

# Battlefield Biodiversity

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Little Bighorn Battlefield  
National Monument  
Montana



Although parks like Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument were initially established as historic sites, recent studies show that parks like this one also contribute significantly to conservation of regional biodiversity. Battlefield Lands act as a refuge, a migratory bird rest stop, and a corridor for animal movement.



Sharp-Tailed Grouse



Swamp Milkweed



Prickly Pear Cactus

## Battlefield Flora and Fauna

Teeming with diverse flora and fauna, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument is an ecotone, or a mix of two types of ecosystems: northern mixed grassland and sagebrush steppe. The combination of environments allows the battlefield to house a wide variety of plants and animals, despite its small size. This makes the battlefield an oasis of quickly disappearing native habitat in a largely agricultural area.

The vegetation on the battlefield today is characteristic of the landscape during the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. Due to urbanization and the expansion of agriculture, prairie ecotones, such as this, are becoming rare in Montana.



A majority of the native fauna is found near the western edge of the park, along the Little Bighorn River riparian zone. More than thirteen reptile and amphibian species reside in the park, although they prefer the riparian areas and are rarely spotted by visitors. Nonvenomous bullsnakes are the most commonly reported reptile at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

Birds are the most diverse animal group in the park. During the summer over 70 bird species can be spotted on the battlefield, although most migrate to warmer climates once the chill of winter returns. Other species, including the sharp-tailed grouse, provide bird-watching opportunities year-round.

In addition to reptiles, amphibians, and birds, twenty-five species of mammals also call the park home. Larger mammals like the pronghorn, often referred to as “pronghorn antelope,” tend to be elusive, while smaller mammals, such as the Cottontail rabbit, are more frequently seen. Bats are also known to travel through the park at night in search of prey.

## Changing Landscape

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument preserves the location of the Battle of the Little Bighorn as a historic site, but the park is also home to a dynamic natural landscape. Human and environmental influences are constantly reshaping and reforming the scenery in a multitude of ways.

The first boundary fence around the battlefield was erected to protect cultural resources, but it also excluded livestock from the land. The land was protected from overgrazing and today the park is home to over a hundred species of native plants, all of which play a role in the prairie ecosystem.

Additionally, in 1983 a wildfire burned 90% of the prairie in the park. Regular fires can be beneficial to the health of native grasses, but large woody plants, such as big sagebrush, are negatively impacted. The sagebrush populations within the burned areas were decimated and have yet to fully recover more than 30 years later. In contrast, the native grasses of this ecosystem have thrived since the fires.

The most obvious change in the landscape of the park is the ornamental vegetation in Custer National Cemetery. Nonnative plants and artificial irrigation in the cemetery provide food, shelter, and water for a variety of species. The decorative features help maintain diversity as well as provide an appropriate setting for the cemetery.

Although the park is constantly changing, there are several crucial opportunities for visitors to keep the park as healthy as possible. By walking only on designated trails and ensuring that trash is deposited in the appropriate locations, you can assure that this park continues to mature in a positive way.

Find out how you can get involved by visiting [www.nps.gov/libi/supportyourpark](http://www.nps.gov/libi/supportyourpark) or [www.nps.gov/getinvolved](http://www.nps.gov/getinvolved).

All photos by National Park Service.