

Like people, animals prefer to live in special places at certain times. The snowshoe hare prefers the deep snows of the higher elevations, while the cottontail and jackrabbit live in the more temperate climate near Mammoth. The pine marten hunts his favorite food, the squirrel, in the forested sections of the park. Although the otter and beaver prefer an aquatic habitat, their food needs are different. The otter feeds primarily on fish, while the beaver is a vegetarian feeding on tree bark such as aspen and willow.

Two large predators, the wolf and the mountain lion, once occurred in Yellowstone Park in fairly large numbers. Until recently the wolf was thought to be extinct, but observation indicates a population of at least six wolves in the park. The mountain lion has been reduced in numbers to a point where it is seldom seen.

Nowhere else in the United States can large mammals be observed as readily as they can in Yellowstone. Though the animals may appear tame, they are unpredictable and potentially dangerous. They should never be fed or approached closely.

A short narrative on the common large mammals of Yellowstone follows. For more comprehensive reading on Yellowstone mammals, suggested references are Yellowstone and Grand Teton Wildlife by Harry and Dilley, and A Field Guide to the Mammals by Burt and Grossenheider.

Black Bear: Often classified as a natural born clown, the black bear is a dangerous wild animal capable of inflicting severe injury. The black bear is an omnivorous animal, eating practically anything from berries to carrion. But once the animal learns that visitors will feed him, he embarks on a new way of life. A way of life that can be extremely dangerous to visitors. Ultimately some bears may have to be destroyed to protect human lives. But who's to blame - the bear or the visitor who feeds the bear?

Grizzly Bear: Yellowstone is one of the few remaining strongholds of the grizzly in the contiguous United States. Threatened with extinction, this large bear is most common in the wilderness sections of the park. Though black bear range in color from black to blondes, one can usually distinguish the grizzly from the black bear. Grizzly bears have a distinct hump on their backs; they are usually larger and more heavily built with a dished face. Grizzlies are seldom seen along roadways or developed areas. Both the grizzly and the black bear sleep throughout the winter months from approximately November to late March.

Coyote: Sometimes called "little wolf" this member of the dog family plays a valuable role in helping to control numbers of rodents and on occasions larger mammals such as weak and sickly deer. Both the coyote and the grizzly bear are effective predator animals which help in controlling the number of plant eaters. Without the predator animals, the plant eaters would soon destroy the range. The coyote is an intelligent animal and even though persecuted by man he survives today and is well established throughout the park.

Bison (Buffalo): The Yellowstone bison is one of the remnant groups of the former millions that once roamed the country between the Atlantic Ocean and the Rocky Mountains. This large animal has a very uncertain disposition and should never be approached closely. They compete with the elk for food and frequent the warm thermal areas during winter. Though the larger herds go into the high country during summer, they can occasionally be seen in open grassland in the vicinity of major rivers.

Moose: The moose is the largest member of the deer family. Like all deer they shed their antlers each year. This ungainly, almost grotesque appearing animal is common during the summer months. They frequent marshy meadows and the margins of lakes and streams. Here they feed on willows and other aquatic type plants. Occasionally moose can be seen resting or feeding while submerged in water. Never underestimate the moose. Though sluggish in appearance they are fast. A cow moose protecting her young can be a dangerous animal.

Wapiti (Elk): Yellowstone has the largest concentration of elk to be found anywhere in the world. Also a member of the deer family, elk migrate to the higher meadows during summer but a few remain at the lower elevations if food is sufficient. During early winter elk move down into the lower valleys in mass numbers. Occasionally they migrate outside the park and are harvested by hunter kill. Elk remaining in the park must compete for the limited food supply. Since natural predators are not present in sufficient numbers to control the elk, there is a danger of range deterioration from overgrazing. Here is a good example where man has upset the delicate balance of nature.

Mule Deer: The mule deer gets its name from the characteristic of having very large mule-like ears. They are generally distributed over most of the park during summer but do not tend to go above timberline. In winter they drift down to the lower, more protected ranges, but not in migratory herds as is the case with elk. Both deer, elk, and bison compete heavily for the same range.

Bighorn Sheep: During the summer the bighorn is at home in the rugged mountainous country particularly in the vicinity of Mount Washburn. In winter they migrate to the lower elevations near Mount Everts. Here they must compete for the winter range, particularly with elk and deer. The bighorn threatens to become another of our vanishing species.

Pronghorn: The pronghorn or American antelope is a plains animal. The body is adapted for speed and agility. These streamlined animals are frequently seen near the Mammoth-Gardiner area. The pronghorn is one of the few animals that feeds on sagebrush.