

Wildlife Viewing

Yukon carnivores




Yukon



Grey Wolf

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ISBN 978-1-55362-871-2

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Capital letters and common names:

In this guide, the common names of animals begin with capital letters to allow the reader to distinguish between species. For example, a Black Bear is a species of bear, not necessarily a bear that is black.

A guide to Yukon carnivores

Yukon is home to 18 species of carnivore divided into four families: mustelids (weasels), canids (dogs), felids (cats), ursids (bears), and phocids (seals). They range in size from the Least Weasel at 60 g to the Polar Bear at 600 kg. These are the smallest and largest carnivores in the world.

Most of these carnivores can be found across Yukon, though some are restricted to our northern shore and sea, and others can only be found in the south along the BC border.

This booklet will introduce you to Yukon's carnivores and start to explore what makes them special. Find small biographies of each, along with key features to look for when you're watching for wildlife. For more detailed information about these species, visit Yukon.ca/wildlife and click on the species profiles.

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Ermine

What is a carnivore?

Animals in the order 'Carnivora' actually have very little in common. They are supposed to specialise in eating meat but some, such as pandas and kinkajous, are essentially herbivores. They come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some live solitary lives and others live in larger packs. Some are terrestrial and others aquatic. Some live in trees and others burrow underground. Some hibernate while others stay active year-round, specially adapted for living in the snow.

The word carnivore means "devourer of flesh," but in reality most species have a varied diet that includes berries, roots, greens, mushrooms and fish, as well as meat.

Polar Bears



Felids, such as the Cougar and lynx, are obligate carnivores: they require only the nutrients found in flesh, and some have difficulty digesting plant matter. However, both Grizzly Bears and Black Bears are omnivorous and plant matter can make up as much as 80 per cent of their diet!

Much of a carnivore's diet depends on the season, habitat and opportunity. It is best to consider them along a diet spectrum.

Coyote

Cameron Eckert

Coyote

Black Bear

Wolf

Red Fox

Grizzly

Red Fox

Carrie McClelland

Hypocarnivore

<30% meat diet

Regardless of the diet, carnivores are often top predators in local food webs and hunting is a central part of their lives. They have keen hearing and a highly developed sense of smell.



Gordon Court

Teeth

Because of their specialized diets, carnivores have complex teeth compared to other mammals.

Canine teeth, commonly known as “fangs.” Used for catching and holding prey.



Carnassials
Used for slicing apart meat and to crush or grind bone.

Reproduction

Yukon's carnivores give birth to a litter of young in the early spring. Almost all carnivores are born "altricial": weak and helpless, completely dependent on their parents for care and protection. Canid parents, such as wolves and Coyotes, share in parenting duties but most other carnivores in Yukon are raised by the female only.

Despite significant parental investment, few young carnivores survive to maturity. Juveniles face many threats in their first year when they are searching for their own territory, hunting on their own and evading predation.

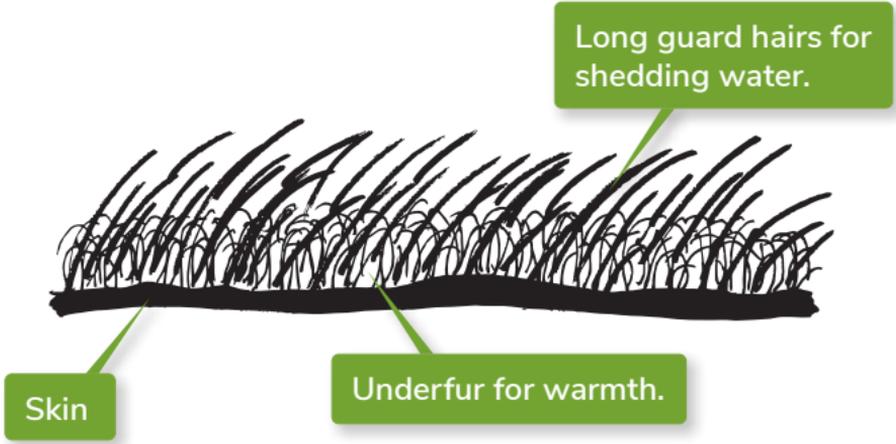
Some carnivores undergo "delayed implantation" where the embryo does not begin development immediately after successful breeding. Instead, it stays in the uterus until the conditions are right for development. This sometimes takes as long as eleven months. There is some debate why this happens, but it does allow these generally solitary animals to mate when it is convenient and still give birth in the spring, when their offspring have the greatest chance of survival.



Jukka Jantunen

A warm fur coat

Most of Yukon's carnivores are active throughout the winter, and their fur coats are essential for staying warm. Their coats are made up of thick underfur and guard hairs to trap heat in and repel moisture. Fur from many of Yukon's carnivores is prized for clothing trim because of its ability to remain frost-free in frigid temperatures.



Arctic Fox
white winter coat.



Arctic Fox in transition
between summer coat and winter coat.

Amy Law

Gabe Rivest



Two different colour variations of Black Bear.

Colour variation

Each species' fur might come in a variety of shades. Sometimes this is simply a colour variation, such as the different shades of wolves. Black Bears are among the most multi-coloured of all, ranging from deep black to nearly white. Other carnivores, such as the Ermine and Arctic Fox, go through seasonal coat colour moulting, from white in winter to shades of brown in the summer.

Semiaquatic species such as otters and mink have dense waterproof guard hairs to protect water from soaking through to the underfur. Their coats are very similar to their terrestrial cousins, the Fisher and marten, except for an oily sheen and the number of hairs per square centimetre.



Northern River Otter fur is excellent at repelling water, keeping it warm and dry even in frigid temperatures.

Hunting strategies

The diets of carnivores vary widely depending on the season and their abilities to hunt. Solitary animals have to take prey by themselves, while others work in teams. In summer, bears can forage for plants and in winter weasels can chase prey through tunnels in the snow.

Stalking and ambush

This hunting style is the preferred choice for felids. Cats move silently through the forest, following prey until they are close enough to pounce in a quick, short-lived, burst of speed. This style works well for carnivores that live alone.



Jukka Jantunen

Teamwork

Wolves are famous for their cohesive packs that work together to bring down large prey, such as Moose or caribou.

They will even strategize to take

turns chasing prey over long distances, gradually tiring it

out while a fresh wolf takes over to continue the pursuit, somewhat like a relay race. The kill will then feed the entire pack, rather than each wolf needing to find its own meal.



Scavenging

All carnivores will take advantage of a free meal. Kill sites can be picked clean within a few hours, feeding many

different animals. The Wolverine specializes in scavenging the kills of other animals and stealing away meat for itself. It has been known to challenge Grizzly Bears for access to a carcass—a predator 16 times bigger!



Foraging

Though bears will hunt and consume meat, they spend much of their time foraging for plants. In spring, fresh greens on south-facing slopes and roadside flowers are a favourite. They will also dig up roots and roll over logs in search of grubs and other insects. In the fall, berry crops and spawning fish (near the coast) are essential parts of the bear's diet.



Lisa Moore

Sit-and-wait

Patience conserves energy and can result in a good meal. Polar Bears will lay by seal holes for hours, waiting for a seal to surface for a breath. Grizzly Bears will also wait for salmon at popular fishing holes.



Gordon Court

Least Weasel

Yukon's carnivores

Red Fox kit

Wolverine

Gulo gulo



Dark fur with blonde stripe along both sides.

Long, bushy tail.

Stocky body that looks like a small bear.

Damian Power



Where to look:

A solitary Wolverine has an enormous home range, so spotting one is rare. They are voracious scavengers and will viciously defend a carcass. In the summer, head to the sub-alpine where long sight distances make Wolverines easier to spot.

They re-use the same pathways through the forest, creating corridors of packed snow or leaf litter known as “rabbit runs.”

Ermine

Mustela erminea

Steven Hint CC-BY-SA 4.0



Winter coat

Long weasel body
with short legs.

Thin tail with
a black tip.



White fur in winter; brown fur with
white underside in summer.



*Least Weasels and Ermine are nearly identical
and both change coat colours with the seasons.
Least Weasels are slightly smaller and do not
have a black tip on the tail.*

Least Weasel

Mustela nivalis



Summer coat

White fur in winter;
brown fur with white
underside in summer.

Short,
stubby
tail lacks
distinct
black tip.

Long weasel body,
smaller than Ermine.

Where to look:

Ermine and Least Weasels are found throughout Yukon as far north as the Arctic coast. Both are nocturnal and voracious eaters, always on the hunt. They can occasionally be seen near houses, wood piles, bird feeders, downed logs in the forest, and talus patches in the alpine, where they hunt for mice and voles.

American Mink

Neovison vison



Small, dark ears

Long, body with short fur.

Tail furred, but not fluffy.

Webbed feet.

Typically dark brown; long guard hairs have oily sheen for water protection.

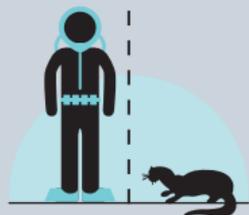


Where to look:

Mink are semiaquatic and can be found swimming close to shore in wetlands, ponds and streams. You might spot them resting on the bank, but this is rare, as they are nocturnal. They are found all over Yukon until the tree line on the tundra.

Northern River Otter

Lutra canadensis



Small eyes and ears.

Long, streamlined body.

Brown and silvery colour.

Tapered tail.



Where to look:

Though not abundant in Yukon, otters can be found playing along river banks and lakeshores, usually in groups. Unlike beavers or muskrats, they will often lift their whole heads out of the water to observe you, snort or huff, and then move away. In winter, "otter slides" are patches of smoothed snow where the animal slid down the bank back into the water.

Fisher

Pekania pennanti



Long, slender body.

Generally dark brown fur.

Small, cat-like face.

Short legs, large feet.

Forest Wander CC-BY SA 4.0

Where to look:

Fishers are among the rarest mammals in Yukon, but are beginning to be seen more often. They prefer stands of large, mature trees and are therefore more commonly seen in the lush forests of the southeastern corner of Yukon near Teslin or Watson Lake. Please report any sightings to the Department of Environment.



American Marten

Martes americana



Pale face.

Pale to brown fur, orange patch on throat.

Long bushy tail.

Long weasel body and fluffy tail.

Sean Nardella



Where to look:

Martens are quick and sly, leaving few signs of their presence. They are more commonly seen stealing from your campsite. Dawn and dusk are the best times to see them hunting voles in meadows or in mature forests. Some marten in Yukon take refuge in our homes or outbuildings during winter.

Canada Lynx

Lynx canadensis

Jukka Jantunen

Can be tan coloured or silvery-grey.

Black ear tufts and under-chin "beard."

Small bobbed, black-tipped tail.

Relatively short, compact body with very long legs.

Disproportionality large, furry feet.



Where to look:

Lynx follow the Snowshoe Hare population cycle closely and are easier to spot when their populations are high. But even still, they are stealthy and solitary, making them difficult to find except for chance encounters. In winter, you can follow their tracks in the snow. In summer, you might spot them hunting voles at the edge of clearings or along grassy roadsides. It is not uncommon to see them looking for food in residential areas.

Round ears with no tufts or beard.

Cougar

Puma concolor

Large body, overall golden colour.

Long tail.

iStock/Evgeny555



Where to look:

Cougars are occasionally spotted in Yukon. They are elusive and stealthy, and though they will come close to human habitation, they are rarely seen or cause conflict. Your best chance at seeing one is in southern Yukon near the BC border, though they have been seen further north. Please report any sightings to the Department of Environment.

Coyote

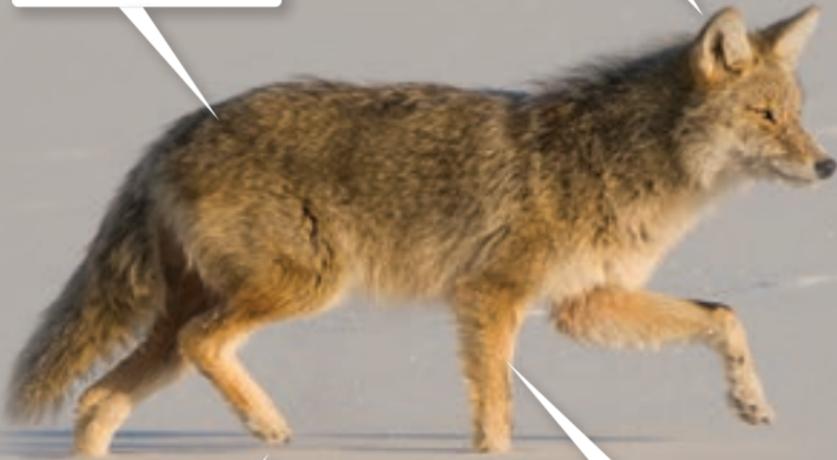
Canis lantrans

Gordon Court



Tawny grey to tan colour fur.

Longer, more pointed snout and ears than wolves.



Proportionally smaller feet than wolves.

Dog-like delicate body with skinny legs.

Where to look:

Coyotes are one of Yukon's "newest" carnivores, first reported in 1944. They are highly adaptable and comfortable living around fringes of human settlements, ranging as far north as Dawson City. More solitary than wolves, they hunt and live alone or with a mate. They are most active at night and can be spotted along roads or suburbs or heard yipping at first light.



Grey Wolf

Canis lupus



Similar to a large dog such as a husky but with a bigger head, longer body and longer tail.

Fur colours vary widely from white to tawny to black.

Relative
size of prints



Large feet allow them to effectively travel in areas of deep snow.

Where to look:

Grey Wolves are found all over Yukon, even up to the Arctic coast. They will venture into urban centres, but are much more sensitive and elusive than Coyotes. Since they are wary of humans, they are difficult to see, but howling in the evening might get a response from a nearby pack. Despite this, you can easily see their tracks almost anywhere in Yukon.



Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*



Slender muzzle with very pointed ears.

Very long, very bushy tail.

Black fur stockings, white throat and chest.

All the foxes on this page are the same species, but with different markings and colours.

Cross fox

Silver fox

Dark band of guard hairs crossing over shoulders and back.

Black coat with white-tipped guard hairs.



Where to look:

Red Foxes, including Silver foxes and Cross foxes, are found in almost every habitat across Yukon. They are highly adaptable and comfortable with humans, and a common sight on city streets, even in Whitehorse. Watch for foxes particularly around dawn and dusk, when they are most active.

Arctic Fox

Vulpes lagopus



White fur in winter;
brownish-blue fur
in summer.

Summer coat

Short ears, legs
and muzzle.

Not much bigger than a large
house cat; much smaller than
a Red Fox.



Winter coat



Where to look:

Arctic Foxes are only found on the Yukon North Slope and Herschel Island-Qikiqtaruk. If you're lucky enough to visit this remote part of the territory, the treeless landscape makes them relatively easy to spot from a distance.

American Black Bear

Ursus americanus



Side profile of the face is straight and flat from nose to ears.

Short claws.

Generally black in colour, but can vary from brown to cinnamon to blonde.

Where to look:

Black Bears range across Yukon to the tree line. All of Yukon is bear country. You have a chance of seeing them wherever you are, including the trails close to the town centres of any community across Yukon. Spend time watching sunny slopes where bears might be foraging for green plants and berries.

Polar Bear

Ursus maritimus

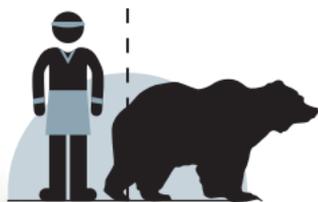
Long streamlined body.

Entirely white fur often tinged with a yellow stain.



Grizzly Bear

Ursus arctos



Characteristic hump on its shoulders is the best way to distinguish it from a Black Bear.

Side profile of the face has an upturned nose.

Range in colour from brown to black to blonde. Long guard hairs have lighter tips which give the bear a 'grizzled' appearance.

Emily Court

Where to look:

Grizzly Bears are found all over Yukon, even in the alpine above the treeline and the Arctic tundra. For a better chance at seeing a Grizzly Bear, head out for a hike in the backcountry or on a canoe trip. Remember to carry bear spray and maintain a healthy distance, viewing bears through binoculars or a scope.

Where to look:

Polar Bears are marine mammals and spend most of their lives out on the sea ice. In Yukon, they are only found on the North Slope and Herschel Island-Qikiqtaruk. If you're visiting the Arctic coast, never stray far from camp without protection.



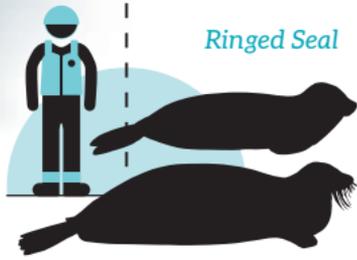
Ringed Seal

Pusa hispida

Dark grey coat.

Pale grey rings on back and sides.

Pups have a soft, white coat.



Ringed Seal

Bearded Seal

Bearded Seal

Erignathus barbatus

Large eyes.

Very large seal with darker brown coat.

Conspicuous moustache composed of very long whiskers.



Where to look:

These seals are marine carnivores that live in the coastal waters of the Beaufort Sea. They eat mollusks, crustaceans, and fish. You'll have to travel to Yukon's North Slope or Herschel Island-Qikiqtaruk for a chance to spot them.



Viewing carnivores respectfully

Since Yukon's carnivores are generally solitary, elusive, nocturnal and occupy huge ranges, viewing them can be particularly challenging. Though attacks on humans are extremely rare, you'll want to maintain a safe and respectful distance.

Finding the animal you are looking for takes a lot of patience and luck. Start by learning more about the species and its preferred habitat. You're more likely to spot an otter on a river shore and an American Marten in a tree. Least Weasels live all across Yukon, but Arctic Foxes are only found in the far north.

Go for a walk, paddle, ski, or drive at dawn or dusk, moving slowly and quietly. Stop and look around frequently; something could be close by, just waiting for you to move on. If you're lucky enough to get a sighting, stop and enjoy the moment, it usually doesn't last long. The animal will catch your scent and hurry away. Always remember to carry bear spray.



For your safety and theirs

Carnivores play an important role in our ecosystem and provide balance in the natural food web. Living in Yukon gives us a wonderful opportunity to observe nature, but it also means we have to be careful and respectful of all wildlife.



- ▶ Never approach animals, especially those with young. They may be defending a kill or protecting their litters, so it's important to give them lots of space.
- ▶ All of Yukon is bear country and bears may be active at any time of year. Always carry bear spray, even in winter, and review bear safety information regularly. You can find bear safety tips

and read our booklet *How you can stay safe in bear country* on [Yukon.ca/stay-safe-bear-country](https://www.yukon.ca/stay-safe-bear-country).

- ▶ Be respectful of traplines and keep your dog on a leash to keep it safe.
- ▶ Never feed wildlife. Ensure that your bird feeders are out of reach, garbage is secure, chickens protected, and pet food kept inside.

Some carnivores are comfortable living close to humans. We need to take care to keep wildlife wild and alive. Pick up a copy of *Living with foxes* from a Department of Environment office or download it from [Yukon.ca/living-foxes](https://www.yukon.ca/living-foxes), for tips on securing your property. In addition, review information on wilderness safety at [Yukon.ca/en/outdoor-recreation-and-wildlife/wilderness-safety](https://www.yukon.ca/en/outdoor-recreation-and-wildlife/wilderness-safety).





Urban wildlife

Living in Yukon provides us with an amazing opportunity to see wildlife up close, right in our own backyards. Whitehorse is truly the “wilderness city” and Yukon’s rural communities have even more interactions with wildlife.

All animals have been forced to change their lifestyles around the encroachment of humans into their natural habitat. Some animals keep their distance, while others have adapted to survive in an urban landscape. We can coexist with wildlife in town, but only if we help them stay wild.

Human food sources often attract animals closer to town than is healthy. Remember that all carnivores will take advantage of an easy meal and have a varied diet. Foxes, Coyotes, bears and even wolves will eat garbage, vegetable gardens, berry patches, fruit trees, seeds from bird feeders, and pets. Though they are usually focused on the easy meal rather than attacking humans, they may become aggressive and dangerous if they are startled or threatened. They often become roadkill or need to be euthanized to protect the neighbourhood.

All Yukoners have a responsibility to take care of our wildlife. Follow the guidelines set out by the Government of Yukon to manage your wildlife attractants and on how to coexist with urban wildlife. While we do not need to live in fear, we should be vigilant and proactive in keeping our distance, and keeping wildlife wild and alive.



Cameron Eckert

Roadside viewing

Sometimes the easiest place to spot an animal is from the comfort and safety of your car. Roads cut across our territory, fragmenting habitat and forcing animals out in the open. Travelling at dawn or dusk will give you the best opportunities for seeing wildlife, but slow down and drive carefully. Remember these steps if you happen to spot an animal while driving:

STOP only in places with good sight lines and pull well over, for the safety of other drivers.

LOOK from inside your car, for your own safety. Do not get out and take a selfie with your phone!

LEAVE within one minute, for the safety of the animal. Wildlife that are too comfortable around people may become aggressive and need to be euthanized.

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Yukon