

## Common Mammals

Mammals are vital to ecosystems including the ocean, lakes, rivers, wetlands, forests, fields, mountains and deserts. There are many different types of mammals. Mammals can be massive, like whales and elephant seals, or extremely tiny, like many rodents. It is worth knowing a little bit about each of the main groups of mammals:

### Rodents, Hares, and Rabbits

Lagomorpha means “hare-shaped.” Lagomorphs have four teeth as incisors at the front of the upper jaw: two smaller peg-like teeth form a buttress at the base of the two larger incisors, supporting and strengthening them. Worldwide, there are more than 40 species of lagomorph, including more than 20 hares, 11 rabbits, and six pikas. Lagomorphs are divided into two families: hares and rabbits are members of family Leporidae, while pikas are in the family Ochotonidae.

### Carnivores

Carnivores vary greatly in weight and size from less than a pound to nearly two tons. They have four to five digits on each leg or arm. All carnivores have sharp canine teeth designed for removing flesh from carcasses. Most have very acute senses. Vision and hearing are excellent in many carnivores and the sense of smell is generally acute. Most have relatively large brains and are excellent runners.

### Rodents

Forty percent of all mammals are rodents –mammals characterized by a pair of broad, sharp-edged, chisel-like incisor teeth that are firmly inserted in both jaws and are used in gnawing vegetation. For example, beavers are in the rodent family. Most people are familiar with domesticated rodents like mice, rats, guinea pigs, hamsters and chinchillas. Wild rodents include squirrels, beavers, lemmings, capybaras, groundhogs, muskrats, porcupines, prairie dogs, and voles.

### Opossums and Shrews

The Virginia opossum is North America’s only marsupial. A marsupial is an animal with a pouch, like a kangaroo or a koala. The opossum is about the size of a large house cat. It has a triangular head and a long pointed nose. Grayish fur covers every area of the body except the ears, feet, and prehensile tail. This prehensile tail is adapted for grasping and wrapping around things like tree limbs.

Shrews, the smallest mammals, are also important because they represent the most primitive mammals. Their characteristics most closely resemble primitive mammals that fossil evidence indicates evolved during the era of dinosaurs. As the name implies, they feed primarily on insects and other small invertebrates. Shrews can be terrestrial (living on land), arboreal (living in trees), and/or semi-aquatic. They have such a high metabolism that they eat regularly, and have a diet that ranges from insectivorous to omnivorous.

## **Bats**

Bats are winged mammals of the order Chiroptera, which includes 900–1,000 species classified in about 200 genera and 17 families. Bats range in size from a wingspread of over 5 feet to a wingspread of less than 2 inches. The body of the bat is mouse-like and usually covered with fine fur. The face varies greatly from one species to another. Many species have complex appendages on the snout and projections (“false ears”) in front of the true ears. The ears themselves are often very large and elaborate. These facial structures help bats emit and receive sound vibrations that allow them to navigate the world around them.

## **Ungulates**

Ungulates are mammals that have hard hooves. They include, among other animals, all members of the deer family (moose, elk, caribou, and various deer species), bison, mountain sheep and mountain goats. Most ungulates are grazers, meaning they eat leafy plants such as grass and clover. Some, like moose, are browsers, feeding largely on twigs and branches. Ungulates are a very important part of the ecology of many wild landscapes. They are often the dominant herbivores (plant eaters) in the habitat, and their movements and feeding habits can change the very nature of any ecosystem. They are also important because they are often the favorite food of large carnivores such as wolves and cougars.

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### *Bears*

Bears are interesting, because even though they are often classified as carnivores, black bears and grizzly bears eat mostly plants, making them omnivores. The meat part of their diet can come from fish, ants, rodents, and whatever other large mammals they manage to catch. Bears are also well known for hibernating throughout the winter.

### *Wolves*

Wolves were hunted to extinction in much of the United States. This is extremely unfortunate, as wolves play an important part in any ecosystem to which they are native. For example, rather than killing off large portions of the ungulate population, wolves only hunt the weaker and the older parts of the pack, making the entire herd stronger in the long run.

### *Coyotes*

The Coyote, a cousin of the wolf, is an entirely different story: rather than being hunted to extinction, more coyotes exist today than when the U.S. Constitution was signed. This is because hardly any animal in America is more adaptable to changing conditions than the coyote. Coyotes can live just about anywhere. They are found in deserts, swamps,

tundra, grasslands, brush, and dense forests, from below sea level to high mountains. They have also learned to live in suburbs and cities. Unlike their cartoon counterpart, they are also very smart: coyotes often share information with each other and can overcome fears quickly when they realize that something that looks or sounds dangerous actually is not. Coyotes have been known to not only avoid being trapped, but also have taken the time to spring every trap on a trap line and kick dirt on the traps before they escape!

## **Marine Mammals**

Mammals that live in or near the ocean are an important part of wildlife. The grey whale is one of the largest mammals in the world, and you can frequently see dolphins, seals and other marine mammals swimming with surfers and sightseers at many beaches.

### **Cetaceans - Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises**

Marine mammals in the cetacean family include whales, dolphins, and porpoises. Although whales spend all their time in the oceans, they are still mammals. This means that they are warm-blooded, give birth to live young, nurse their young, have traces of hair or fur, and must come to the surface to breathe air through their lungs.

### **Pinnipeds – Seals, Walrus, and Sea Lions**

Marine mammals that have front and hind flippers are classified as pinnipeds. These include the seals, sea lions, and walruses. Most of these animals live in the ocean but are able to come on land for long periods of time.

### **Sea Otters**

Sea otters are members of the weasel (mustelidae) family. Like other members of this family, they have very thick fur. In fact, with 850,000 to one million hairs per square inch, they have the thickest fur of any mammal. Sea otters are the smallest marine mammal.

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