



Oregon's Large Mammals



There are certain things in life that cannot be adequately described. The essence is lost in the translation. Words cannot reflect the majesty of a bull elk or the bugling challenge he sends across the mountains.

How can someone who has never seen the swift flight of a pronghorn understand its incredible speed and the perfect match of animal and environment? The same is true of a cougar's scream, the union of grace and power of a buck deer, the courage and recklessness of rutting bighorn sheep. All must be seen or heard to be truly appreciated.

We Oregonians are fortunate in that we have the opportunity to experience the sight and sounds of big game throughout our state. In addition to those mentioned above, Oregon is also home to the mountain goat and the black bear.

Large mammals were the primary food source for many native inhabitants of Oregon as well as the early white settler. In addition to food, their bodies provided shelter, clothing, tools, containers, cooking implements, fishhooks, rope fishing line and a hundred other necessities. Several held important spiritual status with the Indian tribes.

In the early days of white settlement, unrestricted hunting and the impact of domestic livestock had a disastrous effect on several species of Oregon wildlife. Some, like the grizzly bear, were completely eliminated.

Others, like pronghorn antelope, Rocky Mountain elk, and bighorn sheep have been brought back from near extinction to populations which are healthy and relatively widespread. This has been accomplished through sound management policies, regulated hunts and most importantly, the solid support of Oregonians. Oregon hunters have been particularly important in this effort, both from their monetary contributions and their volunteer labor.

Although wild animals are no longer essential to the survival of most people, they are still extremely important to Oregon's economic and social well being. Millions of dollars are spent each year and thousands of jobs are dependent upon big game hunting opportunities in Oregon. Also important is the unique and irreplaceable contribution of each animal species to its environment.

By far the most conspicuous of Oregon's large mammals are the ungulates, or cloven-hoofed mammals. These include all but the black bear and cougar. Oregon's ungulates are all ruminants, which means that they have four chambers to their stomachs. A four-chambered stomach is a nice thing to have for animals that keep getting invitations to be someone else's dinner. It lets them eat and run. A ruminant's digestive system allows it to chew and swallow large quantities of forage quickly, storing the partially chewed food in the first stomach chamber. Later, when the animal has returned to safety, the food will be returned to the mouth as a cud, chewed completely and sent through the final three stomach chambers as part of the digestive process. Four-chambered stomachs also allow the most efficient use of foods which are sometimes of poor nutrient quality. Most visible and numerous of the large mammals are the antlered ungulates, deer and elk.

Antlers are distinctly different from horns. While horns have a bony core and are normally permanent, antlers are solid bone and are produced in an annual cycle of growth and shedding each year.

Antlers are found only on the male of the species. They are primarily used in the bluffs and battles that occur between males during the rut or breeding season. Deer antlers fall off in late winter each year and begin regrowth in April. Bull elk drop their headgear in February or March and begin a new set soon afterward. Antlers of both species become mature by the following summer.

The Cascade Mountains crest serves as a somewhat vague dividing line between different subspecies of deer and elk in Oregon. Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer make their homes east of the Cascade Mountains. There is some intermixing of species on both sides of the crest. Two subspecies of white-tailed deer are found in scattered populations in Oregon, one east and one west of the Cascades.

Rocky Mountain Elk



Rocky Mountain elk were once found in almost every region of North America, including the plains, where they numbered in the millions. They retreated gradually before the advance of civilization to inhabit the high mountain country of the western states. The relative openness of their environment east of the Cascades has helped Rocky Mountain elk evolve into long distance travelers. Widespread movement is the rule, not the exception.

Like many other inhabitants of lands with severe winters, Rocky Mountain elk migrate away from extreme cold and deep snow, then back to their favorite feeding and calving grounds when the weather becomes milder. The seasonal movement of deer and elk is not orientated from north to south but from higher elevations to lower. They take part in what is called a vertical migration, staying high in the mountains during the spring and summer, then descending into the foothills and valleys when snow gets deep and food scarce.



Bulls enter the rut in the early fall. During this breeding season the bulls attempt to collect and keep harems of cows with an assortment of bluffs, bugles, and when necessary, battles. Bulls and cows separate after the mating season, often forming herds of the same sex, with some yearling and immature bulls staying with the cows. Calves are born in the spring and for a short time are vulnerable to attacks by bear and cougar. In the absence of wolves, the only consistent predators of mature elk of either sex are cougars and people.

Roosevelt Elk

Roosevelt elk, named for President Theodore Roosevelt, are sometimes also called Olympic elk. They inhabit the coastal forests and some western portions of the Cascades. There is some interbreeding between the two elk subspecies in the Cascades.

Because cover is much more dense in western Oregon than in the sparse forests of eastern Oregon, and because mild western Oregon winters do not require migration, Roosevelt are staying at-home sort of creatures.

Unless they are pushed by hunters or predators, Roosevelt elk might spend their entire lives in a single drainage.

Although their food sources are more dependable and less spread out, Roosevelts' available feed is rarely as nutritious as that found east of the Cascades. Winter forage in western Oregon is often of very poor quality.



Elk of both species are capable of a variety of sounds. These range from the singsong mewing cows use to communicate with their calves to the bark of alarm that will set a herd to flight, to the breathtaking, scream-grunting bugle of the rutting bull. Elk are also capable of near total silence, to the everlasting frustration of many elk hunters.

Bighorn Sheep

The mountains and canyon country of eastern Oregon were the historic homes of many bighorn sheep. The encroachment of civilization, unrestricted hunting and the introduction of livestock diseases eliminated them from the state in the early 1900s.

Restoration efforts using both Rocky Mountain bighorns and California bighorns have been successful and now several populations are well established in their traditional rimrock and canyon habitats in southeast and northeast Oregon. A few herds have been recently established in central Oregon.



Bighorn sheep reintroduction in Oregon continues a wildlife trapping and transplanting tradition that began during the late 1800s with delivery of Rocky Mountain elk from the Yellowstone area. The methods are more sophisticated now, helicopters are replacing wranglers and trucks are used in place of horse-drawn wagons. The result is the same, however, and the people of Oregon are big winners from a project that has allowed bighorn sheep the opportunity to repopulate their historic range.

Bighorns are renowned for their breeding season battles in which the sounds of head on collisions between males fill the mountains up to a mile away.

Mountain Goats



Mountain goats really aren't goats. They are actually an antelope whose nearest relatives are the chamois of eastern Europe and the serow of Japan. After several attempts at trapping and release, mountain goats are now found only in Oregon's Wallowa and Elkhorn mountains.

Everything about mountain goats reflects their high country ancestry. Their hooves are large and oval and sensitive to the touch. They provide a much better grip on smooth rock than do the hard hooves of most ungulates.

Mountain goat young develop rapidly and are capable soon after birth of following their mothers over the steep, rocky slopes they call home. In fact, some of the youngsters do their very best to remain at momma's side even after they are yearlings and brand new siblings have arrived. Some not-so-gentle persuasion is often used by the female to send the youngsters out on their own.

Pronghorn Antelope



Pronghorns are not true antelope but may have been given the name because of the antelope's age-old connotation of speed. Antelope or not, the pronghorn does have speed; some have been clocked above 40 miles per hour. Pronghorns are the fastest ungulates found in North America. They have enlarged hearts, lungs and windpipes to utilize the enormous amounts of oxygen they require during sprints.

Pronghorns combine their incredible speed with eyesight that would make an eagle proud. They can see, and quickly react to, movement as much as three miles away. Early settlers almost eliminated pronghorns from their native range in eastern Oregon. Hunting was prohibited in the early 1900s and the season remained closed for 25 years. Current populations are healthy and are managed through a limited quota hunting season.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Black Bear

Black bear is a somewhat misleading name because the animal's colors can range from jet black to cinnamon to blonde. Normally shy and inoffensive, black bears can be very dangerous when cornered or their young are threatened.



Black bears are omnivorous in the true sense of the word. They will eat almost anything that lives, once lived or may yet live. The bears' appetite have gotten them in trouble with humans since they will destroy beehives and kill unwary sheep or calves. Some bears will strip the bark from 25 to 50 year-old Douglas firs and chew the sweet underlying cambium layer off. This cambium feeding often kills the trees and those that are not completely girdled are weakened and made much more susceptible to disease and insect pests.

Cougars

Cougars, also known as mountain lions, pumas, panthers, painters and catamounts, are solitary animals that are proving to be very adaptable. Cougar populations are healthy and increasing in Oregon.

Unlike bears, cougars are not scavengers and will avoid eating spoiled meat. As a result, the big cats must depend more on regular hunting. Cougars prey mainly on deer but they will also take elk, small mammals and surprisingly, porcupines.



Mule Deer

Mule deer are a product of the more open country and drier habitats of eastern Oregon. As such they are wide-ranging animals. These deer are found in most parts of eastern Oregon where food, cover and water are available to meet their needs.



Mule deer are recognized by their long, mule-like ears and black tipped tail on a white rump, and are easily picked out by their high, bouncing gallop when they run.

Although browsers by nature, mule deer in much of Oregon may seasonally depend on grasses for much of their diet.

Columbian Black-tailed Deer



Black-tailed deer, which are considered a subspecies of mule deer, are found in all of western Oregon. Though primarily a deer of the deep woods, they have adapted well to the open farmland of the Willamette Valley and high elevations of the Cascades, where some interbreeding occurs with mule deer.

The blacktail population has historically been tied to the incidence of naturally occurring wildfires, which opened thousands of acres up to sunlight and to the growth of grasses, forbs and brush. Black-tails now thrive in clear cuts and other places where timber has been removed. Some parts of the Coast Range support 80 deer or more per square mile. Mule deer of eastern Oregon, on the other hand, rarely exceed 10-15 per square mile.

Columbian White-tailed Deer

Columbian white-tails were once numerous west of the Cascades, especially in the Willamette Valley. Remnant populations now occur near Roseburg and on the Columbia White-tailed Deer National Wildlife Refuge, located near Westport along the Columbia River. Idaho white-tailed deer are now found from Pendleton to the Grande Ronde River drainage and into the Snake River country. Although Idaho white-tails are considered to be a separate deer species, they are known to interbreed with mule deer.



White-tail bucks have antlers with forward sweeping beams from which single points arise.

Management

An important facet of wildlife management is having good census data. Ungulates are surveyed using vehicles with spotlights, horses, helicopters and airplanes. Harvest information is also used to assess population status.

Accurate counts of bear and cougar are not possible because of their extreme secretiveness. Evaluation of body condition, past reproductive success, and age and sex ratios of animals taken by hunters are all indicators used in assessing the population status. The number of damage complaints and number of road-killed bear & cougar are other indicators that are considered.

Primary pronghorn population limitations center on distribution and abundance of available water and food. Construction of ponds and forage improvement are management practices that have been used to help pronghorns expand toward the limits of their historic range.

One tool used in big game management involves the trapping and transplant of large mammals. These efforts, first attempted in the early 1900s with Rocky Mountain elk, continue today on a variety of species.

Interstate wildlife trades have also been successful. There are Oregon elk in Kansas, Texas, and Alaska; Oregon pronghorn in Nevada; Oregon otters in Colorado; and Oregon bighorn sheep in Idaho and Washington. These animals were traded for the Washington, Idaho and Alaska mountain goats, Canadian bighorn sheep and Texas, Nebraska, Kansas and California wild turkeys that now roam our forests.

Did You Know?

The pronghorn's pelage, or coat, consists of hollow hairs to insulate the animal from either heat or cold. It can set the hairs at any desired angle, smooth and flat for heat dissipation or erect to create a thicker layer of insulation.

Mule deer bucks, unlike black-tails and white-tails, do not normally develop spike antlers as yearlings. A spike antlered mule deer may be a genetically inferior animal or have been a late-born fawn. Mule deer usually sprout forked antlers as their first headgear. Regardless of the bull elk's noise and posturing, the day-to-day movement of the herd is controlled by a dominant female, known as the lead cow. Pronghorns are one of very few horned animals that shed their horns each year. The horny outer sheath is lost, the bony core remains. Both bucks and does have horns although the does horns are much smaller.