

# Gunnison area wildlife

**F**OLLOWING IS A LIST OF SPECIES OCCURRING in the Gunnison area, with descriptions, showing birds and mammals that people see on the Gunnison National Forest.

## Birds

**1 Gray Jays** (*Camp Robbers*) are common in the Gunnison Basin area. They usually fly low among the trees in coniferous woods. Often their flight is relatively slow, punctuated with bursts of soft flopping wingbeats and a sailing glide. The Gray Jay is a very social bird that spends a lot of time around campgrounds. This bird is light gray overall with dark eyes. A frequent visitor of camps, they quickly learn to associate people with food. This bird may have demonstrated to some of you how fearless or 'tame' they are and how they have earned the nickname camp robber. Gray Jays are typically noisy, gregarious, and easily observed birds.

**2 Clark's Nutcrackers** may be seen in mature mixed coniferous forests, usually near open rocky areas. They often fly around mountain slopes or perch on conspicuous trees or rocks, and they also frequent high elevation areas near treeline. This bird feeds mainly on seeds of pines. They typically cache pine seeds on southern mountain slopes, which is an important factor affecting tree distribution since many seeds are not recovered and grow into new trees. Their head, back, and underparts are pale gray and their wings are black. They also have a long, pointed black beak. Clark's Nutcrackers walk like a crow when they are on the ground, which is a good behavioral characteristic that can be used to distinguish this bird from jays (jays hop).

**3 Gunnison Sage-grouse** are an obligate of sagebrush plant communities. This species exists in 7 separate populations in southwest Colorado and southeast Utah, with the largest population (*approx. 3,600 birds*) inhabiting the Upper Gunnison Basin. The Gunnison Ranger District manages about 85,300 acres of occupied Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat, comprising almost 11% of the overall occupied habitat throughout the species' range. This species is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. *For more information and viewing opportunities please visit:*

- <http://www.siskadee.org>
- <http://www.western.edu/faculty/jyoung/gunnison-sage-grouse>
- [http://www.gunnisoncounty.org/sage\\_grouse.html](http://www.gunnisoncounty.org/sage_grouse.html)
- <http://wildlife.state.co.us/WildlifeSpecies/Profiles/Birds/Gunnisonsagegrouse.htm>
- <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/birds/gunnisonsagegrouse/>
- [http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/gfo/sage\\_grouse.html](http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/gfo/sage_grouse.html)

**Dusky Grouse** (formerly called *blue grouse*) are large upland game birds that occupy coniferous and mixed coniferous-deciduous forests. They can be difficult to see because of their excellent camouflage coloration. The male (*in courtship display*) **4** is mainly blue-gray with brown wings and a long, black tail; in courtship display the reddish air sacks are evident. The female (*in the aspen*) **5** is brown, finely barred with black.



**6 White-tailed Ptarmigan** are high altitude ground dwelling birds. They are found above treeline in alpine tundra habitat. Ptarmigans have excellent coloration to avoid detection in both winter and summer. During the summer they are a mottled brown and they blend in with lichen covered rocks and alpine vegetation. In winter they are pure white except for their black eyes and bill. Their legs and feet are feathered, which protects them from the extreme cold of the alpine winters. The photo was taken in October, which is when ptarmigan are molting and developing their winter plumage.

**MANY OTHER BIRDS**, including rufous and broad-tailed hummingbirds, mountain chickadees, brown creepers, **7 Three-toed Woodpeckers**, **8 Red-naped Sapsuckers**, and many Neotropical migrants may also be seen on the Gunnison National Forest. River and stream corridors are excellent places for birding, as aquatic habitats and associated wetlands and riparian areas support the highest diversity and numbers of birds compared to dry upland habitats.

The most common hawk seen in the Gunnison Basin area is probably the **9 Red-tailed Hawk** which may be seen soaring high in the sky or perched on the tops of conifers. Swainson's hawk and northern harrier are also commonly seen. Golden eagles may be seen year-round. The bald eagle and rough-legged hawk are winter residents in the Gunnison Basin and can be frequently spotted from Highway 135, County Road 730 (*Ohio Creek Road*), and Highway 50, often gliding or perched on trees or powerline poles. Rough-legged hawks are sometimes seen hovering in place above hay meadows or shrublands looking for prey.

In the winter, **Golden and Bald Eagles** (*a Bald Eagle is pictured on the cover*) can be spotted in the Gunnison and East River corridors and in Taylor Canyon, often soaring above the cliffs or perched on trees high among the canyon walls or along the Taylor River.

**10 Northern Goshawks** (*a juvenile is shown*) typically nest in mature aspen and lodgepole pine forests on the Gunnison National Forest.

*Here's an online bird checklist that you can use for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests:*

- [http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5172823.pdf](http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5172823.pdf)

## Mammals

**11 The Yellow-bellied Marmot** is a large, golden brown rodent with a bushy tail. They live in burrows and are frequently seen sitting on large rocks where they have a good view of intruders. When a threat appears, they sound an alarm with a loud chirp or whistle.

**12 The American Pika** is similar in shape to guinea pigs, and not much bigger than a mouse. They are brownish in color with small, rounded ears and no visible tail. The pika is a member of the rabbit family. Interestingly, pikas clip green vegetation that they spread in the sun to dry like hay. They store their 'hay' in dens deep in the rocks, which sustains them during winter. Pikas are highly vocal and social, often living in large colonies and constantly communicating with each other in shrill nasal bleats that are very distinct. Marmots and pikas are common in rocky areas such as boulder fields or talus slopes, especially above treeline in alpine areas.

**Beaver** are common in aquatic habitats. Look for beaver along streams or marshy areas, such as those depicted here **13**. Their key habitat components are water, willows and/or aspen. They live along streams where they build dams, lodges, and food caches. Through their dam building activities, beavers help improve water quality and create habitat for a large variety of aquatic organisms (*insects, fish, and amphibians*), birds, and mammals. They create water storage ponds that are often used by waterfowl. Look for beaver in the evenings swimming silently in ponds. The best time of year to observe beavers is during the fall, when they are busy caching food and preparing for winter. When disturbed, a beaver will sometimes slap the water with its tail to startle intruders.

**14 Red Squirrels** live in conifer forests and are common in lodgepole pine and spruce-fir forests. They are mostly dark brown. They are often seen scurrying through the trees and running on the ground between trees as they busily cache cones for winter. They make nests out of grass and conifer needles and position them on the limbs of conifer trees. Their nest sites are typically in the largest spruce, lodgepole or Douglas fir trees within a forest stand. Their cone cache sites are often at the base of the largest trees within a forest stand.

**15 American (Pine) Marten** are members of the weasel family. They are brownish, varying from dark brown to blond, with a paler head and underparts, darker legs, and orange or buff throat patch. Their tail is long and bushy; pointed snout; and small ears. They are similar in size to a house cat. Pine martens inhabit subalpine and montane coniferous forests, especially mature or old growth spruce-fir and lodgepole pine forests with abundant logs and dead trees. This photo was taken using a trail cam at a bait site to determine presence within an area of the Gunnison National Forest.

**16 Mule Deer** can be observed in many areas of the Gunnison Basin depending on the time of year. They are typically found in mosaics of meadows, aspen woodlands, alpine tundra, sub-alpine forest edges, or montane forest edges where they feed on browse, forbs, and grasses. During the winter mule deer are found in lower elevation areas with less snow, such as sagebrush shrublands.

**17 Rocky Mountain Elk** are found in a variety of habitats, including semi-open forests and forest edges adjacent to parks, meadows, and alpine tundra, open grassland or shrubland types and mature and old growth forests. Elk are often spotted in herds in open meadows with nearby forest for hiding cover. Expect to find elk in high elevation forested areas or alpine tundra during the summer, and lower elevation montane forests and sagebrush country during winter. Elk are light brown or tan and have a yellow rump.

**18 Moose** can be found along streams in wetland and riparian areas, typically within a spruce forest, aspen and willow thickets. Note the long, dark hair compared to the lighter-colored elk in the photo above. Other notable characteristics include the "horse like" appearance of the moose's face, and broadly flattened palmate antlers. Moose are the largest member of the deer family; they are comparable to a horse in size, and have high, slumped shoulders, long slender legs, and an inconspicuous tail.

Big cats such as **19 Canada Lynx**, bobcat and **20 Mountain Lion** are secretive and often nocturnal animals; the chance of seeing one is limited. Any sighting is a rare opportunity. Canada lynx were reintroduced to the state of Colorado by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and occur on the Gunnison National Forest in subalpine spruce-fir forests. *NOTE: 21 A Black Bear is featured on the back cover.*

# Wildlife viewing tips

**F**OR THE BEST CHANCE TO SEE WILDLIFE, LEARN THE HABITS of the species you wish to observe. Many wildlife species are *crepuscular* – active in morning and evening. There aren't many animals out in the middle of the day. So plan to be in the area that you wish to observe in the early morning or late evening for the best chance of success.

**WHEN LOOKING FOR WILDLIFE**, either from roads in the comfort of your vehicle or on foot, head for open fields, forest-meadow edges, watering holes, wetlands or riparian areas. If hiking, try to stay downwind and move through the woods along the edge of meadows. Many animals, especially deer and elk, travel during the early morning or evening hours when they are moving between the meadows where they graze and the forest where they take cover. Animals in motion are easier to spot from a distance, so you can really increase your chance of seeing wildlife when they are most active at dawn and dusk.

**RESPECT WILDLIFE.** Don't try to get too close and invade their space. Observe the animal carefully to determine at what distance it is comfortable allowing your presence. Watch for reactions such as head and ear movements. If the animal quits an activity and begins watching you or prepares for flight, you are too close. Elk and bighorn sheep often flee from long distances once they spot you, which can be from as far as a half mile to a mile away in expansive areas with little cover. In some areas and at certain times of the year big game animals may become habituated to human activity and presence when it occurs in a consistent, routine pattern; however in areas where animals are used to solitude, they are much more sensitive to human disturbance.

**ANIMALS OFTEN APPEAR GENTLE** and harmless but they can turn aggressive if they perceive themselves as threatened. Consider any animal – *particularly mothers with young* – to be unpredictable and give them and their young plenty of space.

**IF YOU BRING A DOG**, do not allow it to pursue or harass wildlife. It is against the law and with good reason. Our well-fed canine companions do what dogs love to do – following scent trails, looking for critters to chase, pounce on, play with or attack, which stresses the wildlife. Too much stress can kill the wildlife we enjoy. Wildlife may also attack pets, especially if they feel threatened or if they perceive that their young are in danger. For the best experience, please use a leash or leave your dog in the car. Doing so will avoid disturbing or displacing the wildlife you are hoping to see.



**DO NOT FEED WILDLIFE!** It is a temptation to offer tidbits to animals, but for the animal's sake, resist it. Proper nutrition for wildlife exists in nature, not in your lunch box. Human food can cause animals to become ill. Feeding increases concentrations of wildlife, which facilitates the spread of disease. Some animals, such as bears, become aggressive as the natural fear of humans disappears. You may even be bitten or attacked by the animal. For both your health and the animal's, please, do not feed wildlife.

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**21 Black Bear** are common on the Gunnison National Forest, but a chance encounter is unlikely since bears are also secretive animals. Encounters often occur in areas frequented by humans if there is a food source where bears have learned to find food, such as *camp-sites, dumpsters, or in residential areas* within or near areas inhabited by bears. Bears that have learned to find human food lose their natural fear of humans and can be very dangerous and unpredictable. The most effective way to prevent these types of conflicts is to deny them access to human food and garbage. Ensure proper food storage when camping – store food in a sack and use a rope to hang it high in a tree away from your campsite, use bear-proof food storage containers; and at home use bear proof trash cans and dumpsters.

For more information on wildlife viewing opportunities, and a variety of maps showing public and private lands, contact:

## USDA Forest Service

Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, & Gunnison National Forests  
[www.fs.usda.gov/gmug](http://www.fs.usda.gov/gmug)

### GUNNISON NATIONAL FOREST

**Gunnison Ranger District**  
 216 N. Colorado St.  
 Gunnison, CO 81230  
 PHONE: (970) 641-0471



**Paonia Ranger District**  
 403 N. Rio Grande Ave.  
 MAIL TO: P.O. Box 1030  
 Paonia, CO 81428  
 PHONE: (970) 527-4131

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# Viewing Wildlife

## on the Gunnison National Forest



Bald Eagle



Mountain Lion



# Viewing wildlife on the Gunnison Ranger District

Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests

**T**HE GUNNISON NATIONAL FOREST PROVIDES great wildlife viewing opportunities for enthusiasts. The Gunnison Valley is surrounded by high mountain peaks, many of which exceed 13,000 feet in elevation. The Taylor, East, Slate, and Gunnison Rivers wander through the Gunnison Basin offering glimpses of riparian habitat and wetlands that provides great birding and fly fishing opportunities. Lodgepole pine, aspen, Engelmann spruce-subalpine fir forests, wide mountain parks, and sagebrush shrublands provide habitat for a large variety of wildlife. The species present and the areas they can be found varies with season. So grab your binoculars and let's find some wildlife!

**BE A "CITIZEN SCIENTIST" BY DOCUMENTING AND REPORTING** your wildlife observations! Online sources for this include *iNaturalist* and *Project Noah*. If you own a smartphone such as the iPhone or Android, you can download several citizen-scientist apps for free, enabling your phone to function as a tool for exploring nature, reporting wildlife sightings, and connecting people with the natural world. Check the following websites for tools to help you connect with wildlife:

- [www.inaturalist.org](http://www.inaturalist.org)
- [www.projectnoah.org](http://www.projectnoah.org)
- [www.wildobs.com](http://www.wildobs.com)
- [www.conservationmagazine.org/2011/09/smartphone-naturalist/](http://www.conservationmagazine.org/2011/09/smartphone-naturalist/)
- [www.bear-tracker.com](http://www.bear-tracker.com) (to learn about animal tracks)
- <http://www.fs.usanpn.org>
- [http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5172823.pdf](http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5172823.pdf) (bird checklist for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests)
- <http://www.siskadee.org/view.htm> (information on Gunnison sage-grouse viewing at the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site)



**T**O REPORT SPECIES YOU SEE on the Gunnison National Forest, contact Matt Vasquez, Gunnison Ranger District wildlife biologist, at (970) 641-0471 or [mgvasquez@fs.fed.us](mailto:mgvasquez@fs.fed.us). We would love to hear from you about wildlife you are seeing on the National Forest!