



SURE, A ROSE IS A ROSE BUT IS THAT A SWIFT FOX, RED FOX, OR GRAY FOX?

Jacelyn Downey

Wyoming is home to an amazing collection of animals. Many are large and easy to identify – mistaking a porcupine for a badger or elk from pronghorn would be hard – but many other animals can be a bit trickier.

Take rabbits. Most can tell the difference between a jackrabbit and a cottontail, but did you know the state has three types of cottontail? Wyoming has mountain, desert, and eastern cottontail species, and they all look, well, like cottontails.

Snakes can be tricky as well. Identifying a rattlesnake is fairly easy, especially if you hear its signature rattle, but did you know bull snakes

sometimes mimic a rattlesnake’s sound and posture when it feels threatened? Garter snakes can also be challenging to distinguish, considering we have the plains, wandering, valley, and red-sided species.

Most people see a fox and instantly think, “Oh, it’s a red fox,” but depending where, you could be seeing a swift fox or a gray fox.

Birds, especially little brown birds, are probably the worst offenders to a person’s ability to distinguish one animal from the next.

So what’s a person to do? First, exclude animals not found in your area. There is a big difference in the diversity of species in the western

Photo Dan Lewis/WyomingNaturalist.com



Desert cottontail

half of the state versus the eastern half. The time of the year can be an important detail as well, especially with migratory animals like birds. Stop and really take time to observe the animal.

Here’s a condensed field guide to identifying some common, often-misidentified animals that might be lurking just steps from your back porch.

Swift fox

Swift foxes are found in open country primarily in the eastern part of the state. Swift foxes are nocturnal and not likely seen during the day. They mainly eat small rodents, but also eat birds, lizards, and berries. Coyotes are a main predator. Red foxes have a white-tipped tail, while gray foxes and swift foxes have a black-tipped tail. However, gray foxes are found in forested areas, which swift foxes avoid. The red fox and

Photo Dan Lewis/WyomingNaturalist.com



Swift fox



And about that garter snake ...

gray fox are nearly twice the size of a swift fox. All of the foxes use a den, but the swift fox den is usually more complex with multiple openings.

Cottontails

The common names of these cottontails are a clue to where they live and can be a big help in determining which species you might have in your area. Desert cottontails are found in the most arid areas of the state. Both the eastern and mountain cottontails will have shorter, furry, rounded ears, while desert cottontails have just a thin amount of hair on their taller, pointed ears. Like all cottontails, they are a favorite meal for any predator and as such, they are skittish and usually only active from dusk to dawn.

Brewer's sparrow

Sparrows can be an extremely difficult group of birds to identify even with binoculars and a field guide. Oftentimes, identification comes down to details like does it have a streaked breast, and what color are its legs and beak? Brewer's sparrows are tricky because they don't have the colorful face pattern of the lark sparrow or a dark patch on their chest like a sage sparrow. The most advanced identification techniques involve

learning to listen to their songs and noticing patterns in how they fly or other behavioral patterns.

Wandering garter snake

Of all the garter snakes, the wandering garter snake is easiest to identify because it is the only one that doesn't have red, orange, or yellow coloration. A garter snake with red spotting seen in the western part of the state is likely a valley garter snake. A garter snake with red and black checkerboard patterns on the sides is probably a red-sided garter snake. Lastly, if you just notice a stripe of orange

or yellow, it's usually a plains garter snake.

Here are some guides to get you started:

- http://wgfd.wyo.gov/wtest/Departments/Wildlife/pdfs/WILDLIFE_ANIMALATLAS0002711.pdf
- <http://wyomingnaturalist.com/>
- *Mammals of the Rocky Mountains* by Fisher, Pattie, & Hartson
- *The Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Allen Sibley
- <http://bit.ly/pocketbird>
- <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

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Brewer's sparrow

Photo Dan Lewis/WyomingNaturalist.com



Wandering garter snake

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