

NATIONAL PARKS

Must-See Animals in America's National Parks

By **Sandy Bornstein** on March 5, 2019



An American bison cow and calf in Yellowstone National Park. Getty Images

Animal-lovers can find much to love in America's national parks, which showcase a spectacular array of ecosystems and the abundant wildlife to match.

Mountainous regions with massive acreage attract larger mammals, while smaller parks near urban areas are home to more familiar creatures. Destinations near bodies of water have the added bonus of aquatic wildlife. And don't forget to look upward: Birds may be challenging to catch in a photo, but they're fascinating to observe in action.

Some species are relatively easy to locate, while others are elusive or camouflaged. Planning a dawn or dusk adventure — or visiting during the less crowded off-season — may increase the possibility of encountering an animal. Sheer luck can also be a huge factor.

In America's most popular national parks, we've rounded up 45 animals that it's worth the effort to seek out. Some are mighty (grizzly bears, desert bighorn

sheep, elephant seals), while others are adorable (beavers, marmots, pikas). All belong on your bucket list.

Don't forget your binoculars — or your camera.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park: American Black Bears



Getty Images

In the most-visited national park in America, which straddles the border between North Carolina and Tennessee, most of the terrain is filled with dense, deciduous forests. This can make it difficult to spot animals, but there are plenty of open areas (such as Cataloochee, Cades Cove and the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail) to check out the wildlife.

If you're lucky, you may spot the impressive American black bear. Approximately 1,500 of these magnificent creatures roam at all elevations in the park. They tend to be adept tree climbers, good swimmers and (a little frighteningly!) exceptionally quick at 30 miles per hour.

Don't forget to be mindful of cubs: Like humans, parents tend to be protective of their offspring.

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More Animals to See: Salamanders and Synchronous Fireflies



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Great Smoky Mountains National Park has been called "the salamander capital of the world" for a reason. There are over 30 species of salamander here, measuring between two inches and three feet. Just turn over a creekside log or stone, and you'll be likely to find one. Pictured here is one of the most visually distinctive: the blue-ringed two-lined salamander.

Want to see nature put on a spectacular show? For a couple of weeks in May and June, synchronous fireflies create a performance found nowhere else in the world. The male fireflies simultaneously flash their lights four to eight times for 10 seconds, usually between 10 p.m. and midnight. In a few seconds, the females answer by lighting up as well, producing a dizzying array of lights in the night sky.

Grand Canyon National Park: Desert Bighorn Sheep



With a total area larger than the state of Rhode Island and several major ecosystems, the Grand Canyon in Arizona boasts plenty of space for animals to roam.

On canyon walls and rocky terrain, the national park's largest native animal, the desert bighorn sheep, can often be found with its brethren, roaming in small herds. River-rafters sometimes see a few desert bighorn sheep while sailing down the Colorado River.

From a considerable distance away in the fall, one can hear male sheep crash their horns against one another as they compete for females. The sound is staggering.

More Animals to See: California Condors and Chuckwallas



Birds of prey can be observed near the top of Grand Canyon cliffs — and the most magnificent of them all is the endangered California condor. With its white spots, bald head and enormous 9.5-foot wingspan, the largest in North America, this bird is a rare find but easily identified.

Arizona's desert ecosystem is also home to a preponderance of colorful lizards, including chuckwallas, the second largest lizard species in North America. These are easiest to see on warm days between May and September along the banks of the Colorado River.

And don't fret if you do see them: Unlike venomous Gila monsters, which they're frequently confused with, chuckwallas are perfectly safe to be around.

Zion National Park: Mule Deer



Getty Images

Nestled in southern Utah near four other national parks, Zion National Park is home to 68 species of mammals, including the elegant mule deer, named for its unique mule-like ears.

Early morning and late afternoon hikers will most likely encounter mule deer grazing in meadows or alongside quieter roadways. Even though these animals are resilient to the high temperatures, they prefer to remain in the shade during most of the day.

More Animals to See: Wild Turkeys and Canyon Tree Frogs



Getty Images

Another common species in Zion is the wild turkey. After almost becoming extinct in the park, efforts were made to reintroduce more turkeys in the 1980s. With a current estimated population of 20,000, it's safe to say that mission was accomplished.

Canyon tree frogs are one of six amphibians in the park. These plump frogs range in color from brownish-gray to olive green and have a toad-like appearance. They're uniquely suited to Zion: The suction on their toes enables them to climb canyon walls.

Although they tend to be nocturnal, you can sometimes spot them moving among stream rocks during the day.

Rocky Mountain National Park: North American Elk



Getty Images

Head to this high-altitude park on the western Continental Divide in Colorado, and you may catch a glimpse of North American elk, which can weigh up to 1,100 pounds and stand five feet at the shoulder, taller than some humans.

In the fall, during breeding season, traffic can be bumper to bumper as revelers converge to hear (and record) the unmistakable sound of males bugling to lure their mates.

Trust us: it's worth the traffic to experience this extraordinary ritual.

More Animals to See: Moose and 141 Species of Butterflies



Getty Images

If you thought elk were massive, wait until you hear about moose. These mega-members of the deer family, which eat up to 70 pounds a day, stand between five and seven feet tall at the shoulder. Males can weigh as much as 1,500 pounds.

Moose usually travel solo or with one or two others, and can often be found grazing near willows, aspens and aquatic plants. Favorite viewing spots include the pull-off areas along Highway 34 in the Kawuneeche Valley. Make sure to keep a safe distance, though. Moose move as fast as 35 miles per hour!

Rocky Mountain National Park also has 141 species of butterflies, a collection that exceeds some states. You can see butterflies en masse during the warmer months while traipsing through meadows.



Yosemite National Park: Coyotes



Getty Images

Along the way to the famous icons of California's Yosemite National Park, trekkers often encounter coyotes. Their shy behavior may cause them to keep their distance, but their unmistakable howls will alert you to their presence.

For a better chance of seeing coyotes and other wildlife, come during the off-season from November through April.

More Animals to See: Mountain Lions and Red-Legged Frogs



Getty Images

Mountain lions, which roam Yosemite's mountains and valleys, tend to instill fear. But don't worry: they're shy, and good at keeping their distance from humans. Still, you may spot them from afar, perhaps feasting on a raccoon or coyote.

Due to a cooperative effort by several entities, the once-threatened California red-legged frog was reintroduced into lakes, rivers and meadow habits in Yosemite Valley in 2016. The California red-legged frog is the largest native frog in the western United States — though that distinction is relative. It ranges in size from 1.5 to 5 inches long.

We'd also be remiss not to mention the American black bear, which as in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, is one of the most popular animals to spot in Yosemite.



Yellowstone National Park: American Bison



Getty Images

Sitting on top of an active volcano, Yellowstone is the site of one of the world's largest calderas and experiences 1,000 to 3,000 earthquakes annually. Yet despite its frequent earthquakes, this Wyoming park boasts a higher concentration of mammals than anywhere else in the lower 48 states.

Bison, the largest land-dwelling mammal in North America, have lived in the area since prehistoric times. At Yellowstone, visitors will have no problem finding one; the park has the nation's largest bison population on public property.

More Animals to See: Grizzly Bears and Great Horned Owls



Getty Images

Grizzly bears tend to be 1 1/2 to 2 times larger than a comparable black bear. The best time to find a grizzly at Yellowstone is at dawn or dusk, when they lumber around in open spaces and forests.

Great horned owls are common but are easily camouflaged in their forested surroundings. They stand two feet tall with a wingspan of up to five feet.



Acadia National Park: Peregrine Falcons



Getty Images

As the only national park in the Northeast, it is not surprising that Acadia, in Maine, is consistently among the top 10 most-visited in America.

Decades ago, Acadia reintroduced previously captive peregrine falcon chicks into the wild. The park's successful efforts allowed the government to remove these falcons from the endangered species list. At the shoreline, you may spot this crow-sized raptor dive toward its prey in the water at more than 100 miles per hour.

More Animals to See: Harbor Seals and Beavers



Getty Images and flickr/Nagyhajubanya

At low tide, five- to six-foot harbor seals sunbath on rocky shoreline ledges or on nearby islands. However, it may be necessary to take a boat ride to see them.

Beavers were reintroduced in 1920 and their population has grown over the decades. At ponds, it's possible to see their handiwork — intricately constructed houses and dams.

Olympic National Park: Gray Whales



[MyOlympicPark.com/National Parks Trip Media](http://MyOlympicPark.com/NationalParksTripMedia)

Situated on an isolated Washington state peninsula, partially blocked by mountains, Olympic National Park offers four distinct regions to explore — an alpine area, a drier eastside forest, temperate rainforest and the glorious Pacific Ocean coastline.

Along the coastline, marine-life lovers can view mega gray whales, measuring between 50 and 60 feet, from whale-watching cruise boats or on the shore. The best viewing time is in late spring and summer.

More Animals to See: Roosevelt Elk and Olympic Marmots



Getty Images

The largest herd of Roosevelt elk in the Pacific Northwest is located at Olympic. Packs of elk are content to graze in a wide variety of habitats and attract an audience during their bugling season in the fall.

The socially adept Olympic marmot is a rodent with a long bushy tail that changes colors from season to season. It lets people know they're too close by emitting a distinct whistling sound.

If you want to see one, don't bother coming in the fall or winter, when it hibernates.



Grand Teton National Park: Pronghorns



Getty Images

Sixty-one species of mammals reside in Wyoming's Teton Range, the youngest mountain range in the Rocky Mountains.

Among the most memorable of these are pronghorns, which look like African antelope but are actually not related. As the fastest mammals in the Western Hemisphere, with a recorded speed of 60 miles per hour and a sustained speed of 30 miles per hour, they are not to be messed with.

Make sure to keep your distance!

More Animals to See: Pikas and Trumpeter Swans



Getty Images

Hamster-sized pikas, members of the rabbit family, are undeniably adorable. But tragically, they may not be here for too much longer; one of the few mammals that can survive in alpine terrain, they're prone to overheating and, with climate change, are in danger of going extinct. Scientists are holding out hope that they'll be able to survive in this park, though.

Trumpeter swans, the largest waterfowl in North America, also spend time at Grand Teton. To spot a pair of them, check out Oxbow Bend, Swan Lake or the Flat Creek in National Elk Refuge.



Glacier National Park: Mountain Goats



Getty Images

Stopping along the Going-to-the-Sun Road, a 50-mile road connecting the east and west sides of Glacier National Park, will usually reveal wildlife sightings. As the “Crown of the Continent” — with over 700 miles of trails on more than a million acres of pristine land — the Montana park is considered one of the best places to view wildlife. It’s always best to ask park rangers for the latest sightings.

Mountain goats, Glacier’s official park symbol, frequent Logan Pass as well as areas with rocky slopes, cliffs and lakes. Since they love to lick salt in the wild, they’ve been known to lick park railings, where humans leave behind salty sweat. (Gross, but also a fascinating example of the interplay between nature and human activity.)

More Animals to See: Ptarmigans and Canada Lynx



Getty Images

Visitors to Glacier during the heart of winter will be thrilled if they encounter ptarmigans, the only bird species that doesn't migrate from an alpine environment. Nature has helped the ptarmigan adapt; its feathers change from brown to white in the winter and its feathered feet act like snowshoes.

A very lucky few may be able to catch sight of a Canada lynx who's migrated down from the United States' northern neighbor. These felines, rarely seen in the continental U.S., are more than twice the size of domestic cats.



Joshua Tree National Park: Rattlesnakes



Getty Images

Wildlife adapts remarkably well to desert conditions, including a shortage of water and extreme temperatures. Interestingly, many of the mammals found at California's Joshua Tree are paler in color, so they absorb less heat and blend into their surroundings.

This habitat is also ideal for reptiles like rattlesnakes, which take advantage of sunshine from May to the end of October. If snakes are not on the top of your wildlife list, visit in the wintertime.

Just be aware of where you walk: While rattlesnakes are not considered aggressors, you may inadvertently step on one if you're not paying attention.

More Animals to See: Tarantulas and Gray Foxes



Getty Images

Tarantulas crawl along the ground looking for prey. While a bit scary to look upon, there's no need to worry about toxic venom. Just keep some distance when taking a photo to avoid being bitten, which can cause bee-sting-like discomfort.

Gray foxes are relatively small, weighing between seven and 11 pounds. This southwest desert animal is capable of climbing trees to go after birds and to consume insects, acorns and berries. Good luck finding this fox in the desert heat, but lucky you if you do.

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Bryce Canyon National Park: Utah Prairie Dogs



Getty Images

Utah's Bryce Canyon National Park is home to the world's largest collection of hoodoos, a distinctive geological formation. The park's rocky terrain filled with cliffs, canyons, alpine junipers and pinyon forests attracts a wide spectrum of wildlife.

Utah prairie dogs travel in colonies and are usually found in meadows, where they live in burrows with a network of entrances. Their bodies are tawny to reddish-brown in color with a white-tipped tail.

Facing extinction, Bryce Canyon reintroduced the species in the 1970s, and they are happily no longer on the endangered species list.

More Animals to See: Stellar's Jays and Tiger Salamanders



Getty Images

While seated at a picnic area at Bryce Canyon, keep your eye out for Stellar's jays. With little fear of humans, these attractive, boldly colored black-and-blue birds have been nicknamed "camp robbers."

If you hear a low caw from a bird that resembles a blue jay, it's the Stellar's jay.

The tiger salamander, the world's largest land salamander, is the only species of salamander found at the park. At about a foot long, it prefers to be out at night. Take an evening hike, and perhaps your paths will cross.



Cuyahoga Valley National Park: River Otters



Getty Images

Located between Cleveland and Akron on both sides of the winding Cuyahoga River is the only national park in Ohio, where land and water provide an excellent refuge for local wildlife.

River otters, an indigenous species, are agile and quick swimmers who make their appearance at Beaver Marsh in the early morning hours or at dusk. Once on Ohio's endangered species list, today one can watch them hunt for fish and aquatic animals at Cuyahoga.

More Animals to See: Great Blue Herons and American Minks



Getty Images

Look up in the high trees near the wetlands, and it may be possible to spot a great blue heron nesting colony. To see how these magnificent birds raise their babies, head to the two rookeries along the Cuyahoga River.

The wetlands are also home to American minks, adorable mammals that, while nocturnal, can sometimes be spotted by day swimming or hanging out along the water's edge. Like river otters, they like to hunt for fish.



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Hawaii Volcanoes National Park: Sea Turtles



Getty Images

Two active volcanoes, Kilauea and Mauna Loa, are the focal point at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. In addition to spectacular volcanic activity, the Hawaiian archipelago touts exceptional wildlife.

Protected beaches at Halape, Apua Point and Keauhou allow the Hawksbill mother turtle to lay her eggs and let them incubate in the beach sand for two months between late May and December. Alas, it's unlikely you'll see an endangered Hawksbill turtle, as its numbers are dwindling. But you can likely spot green sea turtles, which like to lounge about at Punalu'u, a nearby black-sand beach.

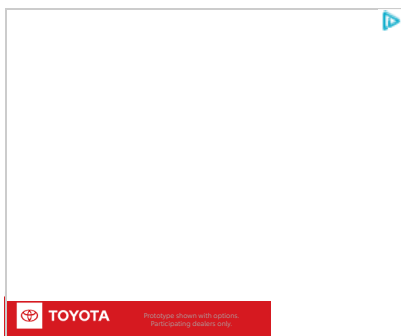
More Animals to See: Seals and Nenes



Getty Images

Hawaiian monk seals are few in number and are only found in Hawaii. Lucky visitors may discover one resting on a beach. A more likely sighting is an elephant seal, who you can't miss: males are, on average, 3,300-5,100 pounds.

The world's rarest goose, the nene, soars above Hawaii Volcanoes park. These geese look like the more common Canada geese, but are a bit smaller and have less webbing on their feet. Many are seen between nesting areas and places where they can feed on seeds, fruits, flowers and leaves. Be mindful of the signs that warn of these geese crossing the road.



Hot Springs National Park: Nine-Banded Armadillo



Getty Images

“The American Spa” is located near Hot Springs, Arkansas and is centered on dozens of thermal springs that flow from Hot Springs Mountain. The park also has over 20 miles of trails in a deciduous forest, offering plenty of places to view native wildlife.

The nine-banded armadillo is the only type of armadillo in North America. Seven to eleven bony plates protect this mammal from predators. Watch for one adjacent to a stream.

More Animals to See: Ruby-Throat Hummingbirds and Fish Crows



Getty Images

Hummingbirds are found throughout the U.S, but the ruby-throat hummingbird is the only one that nests and breeds in Arkansas, and boasts the distinction of being able to fly upside down or in reverse. As this hummingbird zips by it may be difficult to detect its gorgeous green and red markings.

Another find for bird-lovers is the fish crow, which looks very similar to the more well-known American crow, save for some subtle differences in appearance (it has a more purple hue to its plumage) and sound (it emits a unique, nasally, high-pitched call).

Also don't miss the white-tailed deer, Arkansas' state mammal, which can be found on less frequented trails at dawn or dusk.

