

# Wildlife Observation

Viewing wildlife in its natural habitat can be a wonderful and educational experience. Although tempting to try to get close enough to interact with wild animals, it is important to remember that their behavior can be unpredictable and aggressive. Thus, it is always best to view all wildlife from a safe and respectful distance, remembering that wild animals are just that - wild.

It is also tempting to feed a wild animal. It seems like such an innocent and harmless thing. But feeding wild animals can have deadly consequences for them and can place people in real danger. That's why feeding wildlife in national parks and refuges is illegal. In many states, feeding certain wild animals is punishable by fines and/or imprisonment. These concepts apply to aquatic as well as terrestrial animals.

We have developed a list of "viewing tips" that can help you have a safe and enjoyable experience with wildlife while protecting our natural animal resources and developed the following golden rules for watching wildlife, especially marine mammals:

## Respect the Wild in Wildlife

- **Keep your distance.** Generally, try to remain a safe and respectful distance of 100 yards from animals. Use binoculars or zoom lenses to get a close-up look.
- If on the water, avoid excessive boat speed or abrupt changes in speed or direction. Stay fully clear of a dolphin's, whale's, or manatee's path. Endangered manatees have been sliced by propellers when boaters ignore speed limits. If approached by these animals, put the engine in neutral and allow it to pass.
- If on land, observe animals such as seals or sea lions that are "hauled out" without alerting them to your presence. The pups of seals and sea lions have been trampled by adult animals startled by disruptive tourists.
- **Limit time spent observing animals.** Encounters with people can be stressful to animals and can alter their normal behaviors. Half an hour is reasonable. Chances are you haven't been the only one to approach the animal that day.
- **Stay clear of mothers with young.** Nests, dens, and rookeries are especially vulnerable to human disturbance. Never herd, chase, or separate a mother from its young or try to handle pups.
- Resist the temptation to "save" animals, especially "orphans." Mom is usually watching from a safe distance. If an animal appears sick, get professional help by calling animal control officers or, if appropriate, a local zoo or aquarium.
- **Never surround an animal.** Always leave an escape route. Dolphins, whales, and manatees should not be trapped between boats, or between boats and shore.
- **Keep pets on a leash or leave them at home.** Both pets and wild animals can be hurt if bitten. There is also danger of disease transmission.
- **Don't litter.** Leave a habitat better than you found it. When enjoying nature and watching wild animals, carry along a trash bag and pick up litter when you see it.
- And, most importantly, Don't feed wild animals.

## Wild animals fed by people can:

- **Get "hooked" on handouts.** They can lose their ability to find and catch their own food. For example, dolphins that become dependent on humans have been known to abandon their young, leaving calves alone to starve and fight off predators. Young dolphins that have not been taught to forage naturally are at the most risk.
- **Associate people with food and lose their fear of people.** Wild marine mammals that are unafraid of people are more likely to endanger themselves by approaching boats or spending time in areas with high vessel traffic.
- **Destroy the environment or cause property destruction.** Wild sea lions that have been fed by people have hauled out on docks and into boats, doing damage as they search for food.

- **Become aggressive towards people.** Feeding causes wild animals to change their natural behavior. Wild dolphins and sea lions that have become accustomed to being fed have charged, bitten, and otherwise injured people.
- **Become more likely to eat trash and debris.** Eating plastic wrappers or other litter can harm an animal's digestive tract or lead to its death.

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In late May and June dragonflies emerge in large numbers on the refuge. There are many species ranging in colors from bright blue, to green and red, that delight visitors. Why not give dragonfly watching a chance? Sometimes these friendly insects will even hitch a ride on your shirt!

### Tips for seeing wildlife:

- **Take your time.** The people who see the most take time to stop and look, are alert, and are quiet.
- **Listen.** One of the best ways to find an animal is to hear it first. Many animals are camouflaged very well and it takes a while to see them. If you hear their call you can get an approximate location, then look.
- **Watch for movement.** Because they are so well camouflaged sometimes the best way to see an animal is to watch for movement. Whether it is a tree rustling when there is no breeze, a flicker of movement out of the corner of your eye, or some other signal, many times movement will betray a hidden animal.
- **Timing.** Plan your trip based on what you would like to see. If you want to see migratory birds, come in the spring or fall. If you would like to see loons, swans, or other resident wildlife, the best time to visit is late spring, summer, or early fall.
- **Dawn and dusk are the best times to view wildlife.** Remember many parks and refuges are only open during daylight hours.
- **Don't forget your binoculars or spotting scopes.** If you don't have binoculars, ask around for a pair you can borrow.
- **Look for signs of animals.** Search for tracks, missing bark on trees, burrows, scat, and other signs animals have been in the area.
- **Look in edge habitats.** These are areas between different types of habitats, for example where the plants meet the water, treetops, or where the forest and meadow meet. These areas are wonderful places for wildlife.
- **Looking for a specific type of animal, do a little research** and find out where they like to live. This can help you find the right spot to search.
- **Do not disturb a wild animal!** Wild animals are unpredictable and will defend themselves if they feel threatened.
- **Be patient!**

### Wildlife Observation Tools

items to assist with wildlife observation including:

- |  |                       |
|--|-----------------------|
| • Binoculars   | • Backpacks for youth |
| • Close-focus binoculars for getting a good look at insects like butterflies and dragonflies | • Snowshoes           |
| • Field guides   | • Fishing poles       |
|  | • Tackle boxes        |

### Natural Habitat Defined

A natural habitat is an ecological or environmental area where a specific species lives. It is the place in nature that particular species calls home. To help picture what this means, think of a zoo. The developers of a zoo need to study where a specific animal lives so that they can replicate the animal's natural habitat. Chimpanzees, for example, are placed among trees from which they can swing and search for food. Plants and

other organisms all have natural habitats as well. Let's discuss some of the different types of natural habitats and the species that reside in them.

## Types of Natural Habitats

There are many different types of natural habitats. Different species have adapted to the different habitats over time. A species comes to rely on its specific natural habitat for resources that include a place to mate, a place to raise their young, and food. The two factors that really drive a habitat are temperature and precipitation.

### Forests

A forest is a type of habitat that has a dense population of trees. There are forests all over the world and many diverse species live inside this type of habitat. In order for a forest to survive, it needs to have a water source that will support the large number of trees.



Tropical rainforests are just one type of forest. While they cover only 7% of the Earth, they are home to more than 50% of all plant and animal species. There is an abundance of water, year-round high temperatures, and plenty of resources for the species to survive.

The red-eyed tree frog's natural habitat is in the tropical rainforests of various countries. They live in the lower areas of the forest near streams, ponds, and rivers. The frogs need these water resources for their babies that are born tadpoles.

### Wetlands

Wetlands are another natural habitat for many animals. A wetland is an area where water is present for at least part of the year. This water is usually present during a portion of the plant-growing season. The water can be in the form of ponds, streams, rivers, or lakes.



Marshes are a type of wetland where many different species of plants and animals live. Amphibians need places like marshes to survive because these habitats offer both water and land for them to live in. Marshes are also home to other species such as the painted turtle, muskrats, and small birds. There is an abundance of insects that live around marshes too, which make for an excellent food source for all of the animals to survive.



### Grasslands

Grass as their naturally dominant vegetation. Grasslands are found where there is not enough regular rainfall to support the growth of a forest, but not so little as to form a desert.

In fact, most grasslands are located between forests and deserts. About one quarter of the Earth's land is covered with grasslands, but many of these lands have been turned into farms. Grasslands are generally open and fairly flat, and they exist on every continent except Antarctica. Most lie in the drier portions of a continent's interior.

When rainy season arrives, many grasslands become coated with flowers, some of which can survive well into winter with the help of underground storage organs and thick stem bases.

Grasslands are the most agriculturally useful habitat to humans. Soils tend to be deep and fertile, perfect for cropland or pastures. Much of the North American prairielands have been converted into one of the richest agricultural regions on Earth.

Fires, both natural and human-caused, are important to maintain grasslands. Ancient hunting peoples set regular fires to maintain and extend grasslands, and prevent fire-intolerant trees and shrubs from taking over. Grasses are able to survive fires because they grow from the bottom instead of the top.

### Deserts

On the opposite spectrum of forests and wetlands are deserts. Deserts are defined as having less than 10 inches of rainfall per year and a very low rate of precipitation. They are very dry and it takes unique species to call a desert home. The Gila monster is one animal that lives in deserts. They are predators who spend most of their time in burrows underground and do most of their hunting during the day.

### Arctic Tundra

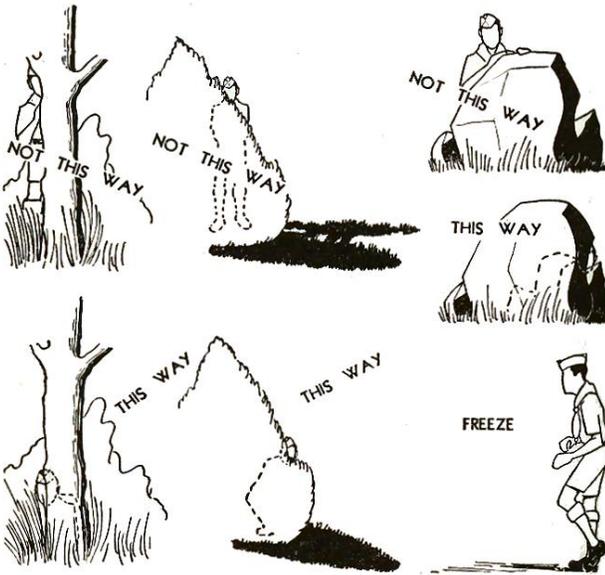
An even more unique natural habitat is the arctic tundra. The arctic tundra has very short days and long nights. The climate is very harsh and only very tough and well-adapted species will survive here. The growing season here is only 50 to 60 days long.

Despite the harsh climate, the arctic tundra is still the natural habitat of many species. Animals such as caribou, snowy owls, polar bears, and arctic fox are just a few that call the arctic tundra home. There are plants as well, such as the bearberry, caribou moss, and lavender tea.

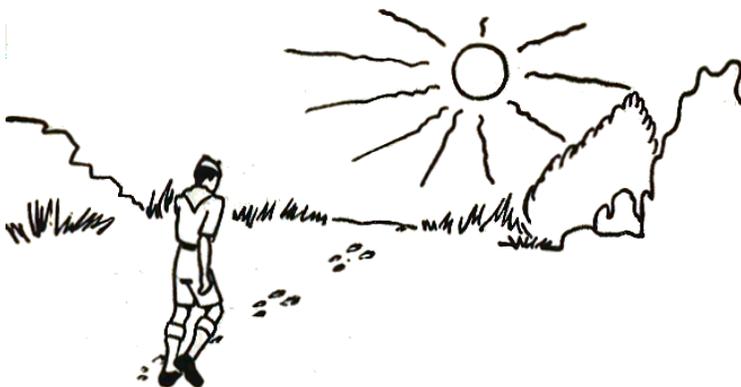
### Destruction of Natural Habitats

Over time, a lot of the natural habitats have experienced mass amounts of damage. Habitat destruction is defined as changing the area in which a plant, animal, or other organism lives to the point where the species can no longer survive. Habitat destruction comes in three forms: actual destruction, fragmentation, and degradation.

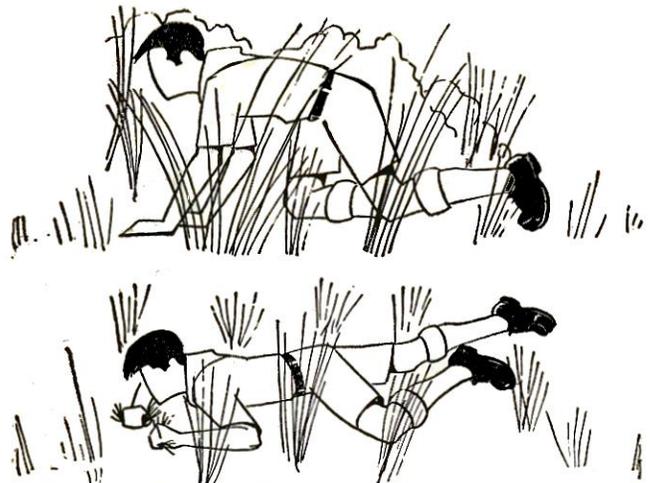
Hide so that you blend into the background



Knowing how to look is important in observation



Tracks are easier to see if you walk into the sun



Keep low by crawling or creeping