



Fall 2012

Wild Times

The Habitat Connection CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS WAS WRONG!

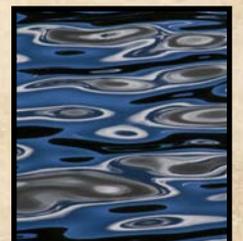
The Earth is flat, at least in places. On every continent, there are seemingly endless expanses of open ground, flat as you can imagine. Sometimes they are covered with grasses or low shrubs that dot the land like spots on a Dalmatian.

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.



Wyoming
Wildlife

A Free Publication of
the Wyoming Game
& Fish Department

Inside: Field Wildlife Journal ...2 Our Wildlife Heritage ...5 Outdoor Classroom ...7 Learning Links ...8
Wildlife Profiles ...3 Around Wyoming ...6 Test Your Knowledge ...8

FIELD Wildlife Journal

Heather O'Brien

WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST



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."

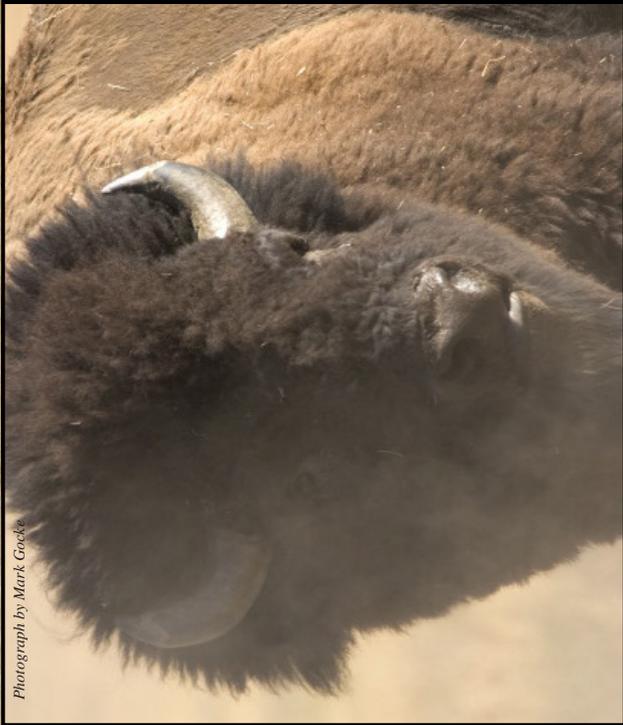
Biologists also study animals for disease. "We are always very concerned about the health of Wyoming's wildlife," says biologist O'Brien. "Knowing the condition of the animals helps us gauge the condition of the habitat, or the food, water, and shelter in the areas the animals are living." Depending 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.

A Few Tools of a Wildlife Biologist



WILDLIFE PROFILES



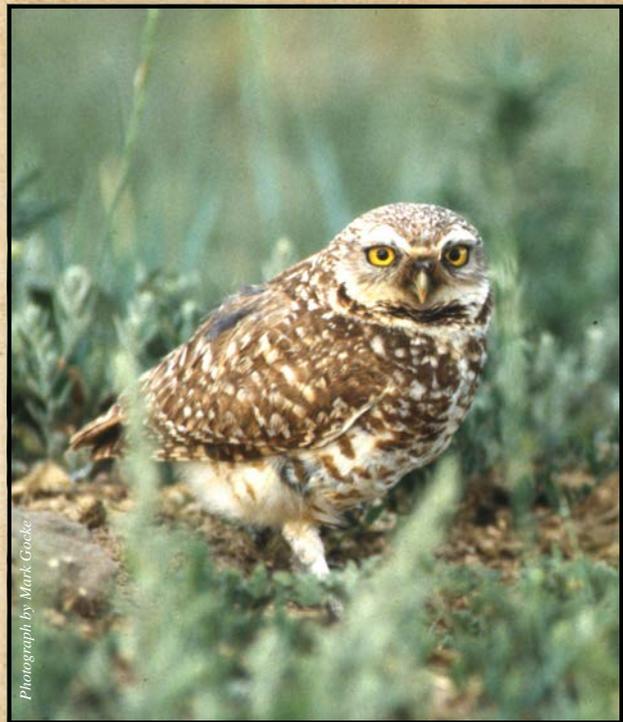
Photograph by Mark Goeke



Photograph by Mark Goeke



Photograph by Mark Goeke



Photograph by Mark Goeke

WILDLIFE PROFILES

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.

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.

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.

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 rabbits 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 Araphaoe. 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 additon 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.



Photograph by WCFD Staff

Around Wyoming

PROJECTS ON THE PLAINS

Wildlife Overpasses



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

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,

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.



Weed Control

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.



Big Birds



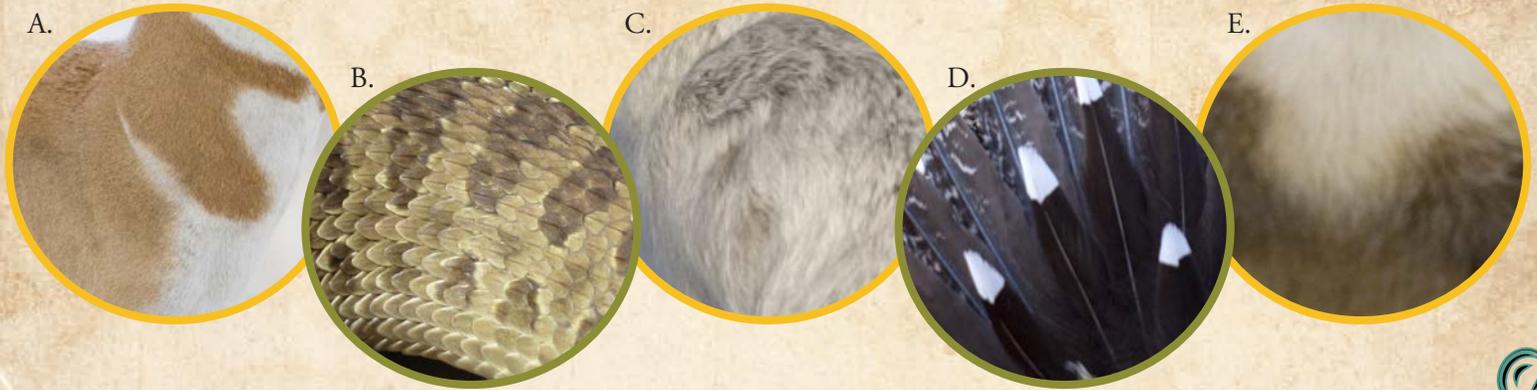
Some places on Wyoming's plains house mineral resources like oil and gas under the surface. The plains are also ideal locations for giant wind turbines that create energy. When companies drill for oil and gas or build a turbine, their activities can have an impact on wildlife.

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.

▶ TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE ◀

WHO'S WEARING WHAT?

Fall is here and that means it's time to break out some warmer clothes such as a heavy coat. Can you recognize the coats of these Wyoming residents?



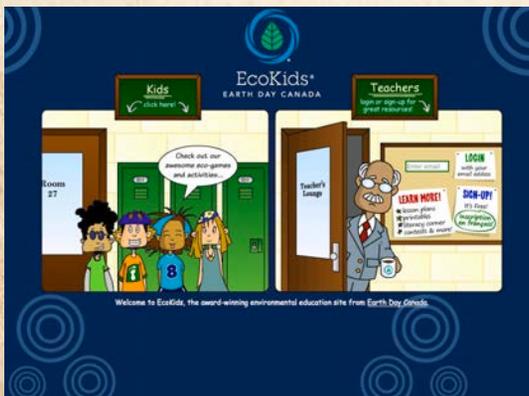
Answers: A. Jack rabbit, B. Prairie rattlesnake, C. Jack rabbit, D. Black-footed ferret, E. Sage grouse.



▶ LEARNING LINKS ◀

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.



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!



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/.



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!



Volume 11, No. 1
Fall 2012
Writer/Editor: Teresa Milner Editor: Janet Milek
Assistant Editor: Al Langston
Contributors: Mark Gocke, Heather O'Brien
Graphic Design: J Blajszczak

Wyoming Wildlife's Wild Times is published four times during the school year (October, December, February and April). Please direct inquiries and changes of address to Wild Times, Education Branch, 5400 Bishop Blvd., Cheyenne, WY 82006; (307) 777-4538.

Printed in the USA. Copyright 2012 by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. All rights reserved.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department receives financial assistance in Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration. Under title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, sex, or disability. If you believe that you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Department of Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Human Resources, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Mail stop: 2000, Arlington, Virginia 22203.