



Mammals of Capitol Reef The Predator and the Prey



Courtesy/Tom McEwan

Predator and Prey: There is a fine balance between the two and both are essential components of our ecosystem. Where do we fit into this web of life? And how do we interact appropriately with the wildlife of Capitol Reef?

Predator: Mountain Lion

One of the most intriguing predators found in Capitol Reef is the mountain lion. For many, the mountain lion is a distinctive symbol of wilderness, a large predator ranging freely in wild areas independent of human interference. Mountain lions roam throughout this area both in desert and mountain country and are found in Capitol Reef National Park. This area provides ideal habitat for these mammals. The chances of seeing one of these secretive animals are slim, although they have been observed in the Fruita orchards, campgrounds, and picnic areas. The likelihood of encountering an aggressive mountain lion is low.

Mountain lions lead solitary lives, having little contact with other lions unless they are mating or caring for young. Mountain lions prey on deer and smaller mammals such as coyotes, porcupines, beavers, rabbits and raccoons. They usually hunt at night or during the hours of dawn and dusk.

The orchards of Fruita host a large deer population which in turn attract mountain lions. Do not feed the deer. Feeding deer encourages them to remain in close proximity to the campground which in turn invites mountain lions to be within close proximity as well. Carcasses from lion kills have been found in the Fruita area of Capitol Reef. Avoid carcasses as lions may return to their kills.

Mountain lions, though beautiful and exciting animals to spot in the wild, are unpredictable and dangerous. It is important that we understand their behavior and act accordingly to protect them and ourselves when visiting their habitat.

For Your Safety:

- Do not attempt to pet or touch any animals.
- Do not jog or hike alone, especially at dawn or dusk.
- Keep children close to you. Do not allow unsupervised children to play along river banks, in heavy vegetation or especially at dawn or dusk.
- Watch children closely and never let them run ahead of you.
- Do not approach a lion. Hold your ground or back away slowly.
- Do not run or turn your back to a mountain lion.
- Do not attempt to hide or crouch. Try to appear as large as possible.
- If small children are with you, pick them up.
- If a lion acts aggressively, wave your arms, shout or throw stones.
- If attacked, fight back aggressively and try not to allow the lion to get behind you.
- Report all mountain lion sightings to a ranger at the visitor center.

Prey: Desert Bighorn Sheep

One prey of the mountain lion, desert bighorn sheep, convey a romantic image of the west. Smaller than Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, they are adapted to desert conditions. These icons of the southwest were once very common in this rugged canyon country. Natural predators of bighorn sheep include mountain lions, wolves, bobcats, and coyotes.

Numerous depictions of desert bighorn sheep in American Indian rock art suggest how important they might have been. These animals had disappeared from this area because of over-hunting and exposure to domestic sheep disease. Bighorn sheep were eliminated from Capitol Reef, although they persisted in remote areas of Canyonlands National Park.

Twenty desert bighorn sheep were captured in Canyonlands National Park in 1996 and successfully trans located here. A second group of 20 was introduced here in 1997. These animals successfully reproduced and expanded their range resulting in a viable Capitol Reef herd

that exists today. Capitol Reef provides an ideal habitat for these animals. They eat shrubs and sometimes even cacti. They get most of the water that they need from plants they eat except during the hot summer months when they readily use free-standing water. If you are lucky enough to have an encounter with one of these animals, enjoy the moment but also remember that they are wild animals to be respected.



Prey: Mule Deer

The most prevalent large mammal seen in Capitol Reef are mule deer, and like desert bighorn sheep, they are hunted by mountain lions. You may encounter them at close range due to the concentrated deer population in the park's historic district. These deer have become accustomed to human presence and are less wary than those encountered in more wild settings. It is important to remember that the deer are not tame. They are wild animals and will attack if provoked.

Do not feed deer. Feeding deer encourages them to become beggars and to remain in high visitor use areas. It provides them with an unhealthy diet which leaves them unprepared for harsh winter conditions and decreases the likelihood of survival at this hard time of year.



Other Mammals:

The web of life at Capitol Reef is diverse and complex. Mountain lions and other predators such as coyotes, bobcats, and foxes are adaptable and opportunistic predators that will feed on a variety of smaller mammals such as

marmots, cottontails, jack rabbits, beavers, rock squirrels, raccoons, ringtails, and porcupines. They may include birds, insects, and reptiles in their diet. People, however, are the only predators of the mountain lion.

For Your Safety:

- Keep a distance of at least 30 feet (9.15 m) from deer.
- Do not approach or attempt to pet or touch animals.
- Keep pets leashed at all times.
- Do not feed animals.
- Does with fawns are less tolerant, and bucks are less tolerant in the fall during rutting and breeding, so give them extra space.
- Do not attempt to touch or move a fawn found alone or bedded down.

Additional information is available on our website www.nps.gov/care which also links to the Capitol Reef Natural History Association bookstore, a non-profit cooperating association that sells publications on Capitol Reef's cultural and natural history.

