The Earth is flat, at least in places. On every continent, there are seemingly endless expanses of open ground, flat as you can imagine. Sometimes they are covered with grasses or low shrubs that dot the land like spots on a Dalmatian.

Wyoming has its share of flat lands, called plains, too. Wyoming’s plains are semi-arid, which means they receive less than 20 inches of rain per year and have scrubby vegetation with short grasses in some areas, and sagebrush in others. There are very few trees on the high plains, usually only along rivers and streams. Because these areas have low moisture and are high above sea level, Wyoming’s high plains experience wide ranges in temperature, sometimes with shifts of more than 45 degrees in a single day. Some areas are also known for their intense winds.

These conditions, food, water, shelter, and space, create habitat for a variety of animals like rabbits, bison, coyote, sage thrashers, and rattlesnakes. If you’ve ever driven across our state, you’ve probably seen one of Wyoming’s most unique plains animals, the pronghorn antelope. Many birds such as rough-legged hawk, hoary, redpoll, snow bunting, and even the occasional snowy owl and gyrfalcon, which breed in the Arctic or forest of Canada, winter on Wyoming plains and grasslands.

Wyoming’s plains can be a tough place to live. Winters can be long, summers are hot and dry, and winds are persistent. But the plains are home to some amazing wildlife, making Wyoming an amazing place for you to call home as well.
There are many different jobs with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. There are people who are accountants, land surveyors, journalists, and biologists. There are even many different kinds of biologists: wildlife biologists, fisheries biologists, nongame bird biologists, and nongame mammal biologists. In Wyoming, autumn is a very busy time for all biologists. Heather O’Brien, the Casper wildlife biologist, is just one of many biologists around the state working extra hard to manage wildlife.

A wildlife biologist usually spends 12 to 16 hours talking to hunters on an average fall day. “It makes for long days, but talking with the people who are seeing the wildlife first-hand is exciting,” says O’Brien. “We also classify wildlife herds in the fall, which means we count the numbers of animals in the herds. We fly in an airplane so we can see and count the animals. This helps us determine how many animals we have, how many fawns or calves there are and how many hunters we should allow to keep a healthy wildlife population.”

Biologists also study animals for disease. “We are always very concerned about the health of Wyoming’s wildlife,” says biologist O’Brien. “Knowing the condition of the animals helps us gauge the condition of the habitat, or the food, water, and shelter in the areas the animals are living.” Depending on what wildlife biologists discover, they may need to make changes to improve habitat (the places wildlife live).

Based on information biologists have received for pronghorn antelope so far, they are worried about the pronghorn in certain areas of the state. “The severe drought and poor habitat is going to make it a tough winter on animals because they might not have enough food to eat once it starts snowing.”
**Pronghorn**

**Lives:** Grasslands, brushlands, and deserts  
**Eats:** Grasses, forbs, shrubs, and cactus  
**Size:** 32-41 inches tall, 80 to 150 pounds

Pronghorn, known to most of us as antelope, can run incredibly fast. They are the fastest land mammal in North America, with a top speed up to 65 miles an hour. One of the only faster animals is the cheetah. The pronghorn has to be fast to escape predators such as coyotes, bobcats, or mountain lions.

Pronghorn form herds of both males and females in the winter. In early spring, the herds separate. Young males form bachelor groups, females form their own groups and adult males live alone. Most female pronghorn don’t have horns, the only way to tell a male from a female is by the black cheek patch found only on males.

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**Plains Bison**

**Lives:** North American prairies  
**Eats:** Grasses and sedges  
**Size:** 700 to 2,200 pounds

The bison found in Wyoming are plains bison, which are smaller than their cousins in Canada, the Wood bison. While bison once roamed freely across our state, today wild bison can only be found in and around Yellowstone National Park, in northwest Wyoming.

Bison have a shaggy, long, dark brown winter coat, and a lighter weight, lighter brown summer coat. During fall, bison will rub their horns against trees, young saplings, and even utility poles. Biologists think the bison use the scent of the trees to help protect themselves from insects.

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**Burrowing Owl**

**Lives:** Grasslands, rangelands, deserts, and agricultural areas  
**Eats:** Large insects and small rodents  
**Size:** 7 to 11 inches long, 5 to 9 ounces

Burrowing owls are tiny, long-legged owls found in open areas of both North and South America. They prefer habitat that is open and dry and has little vegetation. But don’t look for them in trees—burrowing owls nest and roost in burrows in the ground, like the holes made by prairie dogs. Unlike many other owls, burrowing owls are often active during the day. These owls save hunting for night, when they use night vision and hearing can be used to their advantage.

Burrowing owls have bright yellow eyes. Adults have brown heads and wings with white spots. They have white eyebrows and a white chin patch, which they expand and display, when agitated or threatened.

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**Pygmy Rabbit**

**Lives:** Sagebrush grasslands  
**Eats:** Sagebrush  
**Size:** 9 to 11 inches long, less than 1 pound

Pygmy rabbits are the smallest members of the leporid (rabbit and hare) family. A pygmy rabbit small size, short ears, gray color, and small hind legs make it different than other rabbits and hares.

Pygmy rabbits are one of only two rabbit species that dig their own burrows. Burrows are usually dug at the base of a big sagebrush plant and face north to east. The pygmy rabbit digs tunnels and chambers up to three feet below the ground’s surface. Most burrows have four or five entrances, but some have as many as 10.
Our Wildlife Heritage

Long before semi-trucks traveled Interstate 25 or even before settlers followed the Oregon Trail, people were crisscrossing the state. Wyoming's original inhabitants were the Plains Indians. These people, also called Native Americans, would follow the huge herds of bison that also once roamed the plains.

Wyoming's tribes were the Shoshone, Ute, Crow, Cheyenne, and Araphoae. These tribes were nomadic, or wanders. They survived hunting big game like antelope, elk, and deer. But bison was their main food source. The tribes followed the seasonal grazing and migration of the bison.

Most big game hunters today use high-powered rifles or sophisticated bows. Hunting for the Plains Indians was more complicated. Before the tribes had horses, the Plains Indians would surround the bison, then try to herd them off cliffs or into places where the bison could be more easily killed, such as a corral made of fallen trees or rocks. With horses, the Plains Indians could run alongside the bison and shoot them with bow and arrows, or later, firearms.

In addition to eating bison meat, the Plains Indians made items such as cups, decorations, tools, knives, and clothing from bison hides and bones. Even their houses were designed with the bison in mind. The tipis were easily taken down and carried across the plains as the tribes followed the bison. It was a life built around bison, and a proud heritage for today's Native Americans.
In some areas of Wyoming, a weed known as cheatgrass has taken over the land. This grass outcompetes native plants, reducing how much food is available to wildlife. Cheatgrass also cures, or dries out, early in the summer. The dry grass can create fire danger.

Wyoming Game and Fish Department biologists are working to kill cheatgrass and make conditions better for the native plants that wildlife like to eat. They are using fire as a tool, burning areas infested with cheatgrass to kill it. After an area is burned, a helicopter is used to spray an herbicide, or poison, that kills the plants. Biologists hope this will help beat the cheatgrass and save the sagebrush.

Pronghorn are built for speed, but are they not very good at jumping. Wyoming’s many fences prevent pronghorn from where they need to go. But fences can be helpful, sometimes to keep livestock inside the fence, other times to keep wildlife off the road. Wyoming government agencies came together to help pronghorn cross one major highway safely.

This summer, two wildlife overpasses were built between Pinedale and Jackson. In one of the largest animal migrations in the world, pronghorn travel from their summer to winter feedgrounds. Because pronghorn won’t use a tunnel under the road, engineers designed a structure that goes over the road, like a giant wildlife bridge. Tall fences help funnel animals to the overpasses to help them learn where to cross safely. These are the first wildlife overpasses built in Wyoming, and the winter of 2012-2013 will be the first time the overpasses are open for use.

Wildlife biologists wanted to know if energy development affects Wyoming’s ferruginous hawks and golden eagles. To find these large birds of prey, scientists used airplanes and helicopters to look for the birds’ nests. Later, ground crews counted how many eggs or hatchlings each nest had, and when possible, collected blood and tissue samples from young birds. The biologists will continue their study next summer, then use the data to determine if ferruginous hawk and golden eagle populations are healthy in the Cowboy State.
Outdoor Classroom

The Food Chain

What did you have for breakfast this morning? Or dinner last night? Cheeseburgers, pizza, and chicken nuggets may be some of your favorite foods. Now that we get most of our meat, fruit, and vegetables from grocery stores, it can be hard to remember that we are all part of a food chain.

Picture a chain made up of many links, each link connected to the next one. You may be thinking of a necklace or the chain that drives your bike. A food chain connects one component of nature to another. Sunlight gives plants the energy they need to grow. Small wildlife, such as porcupine, rabbits, and field mice eat plants such as grasses and berries.

A predator, such as a hawk, might hunt and eat a rabbit or mouse. When the hawk dies, organisms process the hawk’s body back into organic matter, such as soil. The soil becomes nutrients that plants need to grow, and the food chain begins again.

So what does a food chain on the high plains look like? Sunlight helps sagebrush grow. Pronghorn antelope eat the sagebrush. A coyote might stalk and kill the pronghorn for food. Or, if your family hunts, you might eat a pronghorn for dinner. Now the food chain ends with you!

The next time you’re enjoying the outdoors and see some wildlife, think about that animal’s role in the food chain. Is that animal at the end of the food chain or in the middle? How many links are in the chain? From the smallest berry or insect to the largest predator such as a grizzly bear or human, we all have a place in a food chain.
Who’s Wearing What?
Fall is here and that means it’s time to break out some warmer clothes such a heavy coat. Can you recognize the coats of these Wyoming residents?

Chain Reaction
Want to know more about food chains? Visit Eco Kids online at www.ecokids.ca. Get your parents’ permission first, then log on to learn. You can even play a game to test your knowledge. Give it a try and see why every animal within a food chain is so important.

Big on Bison
Ever seen a bison in action? Prepare yourself for a battle of the bulls in Yellowstone National Park where males are battling to mate with females. You can send a bison e-card and share fun facts about this awesome creature of the plains. Visit this great site at kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/animals/creaturefeature/american-bison/.

Learning Links
Take this home and share it with your parents! Ask them to scan the QR Code with their smartphone and check out the link together!

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