



Oregon's Small Mammals (Carnivorous)

The victim's awareness of danger, when it came, was very late. A slight rustle of leaves, a quick scent that nearly paralyzed him with fear. Then the predator was near and he no longer had time for paralysis or fear. In his panicked flight he scraped against an overhanging limb. It threw him off-stride and made him even more conscious of the predator charging, coming up fast behind him.

He knew it would stop at nothing to catch him; it would jump any obstacles, go under others. It would never quit. Never quit. Never. The relentless, bloodthirsty nature of the pursuer chilled his heart and destroyed any hope of escape. His legs grew heavy, his breathing labored. With all hope gone, he turned to fight, stiffened by a courage born of despair.

But in this last effort he was late, too. Before he could strike a blow he was smashed to the ground. Massive teeth slashed through his spinal cord below the skull. Even before his struggles ceased, the predator had begun to feed. And around the two, predator and prey, the forest sounds returned to normal as a three-inch shrew began to eat her kill, a four inch field mouse.

Oregon's meat eaters, or carnivores, are not limited to the cougar and bobcat. The canines (coyotes and foxes), weasels, opossums, raccoons and even tiny shrews are carnivorous, and share the instincts and habits of other meat eaters.

Moles and Shrews



Moles and shrews belong to a class of mammals called insectivores. It is a somewhat misleading term, particularly in the case of shrews, since although shrews do eat a lot of insects, they eat a lot of everything. Shrews may well be the orneriest, hungriest and most ferocious creatures on the face of the earth. They are extremely nervous, high strung animals; a reflection of a metabolic rate that requires the shrew to eat almost twice its own weight in food every 24 hours. This food requirement makes the shrew a very active animal. When awake, it is in constant, rapid motion and it never sleeps for long. Left without food for more than a couple of hours, the shrew is in danger of starving to death, but it is such a successful hunter that starvation is not normally a problem.

Shrews are primarily ground dwellers, although some live in burrows. A few semi aquatic species even have hairy feet. The hair increases the surface of their feet and allows them to run on water for some distance without sinking. Moles feed heavily on grubs, insects and other small invertebrates, but they can be perfectly happy dining on earthworms as well.



These little diggers, infamous for the tunnels and mounds left by their handiwork in manicured lawns, are equipped with heavily muscled forequarters, shovel like feet and velvety fur that slopes backwards or forward with equal ease.

Opossums



One of the most interesting of Oregon's mammals was not even found in the state as little as 100 years ago. The opossum is North America's only member of the marsupials, a family which also includes the kangaroo of Australia.

Opossums may have been introduced into Oregon by immigrants who brought captive opossums along as future dinners. Some were released or escaped and have populated the Northwest with their descendants.

The opossum is the oldest and most primitive of living mammals. It has been virtually unchanged for 50 million years. Like all marsupials, female opossums have thirteen nipples within their pouches and plenty of room for as many young. However, like airlines, opossums sometimes overbook, and litters often number 15 or more. Thus the baby opossum's very first movement is a race for life, because a youngster who doesn't get to a nipple has a very short life indeed.

Mustellids

Mustellids include wolverine, marten, fisher, weasel, mink, badger and otter. All of these animals have well developed scent glands near the anus and are capable of spreading their scent.

Weasels combine a sleek, fluid grace with the most finely-tuned killer instinct in the animal world. The long, thin body of the weasel gives it extraordinary abilities of pursuit within underground burrows. Its unflinching energy and determination mean almost certain death for the weasel's intended victim. There are two species of weasels in Oregon, the long and short-tailed varieties. Both are famous for their curiosity, and for their ferocity. When hunting (and weasels are always hunting), the little predators attack everything up to, and including the size of rabbits.

When the weasel feels threatened, size is absolutely no object. Even humans must stand aside or risk swift and painful attacks.



Three weasel cousins, mink, marten, and fisher have adapted the typical weasel toughness and efficiency to different habitats. Mink, well known as producers of fine furs, are semi-aquatic animals. Mink spend much of their time in or near water, but are successful dry land foragers, as well. They are common throughout Oregon, but are seldom seen. Their habits, like those of the weasel, allow them to live very near civilization without discovery.



Martens and fishers have adapted to the treetops. These arboreal inhabitants have become graceful forest hunters and are capable of pursuing squirrels, their primary food source, almost anywhere the squirrels can go. On the ground, martens and fishers also pursue and kill rabbits, mountain beaver, chipmunks and voles. Martens seem to prefer dense forest. The removal of older timber stands throughout the state has altered much of their habitat and population have Unregulated trapping in the past also contributed to significant population declines. significantly declined.



Fishers are larger animals than martens and except for travel on the flimsiest of branches, are equally at home in the treetops. Fishers may be 40 inches in length and weigh up to 18 pounds. In spite of their large size, or perhaps because of it, fishers are said to be the fastest animal in the trees.



Badgers have also adapted to their own unique environment. The high desert is badger country. Badgers are low slung, almost flat bodied creatures, ideally suited for their below ground lifestyle. Badgers are one of the few large mammals that can dig fast enough to catch burrowing ground squirrels, chipmunks and marmots. Since the disappearance of wolves from Oregon, adult badgers have no serious predators other than humans.



River otters are another aquatic Oregon mustellid. Widely known as the clowns of the wilderness, river otters truly do have a well honed sense of fun and adventure. Both young and adults spend much of their time at play, wrestling or sliding into the river or just toying with a rock.

Their diet consists mainly of fish but otters will also dine on crayfish, snakes, frogs and salamanders. They rarely have much impact on trout and salmon populations, since they tend to take slower fish.

Procyonids



Ringtails, sometimes referred to as ring-tailed cats, are a cat-sized relative of the raccoon. Both are members of the procyonid family.

In Oregon, ringtails are found only in the southwestern corner, where they inhabit rocky, broken terrain. Ringtails are renowned for their gymnastic skill. Their ability to rotate their hind feet 180 degrees to the rear allows ringtails exceptional leverage in the vertical climbs and descents that are so important in their habitat.



Raccoons are not nearly so athletic as their ring-tailed cousins but what they lack in grace and power, raccoons more than make up for in cunning and aggressiveness. Raccoons are common camp visitors and are not reluctant to put their famous black masks to use as burglars. The dexterity in their forepaws is surprising, and they are known to lift hatches and open gates to let themselves into houses and barns.

With the exception of a few bad tasting salamanders, raccoons eat almost everything else smaller than themselves, aquatic or terrestrial, alive or dead. Unfortunately, their diet sometimes also includes domestic chickens and ducks; a feeding habit that does not endear them to ranchers and farmers.

The raccoon's inherent intelligence and cute, good-natured disposition as a youngster often convinces people to take the young animals home. This is invariably a mistake.

The mother is rarely far away from the youngster and would like to have it back. Also, raccoons do not maintain their cheery outlook forever. An adult coon has a mind of its own and is often quick to remind people around that it is the boss. (Links to other raccoon site

<http://museum.nhm.uga.edu/WLG/racoon.html>
<http://www.loomcom.com:80/raccoons/>
<http://infoweb.magi.com/~cfhs/racoon.htm>)

Mephitids



There are two skunk species found in Oregon. The spotted skunk is smaller than the striped skunk and supposedly more graceful, although both are stiff legged and flat-footed, making it difficult to see how the term graceful could apply to either.

Skunks are shy, unassuming animals that will avoid trouble if possible. Woe to the foolish creature who interprets their shyness as weakness, for a miserable few days awaits. Skunks have perfected the art of musk gland marksmanship, with which they can hit a moving target at up to 20 feet. Skunks will always give advance warning, growling and stamping their front feet in a mildly humorous fashion while adjusting their aim. They will finally fire if forced, and at that point the situation will no longer be humorous at all.

Skunk spray, a mild poison that looks like milk in its liquid form, can temporarily blind and incapacitate its victims. It has remarkable staying power and requires major chemical treatment over an extended period of time to overcome its effects. Meanwhile, the recipient of a skunk's attention will not be popular with friends.

Skunks are primarily nocturnal and will occasionally raid chicken houses. Their overall value is very positive, however, since the biggest part of their diet consists of insects and small rodents.

It is difficult to imagine an animal less similar to the stodgy, flat-footed skunk than its distant mustellid cousin, the weasel.

Canines

The onslaught of civilization has had a negative, if not disastrous effect on many of the animals native to the Pacific Northwest. The wolf and grizzly bear have disappeared; some other animal populations have shrunk to fractions of their previous levels. Not all animals are so drastically affected by man's influence, however. Bear and cougar seem to be adapting to living around people. Other species, like the coyote, have found man's presence an advantage.



Coyotes benefited from people in two ways. First, people eliminated enemy and the only animals that could consistently hunt it with success. Second, human development of buildings, canals, waste products and domestic livestock provided the ultra adaptable coyote with shelter and an abundance of food.

Coyotes are active day and night when away from civilization; near civilization they adopt a more nocturnal lifestyle. They are extremely intelligent and one of the most destructive animals in the United States. They cause heavy losses of livestock in Oregon each year, and as a result, receive much attention from trappers, farmers and ranchers. Their native intelligence serves them well, however, and coyotes are considered one of the most difficult of mammals to trap.

Not only are coyote feeding habits economically painful to humans, but they can decimate certain populations of wildlife as well. Studies show that at times of low rabbit populations, coyotes may kill 70 percent or more of the antelope young in parts of eastern Oregon. In some areas, under the right conditions, coyotes have had a significant impact on mule deer fawn survival as well.

Opportunists that they are, coyotes are willing to eat anything that is available. However, 95 percent of a normal diet consists of rats, mice, rabbits and a few birds. More than any other carnivore, coyotes help maintain optimum levels of rodents. While the coyote's presence is easy to condemn, its loss would have serious repercussions on the natural balance of predators and prey.



Foxes are also well represented in Oregon, though they are more secretive than the coyotes, and thus less often seen. The red fox is a graceful and beautiful animal. It is also blessed with an intelligence that has made its name synonymous with cunning and cleverness.

Red foxes make special use of their bushy tails. Their tails act as a counter-weight in the rapid changes of direction and speed common to fox movement.

Their tails also serve as blankets; during bitter cold nights, foxes curl their tails around and over their otherwise exposed noses and foot pads. Foxes also use their tails as shields in a fight, thrusting them into the faces of attackers while biting and slashing from behind it.



Gray foxes are smaller than red foxes but cover much the same territory in Oregon. They are unique in their ability and willingness to climb trees. Gray foxes climb trees not just as an escape mechanism but also to hunt and to rest. When branches are available, gray foxes will jump from one to another in their climb, but they are also capable of shinnying up branch-less trunks for some distance.



Kit foxes are smaller than their cousins and much fewer in number. These big eared residents of southeastern Oregon deserts have also been called swift foxes, for their lightning fast, short bursts of speed. Kit foxes are not suspicious animals and are easily trapped and poisoned. Previous coyote control efforts may be responsible for drastically reduced kit fox numbers. Ironically, coyotes may now be a primary factor at keeping the remnant populations at very low levels.

Management

Management of small carnivorous mammals involves a number of different programs and approaches. Otters and mink require riparian habitat, the protection and development of which has received increased emphasis in recent years. Badgers need untilled soil, a seemingly simple commodity that is actually becoming more difficult to find.

Fishers and martens need expanses of mature timber and consistent source of prey. In general, the management of small mammals, like their larger cousins, revolves around the preservation of adequate, supportive habitat.

Coyotes, on the other hand, seem capable of surviving, and multiplying, even in the face of shrinking natural habitat. Raccoons, shrews and moles all seem adaptable enough to maintain a healthy population base for the foreseeable future, while the opossum's incredible tenacity may yet earn for it the title of Oregon's number one pest.

Did You Know?

The fisher's large size gives it a broad choice of prey. In addition to the small mammals that the marten pursues, fishers make a regular diet of porcupines.

Opossums are omnivorous and though their lack of speed keeps them from being an efficient predator, they are very capable of decimating a family of nesting pheasants, ducks, or quail at night when the birds are helpless. They have 50 teeth, more teeth than any other living mammal.

River otters are usually found near water, but they can travel widely over land as well. They use a steady arch-backed lope that can eat up long distances.

Shrews are so high-strung that captive shrews have died of heart attacks due to loud noises nearby.

Opossums may be the most famous for the behavior named in their honor. Humans interpret playing possum as a farce in which one pretends to be dead. In the opossum, though, it is a chemical reaction brought on by intense fear that results in a temporary paralysis.

Both weasel species have earned the wrath of farmers and ranchers for their occasional bloody forays into chicken coops. Weasels actually seem to kill for fun.

Ringtails were once widely known as "miner's cats" because 19th Century prospectors would tame the young and keep them in cabins as mousers.

Raccoon is derived from the Latin word for "washer", and for years it was thought that raccoons always washed their food either out of a sense of cleanliness or because they needed the water's lubrication. Recent studies have indicated that the washing motion is simply a reflex.

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