



Northern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus*).
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Turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*). Photo by Richard, [stock.adobe.com](https://www.stock.adobe.com).

Meet Wyoming's lesser-known wildlife

W Wyoming is home to around 100 species of mammals, 400 species of birds, 60 species of fish, 30 species of reptiles and amphibians, and thousands of insect species. But when most people hear the phrase “Wyoming wildlife,” what probably springs to mind is just a few species, such as bison, moose, pronghorn, and wolves. Wyoming has so much more to offer, and although they may not be as common or readily encountered as the iconic species, the lesser-known species are just as fascinating. Let’s take some time and get to know a few!

Northern flying squirrel

Despite their name, northern flying squirrels (*Glaucomys sabrinus*) are not capable of true powered flight like birds or bats. Instead, they have a furry skin flap that extends from the wrists of their front legs to the ankles of their back legs that acts like a parachute, helping the squirrels glide from tree to tree. They’re able to partially steer their flight path by moving their legs and can use their tails to help slow their speed. The average length of a single glide is around 30 meters, but glides up to 90 meters have been documented.

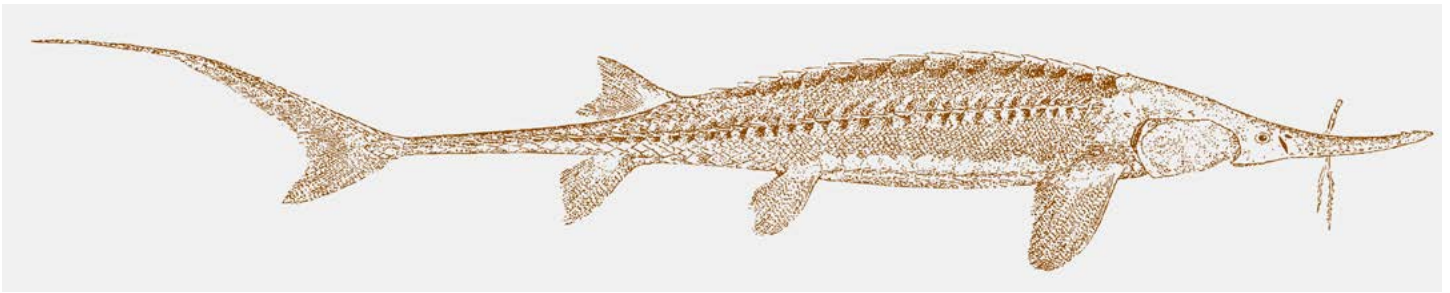
Equipped with their furry parachutes, northern flying squirrels are more at home in the trees than on the ground. Old-growth conifer forests filled with standing or fallen snag trees provide crucial habitat for these cavity nesters.

Like their non-gliding relatives, northern flying squirrels primarily eat nuts, acorns, fruits, and insects. Unlike other squirrels, however, a major part of their diet consists of fungi and lichens. Northern flying squirrels are nocturnal and actively forage for food for about two hours at the beginning of the night and two hours before sunrise. They do not hibernate and are active year-round. They can be found in northwestern Wyoming and the Black Hills.

Turkey vulture

Their bald, bright red heads and interesting habits may not make them the most glamorous bird in Wyoming, but turkey vultures (*Cathartes aura*) sure are an important one. These birds feast exclusively on carrion, providing an essential ecosystem service to the people and animals of Wyoming. They use their keen sense of smell to find mammal carcasses—the fresher, the better. Since turkey vultures are scavengers and do not hunt, they never know when their next meal will be. So, like many other vulture species, turkey vultures gorge themselves when food is available and can eat up to 25% of their body weight.

They have extraordinarily acidic stomach acid, 100 times more concentrated than a human’s stomach acid. Their acidic gastric juices neutralize diseases such as anthrax, rabies, and tuberculosis that are present in the rotting flesh they consume. This reduces the



Shovelnose sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus platorynchus*). Image by M, stock.adobe.com.

amount of disease that is present and spreadable in the environment.

Turkey vultures' powerful stomach acid and less-than-Michelin-star-quality diet combine to create an interesting method of defense. When scared or threatened, turkey vultures can hit a target 10 feet away—with their projectile vomit.

If you want to spot one of these fascinating birds in the wild, keep an eye out for their telltale flight pattern. Turkey vultures have a wingspan of nearly 7 feet and fly with their wings slightly above their heads in a “V” shape. As they soar on the wind's thermals, they rock back and forth on their wings. Juvenile turkey vultures have a featherless, dark gray head that turns bright red in adulthood. They can be spotted around the state April through October.

Shovelnose sturgeon

Shovelnose sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus platorynchus*) belong to a lineage of fish that has existed for 200 million years. Instead of scales, sturgeons are covered in bony plates called scutes, giving them a prehistoric appearance. In fact, if you're lucky enough to encounter a shovelnose sturgeon in Wyoming, you may be meeting a relatively old individual—they can live 30 years or more.

Shovelnose sturgeon thrive in large, warm, fast-moving rivers, and they migrate to their spawning site year to year. In fact, individuals have been documented traveling almost 600 miles!

These fish are a game species in Wyoming, but they have also been identified as a species of greatest conservation need in the state. They historically occurred in the North Platte, Powder, and Bighorn River basins in Wyoming, but were extirpated from the North Platte and Bighorn River drainages by the 1900s. Pollution, overharvesting, and habitat changes through

the construction of dams and other impoundments likely contributed to their decline and extirpation in the Powder and Bighorn basins. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department has been reintroducing sturgeon into the Bighorn River since 1996.

Northern rubber boa

Northwest and north-central Wyoming is home to one of only three boa species found in North America—the northern rubber boa (*Charina bottae*). For those with aversions to large snakes, fret not; rubber boas are the smallest members of the boa family, averaging only around 25 inches in length. That's not the only unique quirk of these small snakes. Unlike most snakes, northern rubber boas are not just cold tolerant, they're somewhat heat *intolerant*. Temperatures over 90 degrees can cause physiological stress and prolonged exposure to high temperatures can be fatal.



Northern rubber boa (*Charina bottae*). Photo by Randimal, stock.adobe.com.



Western (barred) tiger salamander (*Ambystoma mavortium*).
Photo by Henk, [stock.adobe.com](https://www.stock.adobe.com).

Northern rubber boas spend a lot of their time underneath rocks and logs or in burrows where it is cool and moist. Their aversion to heat means that they digest food more slowly than other snakes and may only eat about once a month. Although their meal of choice—baby rodents—are defenseless, the rodent mothers are not. Rubber boas’ tails are about the same width as their heads, and they use this as a defense mechanism. They’ll curl up with their head protected in the middle of their body with their tail sticking out. The brave mother rodent will attack what it thinks is the boa’s head, while the snake remains unharmed—except for scarring on its tail.

Western (barred) tiger salamander

The western, or barred, tiger salamander (*Ambystoma mavortium*) is the only salamander species found in Wyoming. They belong to the Ambystomatidae, or mole salamander, family. Western tiger salamanders spend much of their adult terrestrial lives in underground rodent burrows. The subterranean habitat provides a moist environment necessary to prevent these amphibians from losing water through their permeable skin. The burrows are also more thermally stable, staying cooler than the surface during the hot summer months and warmer during Wyoming’s freezing winters. As spring emerges, so do the salamanders, undertaking migrations on rainy nights to breed in nearby ponds.

Newly hatched salamanders live the first few months of their lives underwater before metamorphosing into terrestrial adults. However, some larval salamanders may not transition to a terrestrial adult form. Instead, they turn into sexually reproductive adults that remain underwater with the same feathery external gills they had as juveniles. These paedomorphic salamanders



Black witch (*Ascalapha odorata*). Photo by Ivan Kuzmin, [stock.adobe.com](https://www.stock.adobe.com).

typically occur when conditions inside the water are favorable. Both paedomorph and terrestrial adults can exist in the same population.

If you want to spot a terrestrial adult salamander nearly anywhere in Wyoming, your best bet is turning over pots or logs in your backyard—or sitting by a pond on one of the first rainy nights in spring.

Black witch

If you see what you think is a bat flying around erratically on a dusky summer evening, take a closer look. You may be lucky enough to spot the largest moth species in North America, the black witch (*Ascalapha odorata*). In some cultures, you may hear the black witch called the “money moth” or *mariposa de la muerte*; in the Bahamas, black witches are seen as harbingers of fortune, while in Mexico, they’re considered omens of death.

The black witch’s typical range is Brazil up to the southern U.S., but individuals are not uncommonly found wandering northward into Canada. They have a wingspan of 7 inches, but by the time these long-distance flyers find themselves in Wyoming, their wings are often worn and tattered. Since they are only occasional tourists in our state, any encounter with them is likely to be happenstance.

During the bright daylight hours, you may spot a black witch resting on a building where it can find some shade. Adults feed on tree sap and rotting fruit, and you may be able to attract a nearby black witch by setting out some bananas or sliced apples overnight.

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