance wildlife viewing opportunities
- Provide education about wildlife and its needs
- Promote active support of wildlife conservation

"Wildlife" is defined as all native animals, from worms and insects to the largest mammals. All species, great and small, are important in the natural scheme of things, and all are interesting.



Rafters prepare for a float trip through Idaho's Snake River Birds of Prey Area, administered by the Bureau of Land Management. The BLM has established wildlife viewing areas on its lands throughout the West. Mark Hilliard, BLM



In 1988 the U.S. Forest Service started an "Eyes on Wildlife" program to promote wildlife viewing and education on national forest lands. Here, second graders learn about life along the Maclay Nature Trail in the Lolo National Forest, Montana. This national forest, in cooperation with many partners, also offers canoe and biking trails, photographic blinds, a loon auto tour, and other opportunities for enjoying wildlife. Susan Reel, USDA Forest Service



The National Park Service Role

The mission of the National Park Service is to protect the natural and cultural resources in its care and to provide for the enjoyment of these by present and future generations. This mission totally encompasses the goals of the Watchable Wildlife Program.

- The diverse National Park System offers many wonderful opportunities for viewing wildlife. Most of these are easily accessible by road or trail. Many national park areas are included in the state wildlife viewing guides. Visitors to these areas are encouraged to get out on the trails so they can experience wildlife as part of the total park environment.

- Wildlife and its habitat is a common interpretive theme in national parks. Exhibits, publications, and ranger-guided interpretive programs describe the parks' wildlife and ways visitors can safely observe it.

- Since its creation in 1916, the National Park Service has sought to conserve wildlife and its habitat. National parks played prominent roles in the recovery of bison, elk, trumpeter swans, and other species in trouble. The Service continues this effort today for organisms ranging from clams and cave shrimp to peregrine falcons and grizzly bears. Through its interpretive and educational outreach programs the Service encourages others to conserve wildlife and its supporting habitat.

Wildlife conservation requires the cooperation of all land owners and all citizens, because wildlife populations depend on broad, regional landscapes with adequate habitat for survival. For this reason the National Park Service enthusiastically joins with the other Watchable Wildlife partners to achieve our common goals.

Wildlife Watching Safety and Ethics

Wild animals, including gentle-looking ones like deer, can be dangerous if approached too closely. Some carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans. For your own safety and the well-being of animals, do not touch or feed wild animals, especially in park settings where they may approach people. Besides being hazardous, feeding animals in national parks is illegal. Feeding can make them dependent beggars, unable to take care of themselves in the wild. For all these reasons, keep a respectful distance.

Besides following these commonsense safety rules, you should be sensitive to the needs of animals. Close approach may cause them stress and disrupt feeding, breeding, or other activities. Watching with binoculars is the considerate and easy way. Remain quiet. Do not disturb nests or dens. Observe, enjoy, but don't encroach.

Consider, too, your effects on wildlife habitat. Tread lightly on the land. And carry your park manners back to daily life. Do not, for instance, dump leftover household chemicals into the environment, or throw debris into the water. Wherever you are, it's somebody's home.

For More Information

To learn more about the nationwide Watchable Wildlife Program, write to: Defenders of Wildlife, 1244 19th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036. To learn more about the National Park Service role in this program, write to: Wildlife and Vegetation Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013-7127. State and other federal land-managing agencies can also provide information.

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Wildlife Viewing in the National Parks: A Few Vignettes

With units spread from Alaska and Maine to the Virgin Islands and Samoa, the National Park System includes habitats ranging from Arctic tundra to deserts, woodlands, and tropical rainforests. Within these habitats are all sorts of animals from the mighty bison to minute creatures of pond and shore.

The bears, elk, and other spectacular wildlife of Yellowstone are well known. So are the waterbirds of Everglades National Park. But most parks have interesting wildlife, even many historic sites and areas in large cities. You just have to know where, when, and how to look (early morning and evening hours are best—be patient and quiet). Below is a small sample of what the National Park System offers.



Isle Royale National Park, Michigan

Want to get away from civilization? You can certainly do it on Isle Royale. Resting serenely in northern Lake Superior, this 40-mile-long island has no roads and no cars. You travel by boat or on foot. Moose and beavers are plentiful, but the wolves that prey on them are few and seldom seen. Gulls, loons, and ducks inhabit the shore waters and interior lakes. Thrushes, many other birds, and a few species of reptiles and amphibians live in the conifer and hardwood forests along with red foxes, red squirrels, snowshoe hares, and a handful of other mammal species that managed to get across the intervening waters of Lake Superior. Scientists have been conducting long-term studies, now world famous, to understand the relationships among wolves, moose, and their everchanging island habitats.



Richard Frear, NPS

Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska

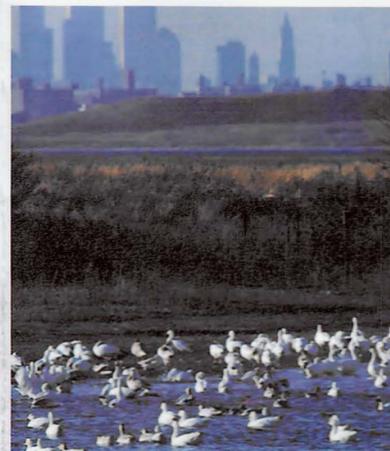
The grandeur of Denali is staggering. Forested valleys sweep up to the tundra, snow, and glaciers of high mountains, topped by North America's highest peak. Here you have a panoramic stage for some of North America's most exciting wildlife watching. A trip along the 90-mile park road aboard the free shuttle or concession-operated buses (the only access to the interior of the park) is likely to show you grizzly bears, caribou, and Dall sheep, possibly moose and wolves. Shorebirds and waterfowl nest around the tundra ponds. On foot you can get a more intimate glimpse: perhaps a red fox stalking voles, or a ptarmigan with chicks scurrying out from underfoot. A day in Denali is always an adventure.



Danny On, NPS

Gateway National Recreation Area, New York

Near the towers of New York City, Gateway National Recreation Area supports an unexpected variety of wildlife. Most visible are the birds. At Jamaica Bay alone, more than 300 species have been recorded. The waterbirds include many kinds of sandpipers, waterfowl, herons, gulls, and terns. The threatened piping plover, along with common and least terns and black skimmers, nests at Breezy Point. You can observe them from beyond the protective fences. From mid-May to mid-June, thousands of horseshoe crabs lay eggs along the shores. Diamondback terrapin hatchlings, some near the trails, head for Jamaica Bay's salt water in early summer. In the fall, great numbers of migrating monarch butterflies appear, especially on Staten Island. Several species of reptiles and amphibians—saved from nearby areas under private development—are being reestablished at Jamaica Bay. Offshore, whales, dolphins, and seals occasionally are seen.



Don Riepe, NPS

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, District of Columbia and Maryland

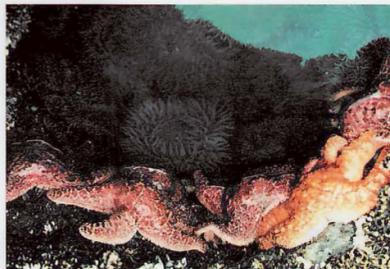
Strolling along the towpath of the C. and O. Canal, you have the quiet waters of the canal on one side and, in most places screened by trees, the swifter current of the Potomac River on the other. All this makes for interesting wildlife watching. In the canal, during the warm months, turtles bask on logs, dragonflies hunt insect prey. Out on the river, ducks and gulls feed, while great blue herons stalk the shallows. Many birds, from colorful little warblers up to the fish-hunting osprey, migrate along this river valley. The big, showy pileated woodpecker is a year-round resident. At Great Falls, bald eagles are nesting again after an absence of 30 years from the upper Potomac. And almost anywhere on the 184-mile canal, you have a chance to see deer and beavers (or their lodges and cuttings), even down into the District of Columbia.



M.W. Williams, NPS

Olympic National Park, Washington

The scenic splendors of Olympic National Park range from glacier-covered heights down through lush coniferous forests to the steep, rocky coast. Along Hurricane Ridge, look for Columbia black-tailed deer and Olympic marmots. An early morning drive or walk in the rainforests might bring a sighting of Roosevelt elk. Five species of salmon migrate up the park's rivers to spawn. Most easily viewed are coho salmon jumping the Salmon Cascades on the Soladuck River in late September to early October. Bald eagles and peregrine falcons nest along the coast, as do tufted puffins, murres, and other sea birds. The spring hawk migration funneling through Neah Bay north of the park is another impressive sight. Tide pools harbor sea stars, urchins, and many other colorful marine invertebrates. Offshore, gray whales migrate by in spring and fall, a stirring event all along the West Coast.



NPS

Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico

After you have toured the spectacular Carlsbad Caverns, stick around for another spectacle—the evening bat flight. At dusk from early May through October, some quarter of a million Mexican free-tailed bats stream from the cave's mouth to go on their nightly hunt for insects. The bats depart in late October to winter in Mexico. Sharing the cave with the bats are cave swallows, which arrive about early March, nest in the twilight zone near the cave entrance from May or June to September, and depart at first frost in October or November. This is one of the few reliable places in the United States to see large numbers of this swallow, which first moved across the Mexican border around the turn of the century. Elsewhere in the park you can see ladder-backed woodpeckers, colorful collared lizards, which sometimes run on their hind legs, and other animals of the shrubby Chihuahuan Desert.



Bat flight. NPS

Assateague Island National Seashore, Maryland and Virginia

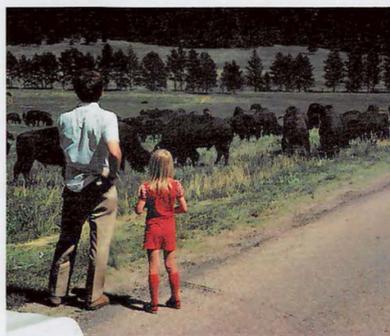
This is a place for dreaming and walking down the beach. Along the way, particularly on cloudy days or with a flashlight at night, you can see pale ghost crabs. In summer dolphins often cavort just offshore while raucous laughing gulls announce your presence. During spring and fall migrations, countless shorebirds probe for food as the waves retreat. From April through summer, thousands of herons, egrets, and terns fish the shallow bayside waters. In autumn you can watch monarch butterflies feed on flowering goldenrods as they pause in migration toward Mexico. Occasionally a red fox or the dead-playing hog-nosed snake is seen in the dunes. Within the Virginia boundaries of the national seashore, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, renowned for its snow geese and other waterfowl in winter. Here too, with some luck, you can see the endangered Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel.



NPS

Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota

You can see both eastern and western animals and plants on the mixed grass prairie of Wind Cave National Park, though western species steal most of the show. Bison and pronghorn antelopes graze here. In late spring it's fun to watch the newborn bison calves frolicking. Prairie dog towns, which cover many acres, sometimes shelter rattlesnakes and burrowing owls. The park's elk are shy and difficult to see, but in the fall their bugling can easily be heard. The mule deer are not shy, often congregating near roads. Overhead, you may spot a hunting golden eagle, perhaps the most impressive bird of the grassland and pine forest. Inside the cave, if you are in a small tour group, you may see a tiny, opaque, cave-adapted species of springtail, an insect that thrives in the cool, damp environment.



NPS

Saguaro National Monument, Arizona

Stands of tall saguaro cactuses dominate this protected segment of the Sonoran Desert, east and west of Tucson. Animal life is surprisingly abundant and varied here, though it retires during the hottest hours of the day. Woodpeckers, screech and elf owls, and other birds make a home in cavities in the saguaros. Javelinas, mule deer, coyotes, road-runners, and Gambel's quail can be seen along the roads and trails in the lower sections of the park. Extra excitement is lent by rattlesnakes and other reptiles, and the large, hairy tarantula; they will not hurt you if you leave them alone. On horseback or afoot, you can ascend mountain trails into cooler, forested zones of the Rincon Mountains, where different species dwell.



Scorpion. NPS

Virgin Islands National Park, Virgin Islands

Marine life is center stage at Virgin Islands National Park. Snorkeling over a coral reef, you can marvel at the profusion of colorful corals and fish, such as parrotfish, angelfish, and stringrays. Close inspection will reveal octopuses tucked away in their dens, with piles of shells at the entrances. Hawksbill sea turtles feed on the sponges and green sea turtles feed on the sea grass beds. Aloft, brown pelicans, magnificent frigatebirds, and terns enliven the sky. Ashore, where tropical dry and moist forests predominate, you are sure to see the tiny black, yellow, and white bananaquit, and more than likely the iridescent Antillean crested hummingbird.



V. Small, NPS