



## MAMMALS OF THE EASTERN SIERRA

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The Eastern Sierra encompasses a wide range of habitats and climates, challenging all local wildlife with extreme environmental conditions. Unlike birds, who can migrate with seasonal conditions, mammals often remain year-round in the same habitat, adopting strategies that enable them to survive changing conditions and seasons. Following are descriptions of mammals common to the Eastern Sierra. For more information, explore *references* at the end of this section.

### **Black bear (*Ursus americanus*)**



The black bear is the only native bear remaining in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range since grizzly bears were hunted to extinction around 1925. Despite their name, black bears are often brown or cinnamon to blonde in color, frequently with a white blaze on their chest. They are good swimmers and climbers who can run up to 35 mph, but they normally move in a slow, lumbering fashion. Mature adults usually weigh from 200 to 300 pounds, with some males weighing as much as 600 pounds.

Black bears are crepuscular – active during the early morning and evening – although they can be active during the day or night. Mainly vegetarian, black bears supplement their diet with insects, grubs, fish, small mammals, and carrion. Bears do not truly hibernate. Unless food is abundant, however, they will sleep through winter in hollow, downed trees or caves.



To help keep these powerful animals safe and prevent unwanted encounters that often result in damaged property, all food should be carefully stored and kept out of sight. Black bears regularly scavenge for food in campgrounds and backcountry campsites, and have been known to break into cars and retrieve properly hung backpacks and food caches. Once bears become habituated to humans and human food, they often become dangerous and must either be killed or relocated.

For more information on food storage regulations in campgrounds and the backcountry, visit the Mammoth Lakes branch of the U.S. Forest Service online at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/inyo>

### Coyote (*Canis latrans*)



The coyote is a member of the canine family (Canidae), which includes dogs, foxes, and wolves. Their Latin name, *Canis latrans*, means “barking dogs,” referring to a special yip or howl that is different from dogs and wolves. Like wolves, however, coyotes often “sing” together. Courtship may last for many months before mating occurs in the fall, and pairs may bond for several years. Coyotes usually weigh between 20 and 35 pounds and are great swimmers. They walk on their toes, a gait that increases speed, and can run up to 40 mph and leap 14 feet.



Coyotes are normally scavengers, but often hunt birds, rodents and other small creatures, including domestic cats and small dogs. They can be social animals, hunting in packs for large prey, depending on the season and the availability of food. Keen hearing and a sharp sense of smell help coyotes adapt easily to changes in their environment, allowing them to range through all elevations and habitats of the Eastern Sierra. It is important to keep food, trash, and pets away from coyotes to help protect these wild animals.

### Mountain lion (*Felis concolor*)

Territorial by nature, mountain lions are powerful and solitary predators. They commonly hunt day and night in undisturbed areas, but tend to hunt only at night in populated areas to avoid human contact. Deer make up the majority of their diet and they will migrate with deer herds to ensure a constant food source, although they also eat coyotes, raccoons, mice, marmots, hares, and domestic pets. They are good climbers and excellent jumpers, able to leap more than 20 feet. Their range once extended throughout the United States, but due to human population pressures and loss of habitat, they now commonly live only in western states and southern Florida.



Protection of mountain lions has helped increase their population, but it has also resulted in more human-lion confrontations. Mountain lions will normally avoid humans, but they are dangerous and contact should never be attempted with these wild predators. Traveling with at least one other person in lion country is advised, and never run from these cats. Instead, shout and try to look as large as possible while slowly backing away.

### Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*)

Like the mountain lion, bobcats are solitary predators, active day and night. These small cats are long-legged with a stubby tail, short ear tufts, and long cheek fur framing their face. Bobcats subsist mainly on rabbits and hares, lying in wait to capture their prey, and prefer forest edges or shrubby understories in montane forests, pinyon-juniper woodlands, and riparian woodlands (see *Plant Communities of the Eastern Sierra*). Bobcats are more tolerant of human disturbance than mountain lions and their distribution has not changed greatly from their historic range.



### Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)



Two subspecies of mule deer are native to the Eastern Sierra, the Rocky Mountain mule deer and the black-tailed deer. The Rocky Mountain mule deer is more common on eastern slopes. They often occur in small herds in the mountains and foothills, but disperse in the summer during fawning season. In the winter, they migrate to lower elevations to escape heavy snows and find food. Mule deer mainly feed upon

herbaceous plants and grasses in the summer and twigs of juniper and sage in the winter. Today mule deer populations are managed mostly by hunting permits in the fall to help maintain a balance between herd size and available forage.

### Long-tailed weasel (*Mustela frenata*)

The long-tailed weasel has brown fur on its back and a white to yellow belly. Their tail is brown with a black tip, equal in size to its head and body length. This fierce predator is diurnal (active mainly during the day) and mainly feeds on voles, chipmunks, birds, and occasionally insects. They use dens which have been abandoned by other small mammals, such as chipmunks and squirrels, to provide shelter and raise their young. Within the den, weasels build nests from the hair of their prey. Long-tailed weasels have a variety of sounds or vocalizations, including squeals or screeches that communicate excitement, and purring that indicates contentment.



### Pine marten (*Martes americana*)



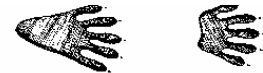
A relative of the long-tailed weasel, the pine marten is brownish in color with a pale brown belly, orange throat patch, and long bushy tail. They are active in the early morning, late afternoon, and at night, traversing a home range of five to 15 square miles. Spending most of their time foraging for food, their diet includes rodents, insects, and conifer seeds. Pine martens have few enemies other than humans and larger predators. They are easy to catch and their desirable pelt has led to their extinction in many areas. Lumber industries have

also threatened habitat and reduced their population. Today, the pine marten is protected and is making a comeback in many areas.

### Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*)



Raccoons are easily identified by a mask of black fur around the eyes and black-ringed tail on an otherwise grayish-brown body. They eat a variety of foods, including fish, amphibians, insects, birds, mice, nuts, berries, and vegetation. Chiefly nocturnal (active mainly at night), raccoons are commonly sighted in suburban areas foraging for an easy meal. They are highly intelligent and have a variety of vocalizations, including cries, whistles, growls, and screeches. A



relative of bears, raccoons also become inactive during the colder winter months, living off fat reserves accumulated in the summer.

### Porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*)

The porcupine is the only mammal in the United States and Canada bearing quills, which are stiff, enlarged hairs covered with barbs that hook toward the base of the shaft. The sharp quills are their primary means of defense since porcupines cannot outrun predators with their slow, lumbering gait. Their ability to climb trees, however, does deter some predators, which includes great horned owls, coyotes, bobcats, and fishers.

Porcupines are solitary animals most of the year, except for brief breeding encounters in winter when many animals may den together to stay warm. Vocal exchanges during these social events consist of whines, screeches, and grunts. Porcupines feed on conifer bark, sometimes girdling a tree and killing it. Because of this, the timber industry considers porcupines to be pests and tries to eliminate them.

### Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*)

Yellow-bellied marmots are found in alpine habitats up to 12,000 feet including talus slopes, rocky meadows, and boulder fields. Active day and night, these chubby, large ground squirrels (up to 19 inches long) are yellow-brown with white between the eyes, a yellow belly, and white-tipped hairs. Hibernating in the



winter, marmots awaken in March or April and breed from mid-March to July. With a social hierarchy based on territory, one to three females will share a mate rather than inhabit inferior territory. They feed on grasses, foliage, herbs, and insects, but are often seen begging for food in populous areas. Please help protect these wild animals by not feeding them.

### White-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendii*)



The white-tailed jackrabbit (often mistaken for the Tahoe snowshoe hare) has a buff to grey coat in the summer and an almost completely white coat (except for the tips of the ears) in the winter. They are very solitary animals and only socialize during the mating season. Mainly nocturnal, they hide most of the day, camouflaged in the snowy winter

landscape. They feed mainly on twigs, buds, and dried vegetation in the winter, and on green vegetation in the summer.



White-tailed jackrabbits are considered hares, which are larger than rabbits with longer necks, hind legs, and ears. They run rapidly, up to 70 mph, and need only sparse protection for shelter. Constantly hunted by predators, defenses include evasive running, hiding in the shelter of brush, and “freezing” in place.

### Mountain cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*)

Unlike hares, cottontail rabbits are plump and relatively slow, relying on brushy habitats to hide from predators. As a consequence of high predation rates, rabbits (and hares) have high reproductive rates, with females birthing several litters a year. The mountain cottontail is present only on the east side of the Sierra and has gray-brown fur above, white tail and underparts, a slight red-orange wash to the neck, and black whiskers. They feed mainly on grass, sagebrush, and juniper, preferring sagebrush scrub and pinyon-juniper woodland habitat (see *Plant Communities of the Eastern Sierra*).

### Squirrels and Chipmunks (family Sciuridae)

The squirrel family consists of 273 species with characteristics including dense body fur, a fully furred, often bushy tail, large ears and eyes, and good color vision. All species, except for the flying squirrel, are active during the day. Many of these cute creatures learn to beg for handouts, but please help keep them wild by not feeding them.

### Belding's ground squirrel (*Spermophilus beldingi*)



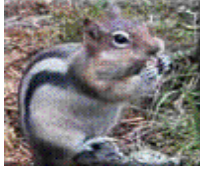
Belding's ground squirrels inhabit sub-alpine meadows and other grassy areas with short vegetation. They have a broad, brown-gray streak down their back washed with reddish brown or cinnamon that contrasts with buff or white underparts and sides. Belding's ground squirrels range in size from eight to nine inches long, with a short tail up to three inches in length.

Belding's ground squirrels hibernate for seven to eight months, one of the longest hibernations periods of any mammal in North America. They typically double their body weight by the time they go into hibernation, feeding on seeds and stems, green leaves, and bugs. The spring breeding season is very short with individual females receptive to males for only three to six hours. Courtship battles are so furious that all males receive injuries and some are killed.

Families of squirrels defend territories from rogue males and predators such as coyotes, badgers, bears, and weasels. Earth-moving vehicles present a threat, but most mortality is due to severe climatic conditions with 54% to 93% of young and 23% to 68% of adults perishing during hibernation.

### Golden-mantled ground squirrel (*Spermophilus lateralis*)

The golden-mantled ground squirrel has a buff, brown, or gray back with a white stripe bordered with black on each side. Their head and shoulders can be various shades of copper gold, giving them the nickname of “Copperhead,” but their face lacks stripes or markings of any kind, a characteristic



distinguishing them from their close relative, the chipmunk. They range in size from six to eight inches long, with a 2.5 to five inch long tail.

The golden-mantled ground squirrel has well-developed cheek pouches, allowing them to carry large amounts of seeds and nuts to their den for storage. They hibernate in the winter, occasionally waking up to feed, but the majority of their food storage is for early spring. Their diet consists of pinyon pine nuts, seeds, fruits, subterranean fungi, mushrooms, flowers, bulbs, insects, bird eggs, and carrion.

#### **Douglas' squirrel, or chickaree (*Tamiasciurus douglasii*)**

Tree squirrels, such as the Douglas' squirrel (also known as the chickaree), lack internal cheek pouches and do not hibernate like ground squirrels. The Douglas' squirrel has a dark olive brown to brown-gray back with a buff, yellow, or rusty belly. A black line runs along each side between the back and belly, and a white ring encircles the eye. They range in size from six to seven inches long, with a tail up to six inches long. These squirrels are commonly heard scolding and chattering from the safety of the trees.

The Douglas' squirrel is active all winter, feeding on stores of food. Their diet consists mainly of conifer seeds, flowers, fruits, fungi, insects, and occasionally bird nestlings. They often cut fir cones from trees and store them under soil and forest litter for later retrieval.

#### **Northern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus*)**



The northern flying squirrel does not actually "fly" among tree branches, but rather glides by outstretching loose, furred skin between the fore and hind legs. These small squirrels can glide as far as 150 feet and are identified by their dark gray backs and cream-white bellies. They range in size from five to seven inches, with a four to six inch long tail. Male and female squirrels may share a home range in the summer, but den separately. In the winter, several squirrels may share the same den, usually located in old growth conifers, a habitat threatened by logging activities. These squirrels are mainly active at night (nocturnal) and subsist on a diet of seeds, insects, meat, fungi, fruit, lichens, and mosses.

#### **Alpine chipmunk (*Tamias alpinus*)**

Alpine chipmunks are the smallest local chipmunks at six to eight inches long, and weigh only one to two ounces. Alpines are generally yellowish gray with lightly contrasting stripes giving an overall pale coloration. They live mainly at higher altitudes (8,000 feet to timberline) in lodgepole, mountain hemlock, and whitebark pine forests.



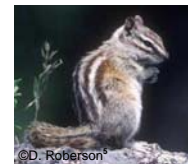
#### **Lodgepole chipmunk (*Tamias speciosus*)**



Lodgepole chipmunks are widely distributed in the Eastern Sierra, from subalpine and montane forest, to montane riparian woodland and chaparral (see *Plant Communities of the Eastern Sierra*). They are somewhat larger than alpine chipmunks at seven to 10 inches long, weighing just over two ounces. In addition to stripes, which are often lacking on the front of their head, they have spots in front of and behind their eyes and ears that are blackish in front and white behind.

#### **Least chipmunk (*Tamias minimus*)**

Least chipmunks are the second smallest local chipmunk, living in and around Jeffrey pine forests (montane forests; see *Plant Communities of the Eastern Sierra*). Adults are about 6.5 to nine inches long and weigh one to three ounces. They are the palest in color of all the western chipmunks with muted yellowish gray on their backs and sides and contrasting dark and tan stripes.



#### **Panamint chipmunk (*Tamias panamintinus*)**

Panamint chipmunks live at lower elevations in pinyon pine forests. They are brightly colored with reddish or tawny backs and gray heads, and black and brown eye stripes. Adults are 7.5 to 8.5 inches long and weigh about 1.5 to 2.5 ounces.

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