

Rocky Mountain Wild



Pika on rock near Pikes Peak

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The Rocky Mountain range stretches from New Mexico to northernmost British Columbia, a distance of over 3,000 miles accented with thousands of mountain peaks up to and over 14,000 feet blanketed in snow: this is the famous Rocky Mountain Range.

With thousands of miles of majestic scenery and abundant wildlife, a photographer could spend years shooting the range and never run out of subjects to photograph. The Rockies are an ideal place to capture outstanding images of wildlife.

Wildlife photographers have a passion

for capturing great images of wild animals. Capturing a great image is as thrilling to a wildlife photographer as a runner winning a marathon. Wildlife photographers use many of the animal tactics of their subjects such as stalking and creeping ever so quietly just to get close enough to capture an image. A visit to the Rockies to photograph wildlife is a rewarding experience. While driving along highway 25 from New Mexico to Canada wildlife enthusiasts will see many herds of antelope and prairie dog towns along the way. Take time to visit the many National Parks such as Rocky Mountain National Park and discover elk, deer and bighorn sheep.

The best time to photograph the large animals is in autumn when the fear of humans lessens due to breeding season. Elk can be approached at close range to photograph, but as with all wild animals maintain a safe distance, as no image is worth disturbing an animal or risking your safety. Long lenses such as a 300mm or more produce great images without the photographer having to get too close. Elk will move down from higher elevations to escape the winter snows, which will cover the peaks with several feet, making the search for food very difficult.

Bighorn sheep similar to the elk move down from higher elevations in fall, which makes it easier to photograph them. Many can be spotted along the roadside feeding in grassy areas. Huge

Mule deer in snow in Rocky Mountain National Park





Long-tailed weasel at den

rams may show many scars on their horns from several battles with other rams to win the favor of the ewes. Bighorn also reside on the sheerest of mountain cliffs: a special soft padding on their hoofs allows them to traverse the most treacherous of terrain, something no human could possibly do.

Mule Deer are also numerous and can be photographed easily but catching just the right pose may require some waiting. Wait until they stop feeding just long enough to check on the location of the does in the herd. Bucks will repeat this process several times to make sure no challenging bucks are close at hand to steal one of his does or challenge him to a duel. Since he is more intent on feeding and watching for a rival he will be more tolerant of the photographer busy recording his image.

Many other animals live in the mountain range also, but are a rare sight compared to that of the larger animals. Mountain lions for example live here, but are rarely seen. Black bears are seen more often but to see one would require a long stay or a lot of luck. Bears like to roam and feed at night so they are rarely seen unless spotted during the day in a tree resting. This photographer saw little cubs just after sundown and required a flash to get enough light to photograph them. Getting too close would have risked an attack by the mother who was a few yards away watching intently.

The elusive long-tailed weasel is the most



Elk bull resting in snow

widely distributed mustelid in the Americas with a range from Central America to Canada, but to see one would require luck or days of searching. Weasels can be found in open or semi-open habitats close to water. They blend in perfectly with their habitat due to the fact that their fur is brownish in color with a yellowish belly. In the northern climates they turn pure white in winter to blend in with the snow, only the tip of their tail remains black both winter and summer. Weasels are most active at night hunting for rodents, their favorite food.

The Red Fox are more often seen since they are almost world wide, but getting a good photograph may require a lot of luck or finding a den and setting up a blind. A fox was first spotted in spring going and coming from the den. Three pups required a lot of feeding and both mother and father were busy hunting and returning to the den to feed the pups. A blind was set up and after



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Young black bear in tree

a long wait images were captured and although several yards away hidden inside the blind, their keen ears picked up the sound of the camera shutter and they became alert to danger. But hours of preparation and waiting paid off with a few good images.

Golden mantle ground squirrels can be seen in many Rocky mountain areas. These critters are often mistaken for a large chipmunks at times since they share some of the same areas, but ground squirrels are somewhat larger weighing 4 to 14 ounces and are about 9 to 12 inches long, where as the chipmunks are about 2 to 4 ounces and 8 inches long.

The American Pika can only be located in rocky areas between 8,000 and 14,000 feet. Pikas are also called rock rabbits or *whistling hare* due to their high-pitched call when retreating into their burrow. Pikas do not hibernate so they gather plants, dry them in the sun and store them in the den for both warmth and food in the winter. In winter their den will be under several feet of snow but the dried plants will sustain them. To photograph these tiny rodents requires finding such a place, setting up with a large lens on a tripod and waiting. They will retreat into their rock habitat when a suspected intruder is in their territory but will return to their normal routine if you sit and wait for a while. Pikas are only 6 to 8 inches long and weigh about 6 ounces. Fall is an ideal time when they are busy gathering food for the winter. Pikas are diurnal, or active in daylight. They spend most of the day watching for predators, guarding their territory, sunning and

Bighorn Ram outside
Rocky Mountain
National Park

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gathering plants. It is not uncommon for them to steal each other's food. Pikas range from New Mexico to central British Columbia and can be found in many places.

The opportunities to photograph wildlife in the Rockies are boundless and they will get better in the coming years. With an abundance of wildlife comes some problems of over population. Elk are especially abundant in Rocky Mountain National Park, along with bighorn sheep, so much so that some times they have to be trapped and re-located when their numbers increase far to rapidly for the food supply to sustain them. Bears are routinely relocated when they become a nuisance, such as when they hunt for garbage and cause property damage. If they continue to be a problem they have to be put down which is a tragic event in itself. There is talk of re-introducing the wolf to the Rockies similar to when wildlife preservers re-integrated wolves back into the wilds of Yellowstone. Efforts to re-integrate animals such as the Lynx and the Mexican Wolf are ongoing and success has been sporadic but research is continuing to try to achieve a balance.

When it comes to photographing wildlife *bigger is better* in choice of lenses. A 300mm to 600mm is ideal equipment but you can capture many good images with less. A 200mm with an extender, either 1.4 or 2X, will work. A tripod is necessary equipment and a window mount for shooting from the vehicle. Vehicles act like a blind and will allow you to capture images without getting outside. Many animals will retreat once you emerge from a vehicle.

Hiking in the mountains can also produce some great images of wildlife. Hiking in the Rockies requires good hiking boots, plenty of water and above all a poncho as weather can change quickly. It's a good idea to carry a plastic garbage bag to protect your equipment from a sudden rain or snowstorm and matches or a lighter just in case. Also remember that the terrain is rough and injuries can happen so keep a first aid kit handy and always hike with a partner for safety.

The opportunity to photograph animals and capture great award winning images in the Rockies are endless. With so much wildlife it's a sure bet. ■



Elk bull in snow



Golden Mantle Ground Squirrel



Red fox and pup at den