

# South Dakota WILDLIFE

South Dakota's rolling plains, wooded stream bottoms and timbered hills are alive with birds and mammals. Being able to recognize wildlife species or sign of their activities can increase the pleasure of a hike in the woods, a trip to a marsh, an evening stroll or a Sunday drive. This simple brochure will help you identify and learn about some of South Dakota's wildlife.

## Northern Bobwhite (Bobwhite Quail)



Northern Bobwhites are native to southeastern and south central South Dakota, being most plentiful in the counties bordering the Missouri River. The ideal habitat for this small game bird is a combination of cultivated fields, brush and weed patches.

## Gray Partridge



Somewhat larger than a quail, the gray or Hungarian partridge, often called a "Hun," is an introduced game bird, originating in Central Europe and Asia. Adapted to more open terrain, they are abundant in farmed prairie areas of northern and eastern South Dakota. They feed on insects, small grain and weed seeds.

## Greater Prairie Chicken



The greater prairie chicken, or pinnated grouse, is native to South Dakota. These birds depend on native prairie and once ranged over much of South Dakota. The highest population now is in the south central part of the state in counties bordering the Missouri River where permanent grasslands and farming activities intermix.

## Ruffed Grouse



Least known of South Dakota grouse is the ruffed grouse, found in some areas of the Black Hills. Mature pine forests are not suitable for a good ruffed grouse population. A combination of openings, brush and aspen mixed with other trees provides the best habitat. Ruffed grouse are well known for the territorial "drumming" of the male.

## Sage Grouse



Largest of the North American grouse, adult males weigh from six to eight pounds, females about half that. Sage grouse are native to the sagebrush flats of northwestern South Dakota. While young birds eat insects and seeds, mature grouse feed on sage leaves. Lacking a gizzard, sage grouse use strong stomach acids to help digest their food. Elimination of sage, which it also uses as cover, has contributed to declining populations.

## Sharp-tailed Grouse



Sharptails are true natives of the original South Dakota grasslands. Their primary range now is the counties immediately west of the Missouri River. Sharptails are most abundant in quality grassland and brushy cover areas. In size and appearance, the sharptail resembles the prairie chicken. The short, pointed tail, from which it gets its name, and the erect head feathers distinguish the sharptail from the similar-sized prairie chicken. Sharptails lack the pinnate feathers found on the prairie chicken's neck.

## Ring-necked Pheasant



First introduced in South Dakota in the 1890s, the ringneck, found throughout the state in suitable habitat, is most at home in eastern and south central counties. Suitable ringneck cover includes weed patches, sloughs, dense nesting cover and tree belts near cropland. The male, with a white neck ring, is distinguished from the hen by its brilliant plumage. The pheasant is South Dakota's state bird and is the state's most sought after game species.

## Wild Turkey



South Dakota has three subspecies of turkeys. The Merriam's turkey was first introduced into the Black Hills in 1948. In 1963, Rio Grande turkeys were released into the river bottom habitats of eastern and central counties. Eastern turkeys have also now been introduced in north-eastern South Dakota. Turkeys thrive in mixed woods that are well interspersed with open areas. Turkeys wander great distances and require large areas of suitable habitat.

## Mourning Dove



The state's most abundant game bird, doves, are as much at home in residential areas as they are in woodlands and fields. Like waterfowl, most doves migrate to southern climates in the fall and return to nest in the spring. Doves are vegetarians and opportunists. They eat the seeds of grasses, forbs and crops as they ripen, changing their feeding habits, as different foods become available.

## Waterfowl



Ducks and geese have always been associated with the wetlands of South Dakota. Many species of puddle ducks nest near potholes and ponds across the state. Diving ducks, including the uncommon canvasback, nest in the natural potholes of northeastern South Dakota. Giant Canada geese nest on waters in western and northern South Dakota. Waterfowl nesting in Canada pass through the state during migration, stopping to loaf in wetlands and to feed on agricultural waste grain. Rare trumpeter swans nest in and around Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge in Bennett County.

## Raptors



There are 28 raptor species found in South Dakota, which include various species of owls, hawks, falcons and eagles. Most owls are nocturnal birds of prey and hunt in open areas targeting rodents and other mammals. Some animals hunt from perches in forested habitat. Some small owls nest in tree cavities. Most owls don't build nests; they use the nest of other birds or no nest at all. Hawks and falcons are diurnal birds of prey that eat birds, rodents and other small mammals. They hover close to open ground, circle overhead dropping down in a steep dive when hunting prey, or hunt from a perch. Hawks and falcons are found in forest and grassland areas or cliff edges. Bald eagles are also diurnal birds of prey that primarily eat fish and are found in trees in riparian areas. Golden eagles nest locally in western South Dakota on cliffs and occasionally in large trees.

## Other Birds



Ornithologists have recorded 414 bird species within South Dakota. Woodland species occur in cities, shelterbelts, woodlands and wooded river valleys. Grassland birds are abundant in prairie areas and fields statewide. Several pine forest/mountain species frequent the Black Hills. The Missouri

River roughly outlines the western-most boundary of eastern U.S. species and the eastern boundary of western birds.

## Elk



A herding animal, the Rocky Mountain elk once ranged over most of South Dakota. Wild elk are now found only in the Black Hills and a few other locations in western South Dakota. Elk are grazers like cattle and browsers like deer. Adult bulls grow heavy widespread antlers in summer and shed them in late winter.

## White-tailed Deer



White-tails are the most common big game animal in South Dakota. Nearly exterminated by settlers in the 1800s, these deer have made a spectacular comeback. Mainly a creature of the brushlands, the white-tail has adapted to changing conditions. Today it is common throughout the eastern farmlands as well as in the rough breaks, prairies and timbered regions of western South Dakota, including the Black Hills. As its name implies, the white-tail has white hair on the underside of its tail. When the animal runs, the tail is flipped up, looking like a flag which can be seen at long distances. Bucks develop and shed antlers each year.

## Mule Deer



Large-eared mule deer are found in the prairie lands of central and western South Dakota and the foothills of the Black Hills. Its tail - narrow, short and black-tipped - is carried down when running. Mule deer bound with a stiff-legged gait as if bouncing up and down on powerful springs. The bucks' tall, wide antlers are shed each winter. A mule deer's antlers are dichotomous, meaning that they have two symmetrical forks on each antler. A white-tails antlers have prongs off one main antler beam.

## Pronghorn (Antelope)



Pronghorns are native to the prairies of South Dakota. When pioneers settled the plains, the pronghorn population was reduced to near extinction. The name pronghorn comes from the large prong projecting from the horns of the male antelope. The smaller horn of the female lacks the prong. The pronghorn is neither an antelope nor a goat, but is the only remaining species of a hoofed mammal family that originated in North America. Pronghorns possess remarkable endurance and can run 40 miles per hour for some distance.

## Bison



The American bison, commonly called buffalo, once roamed by the millions over North America, but unrestrained slaughter for hides, meat and sport in the 1800s nearly exterminated this huge symbol of the West. Its bulky head, high shoulder hump and long, shaggy hair covering the shoulders and front legs characterize the well-known profile of this animal. Mature buffalo develop long beards, which are especially distinctive on the bulls. Both sexes have small, curved horns.

## Bighorn Sheep



The Audubon bighorn, South Dakota's original wild sheep, became extinct about 1920. A herd of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep was introduced in 1959 from Colorado to the Custer State Park area. Bighorns have also been released in the Badlands. The bighorn has a sturdy but graceful build. Its coat, usually gray or dark brown, consists of short hair, not wool. Both rams and ewes have horns; the males' grow to thick, massive curls.

## Mountain Goat



Until stocked in the Black Hills in 1924, the Rocky Mountain goat was never found in South Dakota. Today's herd, found in the central Hills, particularly near Harney Peak and Needles Highway, originated from several animals that escaped from a pen in Custer State Park. The mountain goat is actually a mountain antelope and not a true goat. The all-white animals grow dense wool undercoats and long outer coats of hair. Both sexes have sharp, slender, black horns.

## Mountain Lion



Mountain lions are usually tawny to light cinnamon in color with black-tipped ears and tail. They vary in size and weight, with males being larger than females. Lions are most active from dusk to dawn, although they do travel and hunt in daylight. Their primary prey is deer and elk; however, they will prey on livestock and household pets if given the opportunity. They inhabit sparsely populated areas where deer are plentiful. Most mountain lions are found west of the Missouri River, primarily in the Black Hills.

## Opossum



The omnivorous opossum is a gray housecat-sized mammal with a pointed nose, short legs and naked, scaly tail. The long, gray fur is actually a mixture of black, gray and white hairs. The animal is nocturnal spending days denning in a deserted squirrel's nest, hollow log or hole in the ground. The opossum is the only marsupial in North America, and the female carries and nurses her young in a pouch.

## Raccoon



The nocturnal raccoon is a stocky animal easily recognized by its black mask and ringed, bushy tail. Ideal habitat for raccoons consists of woods with a stream, lake or pond nearby. The omnivorous raccoon spends a great deal of time along waterways in search of food.

## Weasels



A weasel is a very slender, short-legged, small carnivore with a flattened head, beady eyes and stubby, round ears. Weasels are chiefly nocturnal, preying on small animals such as mice. South Dakota is home to the long-tailed weasel, found statewide, the short-tailed weasel, found in the Black Hills and northeast counties, and the least weasel, found over the eastern two thirds of the state. The fur of all three turns white in the winter.

## Mink



The mink is one of the best-known members of the weasel family. The color of its fur ranges from tawny blond to rich chocolate brown. Mink typically live in riparian habitat bordering waterways where a variety of food can be found year-round. Fish, frogs, crayfish, mice, rabbits, muskrats and birds are part of the varied diet of this nimble, nocturnal predator.

## River Otter



The river otter is part of the weasel family and has similar habits to other weasels. Their waterproof fur is brown to dark brown above and silvery below. They have large nostrils and small ears that are easily seen above water while swimming. The otters long body and tail, which is about 1/3 of the body length, grow three to five feet. Otters inhabit rivers, creeks and wetlands and use dens created by other animals, such as beavers, for shelter. They eat fish throughout the year and supplement their diet with crayfish, mussels and amphibians during warm seasons. The river otter is cur-

rently a state protected animal and is distributed in extreme eastern South Dakota, primarily along the Big Sioux River.

#### Skunks



Of the two species of skunks in South Dakota, the striped skunk is by far the most common. The other, the spotted, is often called the civet cat. Members of the weasel family, skunks are mainly nocturnal. The striped skunk is a housecat-sized animal with a broad, low-slung body. Its small, wedge-shaped head sports small, round ears, typical of the weasel family. The civet cat is about half its size. Both have long, black fur with white markings, principally on their backs.

#### Badger



This odd-looking member of the weasel family makes its home in dry, open country throughout South Dakota. The badger's coarse pepper-gray fur grows long on the sides, adding to the animal's flat, low-slung appearance. A distinctive white stripe extends from the nose to its powerful shoulders. Digging for rodents is the badger's chief occupation. Its forelegs are short, thick and tremendously strong. Large, heavy claws complete its efficient soil-moving apparatus. Badgers are most active during darkness.

#### Fox



South Dakota has three fox species: the red, the gray and the swift. The red fox is most at home where small patches of timber are interspersed with pastures, rangeland and farmland. Not all red foxes are red. Black, silver and cross-fox (red-brown with a black cross on the shoulders) are color mutations which may show up in any red fox litter. Found occasionally in South Dakota, the gray fox prefers wooded habitat. Only rarely will it be encountered in rolling farmland and fields. It's unique in the dog family in its ability to climb trees. The rare and protected swift fox is primarily found in southwestern South Dakota. About the size of a housecat, swift fox decreased with the settling of the Great Plains and experienced increased competition from red fox. However, swift fox were reintroduced in central South Dakota in the fall of 2002.

#### Coyote



The adaptable coyote hunts the open prairies and fields over the entire state, but occurs in greatest numbers along the Missouri River and its tributaries and in the Black Hills. While coyotes prefer small mammals as food, they'll eat insects, fruits and berries in the summer. The coyote is gray with a pointed nose and drooping bushy tail. The coyote is also the state animal.

#### Bobcat



A six-inch tail gives the bobcat its name and sets it apart from all other American cats except its northern cousin, the Canada lynx. The bobcat's buff-colored fur is spotted with black. Rough, broken country is the bobcat's habitat. The cedar breaks of the Missouri River and West River streams and the Black Hills have the highest numbers of bobcats. Home for these nomads is usually some rock crevice or gumbo washout near an abundant supply of cottontails or jackrabbits.

#### Marmots



Two marmots, the woodchuck and the yellow-bellied marmot, live in South Dakota. The woodchuck is now found in most of the eastern third of South Dakota and is quite

common in the southeast. The yellow-bellied marmot inhabits the Black Hills. Both are large, ground-dwelling rodents with broad heads, low ears, short legs and short, flattened tails. They feed on grasses during the day.

#### Pocket Gophers



South Dakota is home to the plains pocket gopher and the northern pocket gopher. Although they are seldom seen above ground, their presence is easily detected by the mounds of dirt they push out from their tunnels. Their bodies, sporting powerful front legs and large claws for digging, are designed for an underground existence.

#### Ground Squirrels



The vegetarian ground squirrels, mistakenly called gophers, spend as much as three fourths of their lives underground asleep. South Dakota has four species called ground squirrels plus the black-tailed prairie dog, which is also a ground squirrel. The thirteen-lined ground squirrel, occurring statewide, is the most common. It has broken stripes on its sides and back. The Richardson's, found in the northeastern South Dakota, has no spots or stripes. The Franklin's, inhabiting eastern South Dakota, is the largest and darkest and also has no spots or stripes. The small spotted ground squirrel has distinct square spots of white on its back. It is restricted to the Sandhill country of southwest South Dakota.

#### Black-tailed Prairie Dog



The black-tailed prairie dog inhabits the dry upland prairie areas of western and central South Dakota. These rodents live in large social groups called towns. The conical mound of dirt, which surrounds each prairie dog hole, helps keep rainwater from running into the burrow and provides an observation post from which the dogs can watch for danger. Prairie dogs are vegetarians, eating grasses and forbs that grow near the colony.

#### Chipmunks



The alert, nervous chipmunk is a small, ground inhabiting squirrel with a flattened and hairy, but not bushy, tail. It has a striped back and upper sides. Two chipmunk species live in South Dakota: the eastern chipmunk in northeastern counties and the smaller least chipmunk in the Black Hills and Badlands. These rodents eat seeds and insects.

#### Tree Squirrels



South Dakota has four species of these active, bushy-tailed tree squirrels: fox, gray, red and northern flying. Fox squirrels, which weigh about two pounds, are found nearly everywhere in South Dakota except the Black Hills and less commonly in the west. They occupy almost any kind of wooded area, including shelterbelts. Its hair is a rusty brown. The eastern gray squirrel, slightly smaller than the fox squirrel, lives in the hardwood forests in northeastern and southeastern counties. Its hair is gray. The small red, or pine, squirrel is found in the conifer forests of the Black Hills. The northern flying squirrel can't really fly, but it does glide on hair-covered skin stretched along each side from front to back legs. The flying squirrel lives in the Black Hills, but because it is nocturnal, it is seldom seen.

#### Porcupine



Porcupines are the second largest rodent of the northern Great Plains. The short-legged mammal appears pigeon-toed and bowlegged when walking. They have sharp, barbed quills about 3 inches long on their back, sides, legs and tail which are used as a defensive mechanism to

ward off predators. Porcupines often inhabit coniferous forests or habitat with abundant vegetation. They are primarily nocturnal mammals, but it is not unusual to see them during the day. They are found in much of the western South Dakota as well as a few counties east of the Missouri River.

#### Beaver



The beaver is a rotund, heavyset rodent with a flat scaled, paddle-shaped tail and webbed hind feet. Beaver live in lakes and streams, often building dams of sticks, mud and stones. Family groups of these water engineers live in burrows dug in the bank or in large cone-shaped stick houses they build in ponds.

#### Muskrat



Muskrats look like a pint-sized version of the beaver, but its long, thin, naked tail is flattened on the sides instead of the top and bottom. Muskrats spend most of their lives in water, visiting shore to preen, sunbathe and feed on grain crops. Roots and tubers of marsh vegetation are the muskrat's main food supply. A typical den in a pond or stream is a burrow in the side of a steep bank or dam grade. Marsh-dwelling muskrats build mounds of mud and vegetation.

#### Jackrabbits



The jackrabbit, which is actually a hare, sports long ears and powerful hind legs with which it escapes its enemies, running as fast as 30-40 miles per hour and clearing 17 feet in a leap. The larger, more common white-tailed jackrabbit is found statewide. The black-tailed jackrabbit is found in south central counties.

#### Cottontail Rabbits



The dark gray cottontail is found throughout South Dakota in shelterbelts, woodlots and stream bottomlands. Three cottontail species are found in South Dakota. The desert cottontail lives in stream bottomlands of western South Dakota. The mountain cottontail is found in the Black Hills and along the Little Missouri River. The eastern cottontail occurs over much of the state.

#### Black-footed Ferret



This native ferret, historically never abundant, is one of the rarest mammals in North America. It inhabits prairie dog towns, using old burrows as denning sites and using prairie dogs as food. Black-footed ferrets have been successfully reintroduced in the Badlands, Buffalo Gap National Grassland and the Cheyenne River Reservation. The ferret has black feet, a black mask across its face and a black-tipped tail. The remaining coloration is a variation of light tans.

#### Bats



Bats are often mistakenly referred to as rodents, but they are not rodents. They are Chiropterans meaning hand + wing; the wing structure appears as greatly enlarged hands. Bats generally have dark brown wing membranes and short brown or gray fur making it difficult to distinguish between species. There are 12 bat species in South Dakota: three tree-roosting species, eight multi-habitat species and one cave-roosting species. Tree-roosters inhabit trees and include the silver-haired, hoary and red bats. Multi-habitat roosters inhabit buildings, trees, caves, mines and crevices and include the northern and little brown myotis, big brown bat, long-legged and long-eared myotis, evening bat and fringe-tailed and western small-footed myotis. Cave-roosters inhabit caves or mines and include Townsend's big-eared bat. South Dakota's bats eat beetles, moths, mosquitoes and other agricultural pests.

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South Dakota Department of  
Game, Fish and Parks