

Wildlife in the Woods

Chapter 1: Introduction

The forests of Oregon are full of organisms—animals and plants, big and small, furry and feathered and scaly. All of these organisms have traits that make them well-suited to living in the environment of Oregon. To learn about some of the organisms of the Oregon forest, read one or more of the chapters that follow.



Parts of Oregon are covered with forests. Those forests are home to all kinds of organisms.

Chapter 2: Western Harvest Mouse

Western harvest mice are tiny, even for mice: an adult only grows to about 7.6 centimeters (3 inches) long, plus a tail of about the same length. These mice have large, hairless ears, pale bellies, and dark stripes down their backs. Like all mice, they have large front teeth that are good for gnawing hard food.

Western harvest mice got their name because they harvest (pick and eat) the seeds of plants in grassy areas. They hide extra food underground using holes left behind by other small animals. Western harvest mice weave grass into soft nests about the size and shape of a baseball, where they hide all day. These tiny mice mostly come out at night and are especially active on dark, moonless nights when it is harder for predators to see them.

Predators that eat western harvest mice include snakes, owls, hawks, and foxes. To avoid being eaten, the mice spend a lot of time hiding in covered places: they build their nests deep in grass, underground, or under fallen trees.

These tiny mice usually live less than a year, but they reproduce a lot: about once a month, each female may give birth to up to nine babies.



The adult western harvest mouse is only about 7.6 cm (3 in) long.

Chapter 3: Common Garter Snake

Common garter snakes are colorful snakes with long stripes that may be green, blue, red, orange, yellow, or brown. They can grow up to 1.2 meters (4 feet) long, but they are slender and harmless to humans.

Often living along the edges of lakes and ponds, common garter snakes hunt small prey both on land and in the water. Their excellent sense of smell helps them to find and catch young fish, frogs, newts, worms, insects, and other small animals. Like most snakes, they swallow prey whole.

Garter snakes' stripes make it harder for predators to see them when they are hiding in grass or reeds. Predators that eat garter snakes include larger snakes, birds, fish, and dogs. If caught, garter snakes produce a foul odor to try to drive their predators away. Unlike many other snakes, common garter snakes do not lay eggs. Instead, they give birth to live young—as many as 40 little snakes at once!



The stripes of common garter snakes make them harder to see when they're hiding in grass or reeds.

Chapter 4: Western Screech-Owl

The gray-and-white feathers of the western screech-owl blend in perfectly against tree bark, helping it to hide during the day. This small owl has large yellow eyes and two feathery tufts on its head. Western screech-owls often live in tall Douglas fir trees, usually at the edges of ponds or grassy areas.

At night, western screech-owls use their excellent senses of sight and hearing to watch and listen for small prey. They swoop silently down from trees to grab mice, small birds, and large insects with their powerful feet. However, due to their small size, screech-owls have to be on the lookout for larger night predators that might eat them, such as great horned owls, raccoons, and skunks. Western screech-owls use camouflage to stay safe from predators: they stretch to be as tall as possible, hold their feathers flat against their bodies, and close their eyes so they look like part of the branch they're sitting on.

Western screech-owls lay their eggs in holes in trees without adding any sticks or other nesting material. Males and females work together to guard their nests and bring food for the young birds once they hatch. These owls guard their nests boldly, and may even attack humans who come too close.



A western screech-owl's markings act as camouflage when it sits in a tree

Chapter 5: American Black Bear

American black bears are not always black: their fur may be brown, reddish, or even white! Large males often grow to weigh about 250 kilograms (550 pounds). Black bears' powerful legs are tipped with long, sharp claws excellent for fighting, climbing trees, and clawing beehives open.

Hungry black bears will eat almost anything. Most of their food comes from plants, including nuts, berries, tree bark, and soft young leaves. They also eat honey, as well as bees, ants, and other insects. Many black bears hunt for salmon in rivers. Black bears don't usually hunt for land animals, but they will eat dead animals when they find them. Black bears are smart and curious, exploring their environment for anything they might be able to eat.

Adult black bears are so big that they are rarely attacked by predators. Instead, the most dangerous part of black bears' environment is people. Many bears are killed by hunters or hit by cars, and the more bears come into contact with humans, the more likely they are to be killed. Black bears also sometimes die because they can't find enough food—it takes a lot of fish, nuts, berries, honey, and insects for such a large animal to stay alive. Bears that must compete with many other bears for their food, or that live in places where food is scarce, may not survive for long.



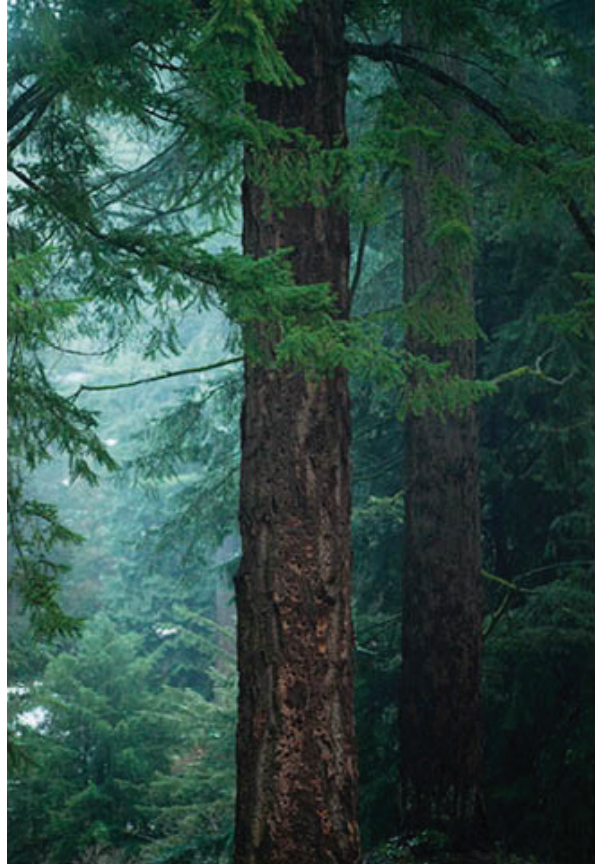
Black bears eat almost anything, including salmon they hunt in rivers.

Chapter 6: Douglas Fir Tree

Douglas firs are some of the tallest trees on Earth. They can grow more than 91 meters (300 feet) tall, with trunks up to 6 m (20 ft) across! These evergreen trees have blue-green needles and seed-filled cones. Once they shoot up from tiny seeds, Douglas fir trees may live 1,000 years or more. The Douglas fir supplies many other species with the food they need to survive: many birds, insects, and other small animals eat the seeds of Douglas firs, and deer eat soft new needles early in the spring. Black bears like to scrape the bark off young trees and eat the sticky sap that drips out. These species feed off the Douglas fir, but they do not kill it.

One threat to the Douglas fir tree is fire. However, Douglas firs have thick bark that can protect their wood from the heat of forest fires. Insects can also threaten Douglas firs: certain types of beetle burrow into the trees' trunks and can eventually kill the trees. To discourage beetles from invading, Douglas firs can put out large streams of sap that pour down the sides of their trunks. The thick sap fills in any holes the beetles have made, trapping the beetles inside and drowning them. Beetles on the outside of the tree may also be stuck in the sap and die.

Humans are one of the biggest threats to Douglas firs. For thousands of years, people have cut down Douglas firs and used the wood to build houses, boats, and other things. Ancient Hawaiians found Douglas fir logs from across the Pacific Ocean washed up on beaches and used them to build huge canoes.



Douglas fir trees can grow more than 91 m (300 ft) tall and have trunks more than 6 m (20 ft) across.

Chapter 7: Oregon Grape-Holly

Oregon grape-holly was named for its berries, which look like grapes, and its leaves, which look like holly leaves. Like holly, this plant has sharp spines sticking out from the edges of its leaves. The sharp spines protect the leaves from deer and other leaf-eating animals.

In spring, bright yellow flowers bloom on Oregon grape-holly plants—these flowers are the official state flower of Oregon. The flowers give way to clusters of berries in summer, which ripen to become dark purple. Birds, black bears, and other animals eat these sour berries.



Oregon grape-holly berries are dark purple when they're ripe.