

Watching Wildlife



A WILD PLACE

With elk bugling in the fall, bighorn sheep with lambs in the spring, coyotes howling, beavers building, and eagles aloft, Rocky Mountain National Park is one of America's great places to see wildlife.

Will you be **sure** to see bighorn sheep? Maybe not. But while looking for sheep you might see a coyote or a hawk. That is the adventure of looking for animals in the wild instead of in a zoo.

Success in wildlife watching grows with experience.

As you learn about the lives and habits of animals, you will know when and where to look for them. Get up at dawn to look for elk or deer in Beaver Meadows. Listen for owls and watch for bats at dusk in Moraine Park. Keep an eye out for otters along the Colorado River.

KEEPING ROCKY WILD

Remember that animals you see in the park may encounter many people every day. Even celebrities get tired of photographers chasing them; for wildlife, repeated harassment weakens and kills.

Animals you see in the park are often feeding. When people get too close, animals sense danger and waste energy moving away. Repeated disturbance means animals do not get enough to eat.

One purpose of National Parks is to preserve wild places and all that lives there. With about three million people coming to Rocky each year, park wildlife is under stress. Each of us can help by learning how to watch animals without disturbing them.



Guides for Successful Wildlife Viewing

- Watch wildlife from a distance. If animals notice you, or if they seem nervous, you are too close. Move away quietly.
- Use binoculars or a tele-photo lens to get close views.
- Never approach wildlife. Harassing animals is unlawful.
- Keep pets in your vehicle. Pets may scare wildlife, and animals can hurt your pet. A deer can crush a dog's skull with its hooves.
- Drive slowly. Watch for animals crossing the road. Deer and elk are seldom alone: if you see one animal cross the road, look out for others that may follow it.
- Stop your car to watch animals only if you can pull off the road safely. Do not block traffic.
- Talk quietly so you don't disturb the animals or people nearby. If watching from your car, turn off the motor.

FINDING WILDLIFE

Among the best places to see wildlife in the park are roadside pullouts in open areas. Bighorn sheep visit natural mineral licks in Horseshoe Park, especially in May and June. Moose live in the Kawuneeche Valley. Coyotes, deer, and elk feed in all the open meadows. From Trail Ridge Road, look for elk, marmots, and birds on the tundra.

Elk, moose, and deer are most active at dawn and dusk. But bighorn sheep are active all day. So are marmots, squirrels, and chipmunks. Birds are easier to find in early morning. Beavers work mostly at night.

Ask a ranger about how to find animals. Check the park newspaper for ranger programs that focus on wildlife.



CLOSED AREAS PROTECT WILDLIFE

To protect wildlife at critical times, parts of the park are sometimes closed to people.

The Crater Trail on Specimen Mountain is closed from May through mid-July during bighorn lambing season. This lets sheep move freely from the lambing area to feeding grounds elsewhere.

During the elk rut in September and October, most large meadows in the park are closed to off-trail travel from 5 pm until 7 am. When people stay out of the meadows, the elk spend more time in the open where people can see them from roadsides.

While birds of prey are nesting (mid-April to mid-July), some rock climbing routes are closed on Lumpy Ridge and Sheep Mountain. Closed areas are posted at trailheads.

Why is it illegal to feed animals in National Parks?

- Animals can hurt people who feed them, but more often, the animals suffer.
- Animals fed by people become beggars. They often bite. Some have fleas that can infect people with plague.
- Beggar animals often stay near roads, where cars hit them.
- Imagine: One peanut from each park visitor would add over three tons of extra food per year. Some animals would overpopulate, crowding out other wildlife. Then many of the extra animals would die in winter when no one feeds them.

MORE THAN MEGAFUNA

There is more to wildlife watching than the big and the furry. Watch magpies in a meadow pouncing on grasshoppers. Stop by a stream to study a trout's sleek style. Look closely at wildflowers to discover the butterflies, longhorn beetles, and leafhoppers that live around plants. Exploring with a hand lens can open up a dramatic world of small lives.

Listen for wild **sounds**. Marmots whistle and hummingbirds trill by day. By starlight, owls and coyotes hoot and bay.

What is the **best** way to see wildlife at Rocky? Just pick a spot—say, in a meadow or near a stream—and sit quietly. Soon animals nearby will become active again. Meanwhile, as John Muir said, *Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees...while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.*

