



BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

Mustela nigripes

AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Grasslands

Diet: Prairie dogs, ground squirrels, mice, and rabbits

Conservation Status: Endangered

Threats: Habitat loss and non-native diseases such as sylvatic plague

Where They Live:

Intermountain prairies and grasslands of North America



WILD CLASSROOM

LEAST CONCERN

NEAR
THREATENED

VULNERABLE

ENDANGERED

CRITICALLY
ENDANGERED

EXTINCT IN THE
WILD

EXTINCT

Why Black-Footed Ferrets Matter

- Black-footed ferrets are an indicator species—they represent the health of their grassland habitat, which many animals and humans depend on to survive.
- They are important grassland predators and help keep their ecosystem balanced by keeping prairie dog populations stable.
- Black-footed ferrets are the only ferret native to North America.



DIGGING DEEPER

Characteristics

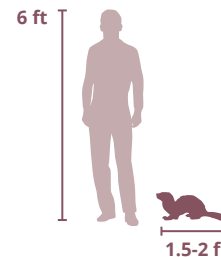
- Black-footed ferrets weigh just 1.5–2.5 pounds. Their slender shape allows them to easily move through prairie dog burrows.
- Because of the black markings on their face, black-footed ferrets are sometimes called “the masked bandits of the prairie.”

Lifestyle

- Black-footed ferrets can survive only in prairie dog colonies because prairie dogs are their main prey and use their burrows for shelter.
- These nocturnal animals live underground alone unless they are breeding or caring for their young, called kits.

Threats

- Black-footed ferrets are threatened by a non-native bacterial disease called sylvatic plague. Plague is spread by fleas and is fatal to their prairie dog prey, threatening the ferrets' food supply.
- They also experience habitat loss as grasslands are plowed up for farming and prairie dogs are removed by some landowners.



Photos: Black-footed ferrets (front) © naturepl.com/Shattil & Rozinski/WWF; Black-footed ferrets (back) © Kristy Bly/WWF
© 2024 WWF. All rights reserved by World Wildlife Fund, Inc. WWF® and © 1986 Panda Symbol are owned by WWF. All rights reserved.

DID YOU KNOW?
Bison are the national mammal of the United States.



AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Grasslands

Diet: Grasses, flowering plants, leaves, shrubs, and lichens

Conservation Status:
Near Threatened

Threats: Habitat loss and low genetic diversity

Where They Live:

Historically ranged across most of North America



WILD CLASSROOM

LEAST CONCERN

**NEAR
THREATENED**

VULNERABLE

ENDANGERED

CRITICALLY
ENDANGERED

EXTINCT IN THE
WILD

EXTINCT

Why Plains Bison Matter

- Plains bison are one of the most important grazers of the plains and maintain the health of plants that other animals need for food and shelter.
- Indigenous peoples of North America have deeply rooted connections with bison, including for food, shelter, and important cultural traditions.



DIGGING DEEPER

Characteristics

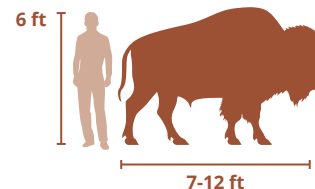
- Despite weighing 2,000 pounds, bison can run around 40 miles per hour, jump six feet high, and easily swim across rivers.
- Bison have a winter coat of woolly underfur with guard hairs that enables them to survive the harsh winters.

Lifestyle

- Bison graze for 9 to 11 hours every day. In winter, they use their large heads and shoulders to sweep away snow and reach the grass.
- They roll around to create shallow pits called wallows. Wallows collect rainwater for animals to drink and serve as habitats for amphibians and plants.

Threats

- By 1889, most bison were killed by settlers who wanted to take land belonging to Indigenous peoples. Without bison, Indigenous peoples were forced to live on reservations.
- Today's bison population is around 420,000, but they are losing their habitat as humans use land for farms or buildings.





AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Grasslands, open prairies, and meadows

Diet: Nectar and pollen from a variety of flowering plants

Conservation Status: Endangered

Threats: Habitat loss

Where They Live:
Central and southern United States



WILD CLASSROOM

LEAST CONCERN	NEAR THREATENED	VULNERABLE	ENDANGERED	CRITICALLY ENDANGERED	EXTINCT IN THE WILD	EXTINCT
---------------	-----------------	------------	-------------------	-----------------------	---------------------	---------

Why Southern Plains Bumble Bees Matter

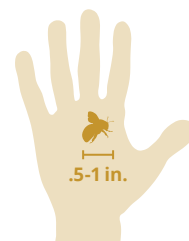
- Southern Plains bumble bees are diet generalists, meaning that they visit many different species of flowers to feed. As they move between flowers, they pollinate wild plants and crops that humans need, and contribute to the health and biodiversity of the grassland ecosystem.



DIGGING DEEPER

Characteristics

- They are one of the largest bumble bee species in North America, with the queen being up to twice the size of the workers!
- They have flat hairs on their midsection that make them look smoother than fuzzier bumble bees.



Lifestyle

- Like other bumble bees, they live in colonies with one queen and hundreds of worker bees, ensuring that they can reproduce and gather enough food to survive.
- Every winter, new queens hibernate underground to survive the harsh temperatures of the plains.

Threats

- Climate change can cause extended periods of high temperatures that are hard for these bees to tolerate.
- When land is plowed for agriculture, fewer types of plants and nesting sites are available to bees.
- Pesticides make bumble bees sick and unable to feed themselves or care for their colony.



AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Grasslands

Diet: Grasses and other plants

Conservation Status:
Least Concern

Threats: Habitat loss and disease

Where They Live:

Throughout the Great Plains of Canada, the United States, and Mexico



WILD CLASSROOM



Why Black-Tailed Prairie Dogs Matter

- Prairie dogs live in colonies, including in underground burrows providing shelter for black-footed ferrets, burrowing owls, jackrabbits, toads, snakes, and more. Their grazing creates unique patches of vegetation that attract specific animals.
- Prairie dogs are 90% of the endangered black-footed ferret's diet.
- Protecting prairie dogs protects animals that depend on them.



DIGGING DEEPER

Characteristics

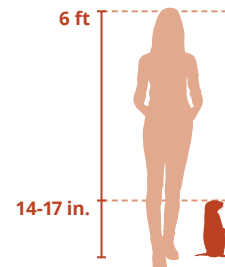
- Though they may look cuddly, they are fast, skilled fighters with sharp claws and powerful teeth.
- Prairie dogs have short ears, dark eyes, a tan body with a lighter belly, and black fur at the tip of their tail.

Lifestyle

- They live in tight-knit family groups, with one or two males, several females, and their pups. Males usually travel between groups while females stick together for life.
- Prairie dogs' language is incredibly complex, and their squeaks, yips, and barks communicate specific details when they warn each other of danger.

Threats

- Hundreds of years ago, massive prairie dog colonies sprawled for miles. Due to habitat loss and removal by humans, less than 5% of their population remains.
- Sylvatic plague is a non-native, fatal disease spread by fleas. When it infects an area, it can wipe out entire prairie dog colonies.



Photos: Black-tailed prairie dog (front) © Conservation Media/WWF-US; Black-tailed prairie dog (back) © Eric Isselee/Shutterstock.com
© 2024 WWF. All rights reserved by World Wildlife Fund, Inc. WWF® and © 1986 Panda Symbol are owned by WWF. All rights reserved.



AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Grasslands and deserts

Diet: Shrubs and grasses

Conservation Status:
Least Concern

Threats: Habitat fragmentation

Where They Live:

Throughout the Great Plains of Canada, the United States, and Mexico

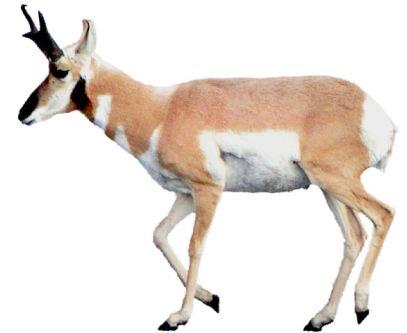


WILD CLASSROOM



Why Pronghorn Matter

- Pronghorn are an indicator species, meaning that they help us monitor the health of their ecosystem.
- Pronghorn are sensitive to changes in their environment because they rely on large areas of prairies to migrate. Scientists study pronghorn migration patterns to learn how to better protect them.



DIGGING DEEPER

Characteristics

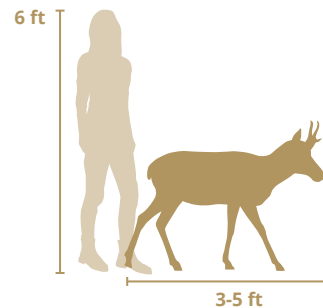
- Pronghorn may resemble deer in size and shape but are more closely related to giraffes.
- Males have horns that are about 10 inches long while female horns are usually much shorter.

Lifestyle

- Every year, following the same pathways as their ancestors, pronghorn embark on one of the longest land migrations of any hoofed animal in North America's lower 48 states.
- They thrive in flat, wide-open areas where they use their excellent eyesight to see predators from a distance and run away, if needed.

Threats

- Fences, roads, and oil and gas development create obstacles across the pronghorns' migration paths, making it difficult for them to travel between their breeding and winter grounds.
- Most pronghorn populations remain stable but have experienced a historic decline in some areas.



DID YOU KNOW?

They are sometimes called "Prairie Ghosts" because their light brown coloration allows them to disappear into their surroundings.

MOUNTAIN PLOVER

Charadrius montanus

AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Grasslands

Diet: Insects

Conservation Status:

Near Threatened

Threats: Loss of nesting and breeding habitat

Where They Live:

Throughout the Great Plains of Canada, the United States, and Mexico



WILD CLASSROOM

LEAST CONCERN

**NEAR
THREATENED**

VULNERABLE

ENDANGERED

CRITICALLY
ENDANGERED

EXTINCT IN THE
WILD

EXTINCT

Why Mountain Plovers Matter

- Mountain plovers need undisturbed prairie land and depend on the health of bison, pronghorn, and black-tailed prairie dog populations. Scientists can monitor plover populations to gauge the overall condition of the grasslands.



DIGGING DEEPER

Characteristics

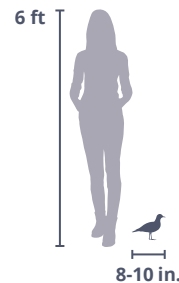
- Mountain plovers are brown, with a round, light belly, a black forehead, and a black stripe in front of their eyes.
- They can be identified by their upright posture, quick steps, and instinct to freeze when a predator is present.

Lifestyle

- Mountain plovers are very social and prefer to move in flocks of several hundred birds, especially during the winter.
- They depend on other animals for survival, feeding on insects stirred up from the ground by bison and pronghorn hooves and nesting on the ground near black-tailed prairie dog colonies.

Threats

- As humans and diseases are wiping out prairie dog colonies, mountain plovers have lost much of their breeding habitat. The use of grasslands for farming or oil and gas development also degrades their habitats.
- When nesting in agricultural lands, mountain plovers are vulnerable to harm from farm equipment or pesticides.



Photos: Mountain plover (front) © Conservation Media/WWF-US; Mountain plover (back) © Gordon COURT/WWF-Canada
© 2024 WWF. All rights reserved by World Wildlife Fund, Inc. WWF® and © 1986 Panda Symbol are owned by WWF. All rights reserved.

DID YOU KNOW?

Male sage-grouse perform spectacular dances and songs in hopes of attracting females during mating season.

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE

Centrocercus urophasianus

AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Grasslands

Diet: Sagebrush and insects

Conservation Status:

Near Threatened

Threats: Oil and gas development

Where They Live:

Western United States and Canada



WILD CLASSROOM

LEAST CONCERN

**NEAR
THREATENED**

VULNERABLE

ENDANGERED

CRITICALLY
ENDANGERED

EXTINCT IN THE
WILD

EXTINCT

Why Sage-Grouse Matter

- Because sage-grouse are sensitive to habitat changes, a thriving population shows scientists that the ecosystem is healthy and intact.
- The protection of sage-grouse benefits the other species, such as pronghorn and songbirds, that share the same habitat.

**DIGGING DEEPER****Characteristics**

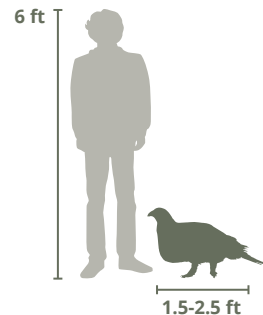
- Sage-grouse have a round, brownish-gray body with long tail feathers and a small head.
- During mating season, males can weigh nearly twice as much as females.

Lifestyle

- Males gather in groups of 70 or more to perform courtship dances. To attract females, they puff out their white chest repeatedly, make popping sounds, and show off their tail feathers.
- After mating, females construct nests under sagebrush made with leaves and twigs and lay around seven to nine eggs.

Threats

- Oil and gas development disturb the sage-grouse's habitat and ability to reproduce. The loud noises from energy towers interrupt the birds' ability to call potential mates.
- When their land is cleared for agriculture, they lose space for nesting and breeding, and they may be more visible or vulnerable to predators.



Photos: Greater sage-grouse (front) © Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com/WWF-US; Greater sage-grouse (back) © Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com/WWF-US | © 2024 WWF. All rights reserved by World Wildlife Fund, Inc. WWF® and © 1986 Panda Symbol are owned by WWF. All rights reserved.

DID YOU KNOW?
Swift foxes are one of the smallest fox species in North America and are the size of a house cat.



AT A GLANCE

Habitat: Short- and mixed-grass prairies

Diet: Small mammals, birds, and insects

Conservation Status:
Least Concern

Threats: Lack of habitat, predators, and vehicle collisions

Where They Live:
Throughout the Great Plains of the United States and Canada



WILD CLASSROOM

LEAST CONCERN

NEAR
THREATENED

VULNERABLE

ENDANGERED

CRITICALLY
ENDANGERED

EXTINCT IN THE
WILD

EXTINCT

Why Swift Foxes Matter

- The presence of swift foxes signals that a grassland ecosystem is healthy and stable.
- Protecting their habitat and population helps other wildlife in the same environment, including prairie dogs, ground squirrels, and grassland birds.



DIGGING DEEPER

Characteristics

- Swift foxes are small carnivores and weigh five to seven pounds. They have pale yellow fur, a bushy tail, and large, brown ears.
- Their ears are adapted for sharp hearing, which helps them locate prey and avoid coyotes and eagles.

Lifestyle

- They primarily hunt at night and are opportunistic eaters, meaning that they eat a wide variety of foods, including rodents, rabbits, insects, small birds, fish, and lizards.
- Although they are fast runners, as their name implies, they prefer to stay near their dens for safety.

Threats

- Once widespread throughout the Great Plains, swift fox populations have dwindled, partly because they eat poison baits intended for coyotes and wolves. Over half of their historical U.S. range has been destroyed for agriculture and human settlements.
- Roadway development fragments their habitats and increases the risk of car-related injuries.

