

# WILDLIFE VERSUS WEATHER



Christopher Bruno/Contributed Photo

The common raven relies on carrion for much of its food during the winter.

■ Species use a variety of tactics to withstand wintry conditions and adapt to the limited availability of food

Here we are again, on the far side of the winter solstice, hunkered beneath a blanket of freezing fog and snow. Our latitude offers approximately eight hours of daylight early in the calendar year. And, while most humans seek winter shelter in our heated homes and celebrate holiday feasts, wildlife experience a greater challenge, making due with what Mother Nature provides (or doesn't), and relying on innate strategies to see the winter through.

Animals are keenly attuned to environmental cues like photo period (day length) which drive their responses to the changes in seasons. Similar to putting on your winter coat, mammals such as squirrels, bear, deer and elk grow a coat of hollow, insulating fur and seek to fatten up, devoting more time and attention to foraging. Bears go into hibernation while elk and mule deer, and songbirds, make winter migrations to warmer climes and more abundant food sources.

Nut-bearing trees in our local communities feed populations of non-native eastern fox squirrels. Glancing around town, you will likely notice these orange, bushy-tailed tree rats scurrying, digging and burying all fall. Squirrels can stash up to 10,000 nuts for winter forage, creating caches in hollow trees and other convenient hiding spots, like your home attic.

Songbirds that overwinter locally feed tirelessly throughout our short winter days. Weed seeds, nuts and berries are typical wild food sources, supplemented by our home bird feeders. High-energy foods like sunflower seeds are a staple in their daily diets.

Songbirds reduce their body temperature at night to avoid excessive energy expense to keep warm. As the sun rises, a flush of activity occurs for several hours as they



National Park Service/Contributed Photo

A snowshoe hare spends its day hidden beneath snow-covered vegetation.



**UPLAND PURSUITS**  
BRAD TRUMBO

feed. Midday usually brings reduced activity and short periods that will have you wondering if the birds have simply vanished, but the afternoon rush will soon hit with another flurry of wings.

Critters like reptiles that cannot regulate body temperature seek winter shelter in burrows or covered in mud where the ground temperature is warmer than the air. They don't require food, but must avoid freezing. Some frogs even create their own "anti-freeze" to avoid cell damage.

Beavers stash food below the water surface in case a freeze prevents them from foraging, and their tails store fat for the lean times. Chipmunks cache food in their burrows and remain below ground when the weather is exceptionally rough.

The snowshoe hare may use a burrow as well, and hares feed on plants and twigs that they dig or find protruding from deep snow.



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

A plump eastern fox squirrel gnaws on a walnut retrieved from its winter stash.

Their large feet allow them to move across the snow surface without sinking in, reducing energy expense for foraging and providing efficient predator avoidance.

While the hardships of winter are evidenced by wildlife adaptations for survival, these adaptations allow species to thrive through freezing temperature and deep snow, like the

snowshoe hare, which lives right here in the Blues.

One of the more abundant and well-distributed mammals in North America, hares rarely starve. Research suggests they maintain consistent body mass throughout the year. Their large feet, white winter coats, and efficient digestive system allow hares to prosper on

minimal, and at times, poor-quality food sources over the northern latitude winter.

Ravens are another local example of an animal that has adapted well to winter living. During the warmer months, ravens are active predators, as well as feeding generalists. But when winter pickings become slim, ravens turn largely to carrion. Ravens have been documented following wolf packs, feasting socially alongside them. Ravens are highly intelligent and wary of novel food sources, but trust the prey of wolves, swooping in almost immediately as the pack makes a successful kill.

Scientist and author Bernd Heinrich published a book titled "Ravens in Winter," presenting a surprisingly captivating study on raven feeding and social behaviors in New England. Heinrich found that ravens cache carrion when in abundant supply and communicate openly with fellow ravens, leading them to new food sources.

While viewing the winter world from the comfort of our heated homes, it appears an inhospitable place. It's easy to anthropomorphize the plight of wildlife from our understanding of discomfort and hardship. Yet animals have the gig nailed, surviving, adapting and thriving with typical grace and beauty. Take a snowy day walk in the forest or even around town this winter. Stop, look and listen to the feathered and furred lives busy at work. And take inspiration from their resilience and resourcefulness, making the most of what is provided every single day.

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# Sheep Shape

■ If you hope to hunt bighorns, you need to prepare in advance

Six bighorn sheep stared down. All rams. They had been bedded when we hiked into sight, watching us the whole time. Now some stood, some fed, turning their heads from time to time, watching us watching them.

Rocky Mountain bighorns, lying in direct sunlight at the very top of a rock slide in the breaks of Hells Canyon. A high, fissured cliff protected the sheep from above and six pairs of eyes watched for danger's approach from the sides or below.

Two of the rams dwarfed



**ON THE TRAIL**  
GARY LEWIS

the rest. From their beds they could watch the other sheep and our camp for signs of danger.

But we were there to hunt black bear and soon our attentions turned to the green slope opposite. We loaded our rifles and began the long climb around a cliff on our side of the canyon to achieve a better vantage from which to glass for bears. Each step

was carefully taken. A loose stone might roll underfoot, a handhold could give way or a rattlesnake might be coiled beneath a ledge. We followed a sheep trail up, picked our way across rock slides, clutching at clumps of grass to keep balance on the treacherous slopes.

Up the canyon and high above camp now, we scanned the far hillside. More black rocks and lightning charred stumps and green grass and flowers. Not a bear to be seen. We turned our attention to our own slope once more.

Two more rams were feeding less than 200 yards away.



Gary Lewis/Contributed Photo

Bighorn sheep in their preferred rocky habitat in the Hells Canyon country.

We were above them this time and they browsed along the hillside above a sheer drop of

200 feet. From this range we could see what they fed on, broad-leafed yellow flowers,

bitterbrush and wild parsley.

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