

SILVERTON WILDLIFE



LIFE IN THE SAN JUANS

The San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado are a sub-range of the Rocky Mountains with thirteen of the state's peaks above 14,000 feet and a third of the 100 highest peaks in the state. The forests, peaks and valleys of the San Juans are home to a variety wildlife that are not only able to survive but thrive under the often-harsh conditions of mountain life. Most of the photos shown here were taken in the region around the tiny, remote town of Silverton (Elevation 9318 feet), which is situated in a high valley surrounded by forested peaks and where it is not uncommon to see moose, fox, bears, and other animals passing through.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

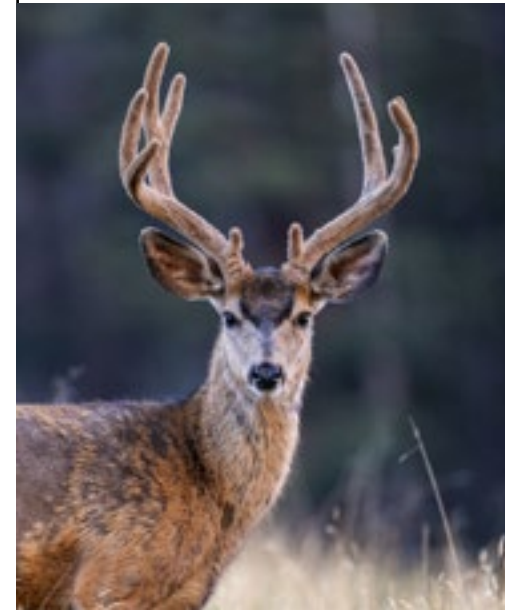
MOOSE



ELK



MULE DEER



BIGHORN SHEEP



MOUNTAIN GOAT



BLACK BEAR



COYOTE



CANADA LYNX



RED FOX



BEAVER



SNOWSHOE HARE



YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT



LONG-TAILED WEASEL



PORCUPINE



PINE SQUIRREL



AMERICAN PIKA



BALD EAGLE



OSPREY



RAVENS & CROWS



STELLER'S JAY



DUSKY GROUSE



MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD



RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER



WESTERN TANAGER



WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN

MOOSE

The moose population in the San Juan Mountains has increased dramatically since they were transplanted into southwest Colorado in the early 1990s. As a result, moose watching has become a popular activity for many visitors. In the summer, it is quite common to see moose browsing on willows in the river valleys along the highway. Occasionally, moose can be seen strolling through the town of Silverton! Given that full grown bull moose can weigh up to 1000 pounds and stand 6 feet at the shoulder, they should be viewed from a respectful distance. Moose are also agitated by the presence of dogs, so it is important to keep pets under control.



ELK

Colorado has the largest elk population in the U.S. (estimated at over 300,000 as of 2023), drawing hunters to the San Juan Mountains every fall. Elk avoid people by staying hidden in the forest, especially during the hunting season. They spend the warmer months high in the mountains; migrating to lower elevations in winter, although several small groups do brave the winter in the area around Silverton. Unlike the more solitary moose, elk tend to band together in larger groups of cows and calves for safety. Like moose, they mate in the fall around late September or early October and give birth in late May or early June of the following year.



MULE DEER

Mule deer are a common sight in the San Juans, named for their large (mule-like) ears. They are most active at night and can pose a serious hazard for vehicles on the roads around dawn and dusk. Mule deer are found at a range of elevations in the summer, migrating to lower elevations for the winter. As with moose and elk, males (bucks) sport a set of antlers that they shed each winter and re-grow over the spring and summer. Antlers are used to attract mates and to intimidate or fight other males. While growing, antlers are covered with a fuzzy-looking skin called velvet. The velvet drops off in late summer when the antlers stop growing and turn into hardened bone.





BIGHORN SHEEP

Bighorn sheep are named for the massive, curved horns of the adult males (rams). Females (ewes) also have horns, but they are more delicate and less curved. Mature males use their horns as battering rams during the fall rut when they fight each other to establish mating rights. The rams charge each other at high speed, colliding headfirst with their horns crashing together. Bighorn sheep are found in areas with steep, rocky cliffs, which gives them an advantage against predators. Their hooves have a spongy center that helps to grip the rocks. It is amazing to watch these animals scramble up and down steep rocky faces where a misstep can be fatal!





MOUNTAIN GOAT

Mountain goats are not native to Colorado but were introduced around the middle of the 20th century for expanded hunting opportunities. While sometimes mistaken for bighorn sheep, their shaggy white coats and pointed black horns are quite distinct from the brown coats and large, curved horns of bighorn rams. In the summer and fall they can be found in high alpine meadows, ridges and even on the tops of peaks around and within the rugged Weminuche Wilderness, which encompasses nearly half a million acres in the San Juan Mountains. Like bighorn sheep, mountain goats are adept at scrambling over treacherous rocky terrain and steep cliffs.



BLACK BEAR

Black bears are the only bear species currently found in Colorado. Despite their name, the color of a black bear's coat varies, including blonde, cinnamon, and light brown. They seek cover in the forest where they forage on vegetation, berries, insects, and small animals. Bears are active during the warmer months, especially in the fall when they forage up to 20 hours per day as they prepare to hibernate. During hibernation, from around November through mid-March, they shelter in a den with their metabolic rate slowing to conserve energy, though they may still lose 25-40% of their body weight. The females (sows) give birth in their dens with the newborn cubs spending their first month or so sheltered with their mother.



COYOTE

Coyotes are native to North America and populations of these highly adaptable canines are widespread. These beautiful animals are primarily carnivorous and are one of the few remaining large predators in the San Juan Mountains. They are of little danger to humans, but occasionally kill domestic animals, giving them a poor reputation among livestock ranchers. They hunt everything from small rodents to deer and are capable of running up to 30 miles per hour and traveling long distances. Coyotes typically hunt alone but will sometimes pair up to hunt cooperatively. They can be found in a wide range of habitats including in and around Silverton as well as traversing the tops of the highest peaks.



CANADA LYNX

Lynx have historically lived in Colorado but were driven to extinction due to trapping, poisoning, and development. They were re-introduced into the San Juan Mountains starting in the late 1990s, and now have a self-sustaining population. Although they are rarely seen (being primarily active at dawn/dusk or at night), during the winter evidence of lynx can often be found via their tracks in the snow. Lynx tracks are large relative to their size (18-24 pounds) as they have big, well-furred paws. This allows them to stay on top of deep powder snow where other animals might struggle or sink and equips them to catch their favorite quarry, the snowshoe hare.



RED FOX

Red foxes are a common sight in and around the town of Silverton, frequently spotted roaming the streets late at night (perhaps attracted by easy food sources). A red fox can be distinguished from other fox species by its characteristic, white-tipped tail, and black fur on its lower legs. Their coats are most often red in color, but may vary to include tan, silver, or even black. Foxes are mesocarnivores, meaning they will eat whatever is available, including fruits, vegetables, and insects as well as meat. Their excellent hearing allows them to hunt small animals underground or beneath the snow, often jumping high in the air to catch their unsuspecting prey from above.





BEAVER

The beaver is the largest native rodent in North America. These shy creatures are semiaquatic and spend almost all of their time in or near water. Beavers build dammed areas on flowing water, creating important wetland habitat for a variety of other species including fish, moose, and waterfowl. Their lodges are typically large mounds made from sticks, plants materials, rocks, and mud. It is easy to find signs of beaver activity (gnawed-through trees, lodges, dams), but harder to spot the animals. In summer, they are often out near dawn and dusk feeding or working on their structures. Although they don't hibernate, they are much less active in the winter, mostly surviving on vegetation stored in ponds under the ice.



SNOWSHOE HARE

Snowshoe hares have large, furred hind feet that enable them to float in deep powder snow. They can bound up to 12 feet and run as fast as 30 miles per hour as they attempt to evade predators. They are the main prey species of the Canada lynx, but just about any predator will prey on snowshoe hares. They don't build nests or burrows, living above ground in thick vegetation. In winter, they often sleep in cavities created by snow covered vegetation or deadfall. Snowshoe hares rely on camouflage for their survival, changing from white coats, which allow them to blend into the snow-covered forest in winter, to a brown coat during the summer.



YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT

The yellow-bellied marmot is a large ground squirrel (up to 10 pounds and 2 feet long) found in suitable habitats over a range of elevations in the San Juan Mountains. Their burrows are excavated into the soil near boulder fields or rocky outcrops. As their name implies, they have a yellowish belly, and their upper coat is often frosted with variations in fur color. They are active during the day and can often be seen perched on a boulder, sunning but alert. If alarmed, they give a characteristic whistle and scurry for cover with their furry tails flagging behind. They have a long hibernation period (September-May at high elevations), so they are typically only seen in the summer.



LONG-TAILED WEASEL

Weasels are extremely active little predators, requiring a steady diet of meat to keep them going. Adults may consume an amount equal to a third of their own body weight daily. Rodents are a favorite prey, but the weasel is not picky; it will eat birds and their eggs, rabbits, and hares, and will sometimes feed on carrion (decaying flesh of dead animals). Long-tailed weasels are skillful hunters that can take down prey much larger than themselves, hunting above or below ground, in trees and under the snow. In summer, their coat is brown with yellowish fur on their belly, but like snowshoe hares, their coat turns white in winter except for the black tip on their tail.





PORCUPINE

Porcupines are shy, forest-dwelling herbivores that are mainly active at night. They may be seen early in the morning waddling slowly along the ground searching for food, but they retreat high up in an evergreen tree, well-hidden in its foliage during the day. Porcupines warn off would-be attackers by tooth chattering, giving off a pungent scent, and erecting their quills; a final resort is to strike an aggressor with their quilled tail. Once erected, the barbed quills easily release from the porcupine and embed into its foe. While some predators attempt to flip the porcupine over to avoid its quills, it is a risky animal to attack. Many local dogs have learned the hard way not to mess with porcupines!



PINE SQUIRREL

Several squirrel species are commonly seen in the San Juan Mountains in town, campgrounds and along the trail. The pine squirrel (also known as a chickaree) is a forest-dwelling tree squirrel. Pine squirrels are quite vocal and will often scold a passing human with a long dry trill. Unlike chipmunks and most other squirrels that reside in the San Juans, the pine squirrel is active year-round. It feeds on coniferous seeds and stores food in underground caches or in a tree. Pine squirrels can sometimes be seen sitting in a tree eating a pinecone like a person might eat an ear of corn!



AMERICAN PIKA

The American pika is a cute little animal in the rabbit/hare family. Pikas live in territories established on talus slopes, with dens beneath the rocks. They communicate by frequent vocalizations and are often detected by their shrill nasal "eehp!" call. They can be difficult to spot, as they blend remarkably well into their rocky surroundings. Pikas have a complicated social structure, being essentially solitary animals that live in close proximity, constrained within a specific habitat (rocky slopes at high elevations). They fiercely protect their territory from intruders, including pikas from other colonies. Pikas are active year-round, but the best time to spot them is in the summer when they are busy feeding or gathering stores of vegetation for the winter.



BALD EAGLE

Eagles are the largest birds of prey in the San Juan Mountains with two species found here, the bald eagle and the golden eagle. Bald eagles are almost always found near water, since they rely heavily on fish and waterbirds in their diet. They are also opportunists that will eat carrion or steal a catch from other animals. Bald eagles don't dive for fish, but they will swoop down and use their talons to snatch one swimming near the surface. Immature bald eagles are sometimes mistaken for golden eagles due to their mottled brown and white color. Bald eagles take several years to reach their full adult plumage with their characteristic white head and tail and dark brown body.





OSPREY

Ospreys, also known as fish hawks, are skillful anglers. At least one mating osprey pair can be found high in the San Juan Mountains near Molas Lake most summers. Molas and several other lakes in the area are stocked with rainbow and cutthroat trout, providing excellent fishing opportunities. Ospreys circle the lake searching for a fish below the surface. Once they spot one, they go into a steep dive, plunging down (feet first) into the lake and grasping the fish in their powerful talons. Their large wings allow them to generate a tremendous amount of lift making them uniquely suited among raptors to dive for their prey and then take off from the surface with their catch.



RAVENS & CROWS

Ravens are a common sight in the San Juan Mountains, along with their similar-looking corvid cousins the American crow. The crow is about half the size of a raven with a smaller bill, less shiny plumage, and a fanshaped tail. In contrast, the raven has a wedge or diamond-shaped tail, and its throat feathers may appear shaggy. Crows are also more vocal, often cawing loudly and repeatedly, while ravens have a softer croak. Crows are commonly seen in Silverton while ravens are a more frequent sight high up in the mountains soaring along ridges and peaks, engaging in aerial contests with other ravens, or ganging up to harass raptors like red-tailed hawks or eagles.





STELLER'S JAY

Steller's jays are a stunning-looking bird with bright blue feathers and a dark crest. Those found in the San Juan Mountains typically have white accents above their eyes and on their foreheads. Like many other jays they make loud scratchy, scolding calls, but they also mimic a variety of other birds, squirrels, and other animals. They are year-round residents in the forests of the San Juans, and they are a frequent sight in and around town and are readily drawn to bird feeders. They are shy birds, however, with a tendency to hide in thick vegetation or fly away when approached, making it challenging to get an unobscured photograph of these beautiful birds.



DUSKY GROUSE

Dusky grouse live in the forest where they are well-camouflaged against the forest floor. It is often easier to detect them by ear, listening for the crackle of vegetation as they pace through the forest undergrowth, or a flutter of wings as they fly up into the trees when alarmed by an intruder. The male dusky grouse can be distinguished from the female by their yellow eye comb, which turns red during courtship in the spring. Another striking part of the male's courtship display is their purplish-red neck sac displayed as they strut repeatedly back and forth over a patch of open ground, tail fanned, and flamboyant air sacs and eye combs exposed.



MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD

The adult male mountain bluebird is a striking bird with a rich cerulean blue color on its wings and upperparts, and pale blue underparts. Females and juveniles have less blue, mainly concentrated in the wings and tail. Mountain bluebirds arrive early in the spring to breed, often at elevations well above timberline. They are cavity-nesters, with the male identifying potential nest sites and showing them to the female who selects the site and does the nest building. Look for them on sunny open hillsides or meadows where they may skillfully hover in the air and dive for insects.



RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER

Red-naped sapsuckers are summer visitors that breed in the area. They are black and white overall with a bright red cap and throat. The female can be identified by a small white patch on her chin, while the chin and throat of the male is all red. These industrious woodpeckers excavate their nest cavity into a live aspen tree. While these nest cavities may be re-used again by the same breeding pair, they are often used by other species unable to drill out their own nest cavities. Sapsuckers also drill smaller holes for food, leaving a neat array of evenly spaced holes that provide sap to drink and attract insects to eat.





WESTERN TANAGER

Western tanagers are colorful medium-sized songbirds found in the San Juan Mountain forests during the summer. The female is mostly yellow with gray wings and back, while the adult male has an orange-red head (in breeding plumage), brilliant yellow body, and coal-black wings, back and tail. It is easy to overlook these striking birds as they tend to forage and perch high in the trees, and they blend into the foliage surprisingly well. Once you learn to listen for their characteristic "pit-r-ick" call, however, they are easier to find. Like many other migrating songbirds, they spend the winter in Mexico and Central America, flying north to breed in summer.



WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN

White-tailed ptarmigan are a small, tubby-looking grouse. They are the only North American bird to live yearround in the high-elevation alpine tundra, although they sometimes move to lower elevations in response to weather and seasonal changes.

The ptarmigan's plumage varies by season, with a very effective summer camouflage pattern of blacks, browns, grays, and tans that render them nearly invisible among the rocks and shrubs where they reside. In winter, they turn all white with the exception of their eyes and beak, making them nearly invisible against the snow-covered landscape. They have large, feathered feet, allowing them to walk on top of the snow, and they burrow into the snow to roost in a well-insulated snow cave.



More photos and information
about the animals in this
guide available at
[Colorado Parks and Wildlife](#)
& [Wesley Berg Photography](#)



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