

# Where the wild things are

## Flora and fauna of the Methow

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**T**hanks to its size, latitudinal extent, and diverse terrain, the Methow Valley is home to a vast array of plants and animals. This article offers an overview of the valley's habitat types, and a look at some of the plant groups and animal species that occupy them.

The Methow offers four major habitat types for plants and animals to colonize: forest, shrub-steppe, riparian and aquatic.

- Forested lands receive enough moisture to support trees, and vary from dry forests where trees may be widely spaced to denser stands in cooler and wetter areas – often at higher elevations.

- In the shrub-steppe, trees are few or non-existent due to lack of water; shrubs fill the ecological niche that's occupied by trees in forests. Long considered barren wastelands, areas of shrub-steppe are now understood to be rich storehouses of plant and animal diversity.

- Riparian areas – those adjacent to water bodies – have access to plenty of water and support diverse trees and shrubs. Straddling the edge between water and land, they are house abundant resources and are more important than their size would suggest.

- Aquatic systems – rivers, streams and lakes – are home to few plants but many animals.

### ■ THE FLORA

Forests, shrub-steppe and riparian areas all support a mix of vegetation types: trees, shrubs and forbs (the botanical term for grasses, wildflowers and other non-woody flowering plants).

Trees grow primarily in forested and riparian areas. Generally, shrub-steppe is too dry to support them, although they may appear



Photo by ASHLEY LODATO

in spots where there's adequate moisture.

Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir are two prominent tree species at lower and mid elevations. Both are adapted to fire, and forests like those in the Methow Valley thrive on periodic low-intensity burning. Other pines and true firs become more common at higher altitudes, and there's a smattering of Western Red Cedars in moister places. In the mountains, larches provide a spectacular color show when their needles turn gold in the fall.

Riparian zones, and wetter spots within forests, may support cottonwoods, aspens, alders, willows and birches. Scouler's Willow is a common find in local forests – unlike most of the willows, it will grow

on drier sites, away from lakes and streams.

Shrubs are workhorses of arid-zone ecosystems, providing food – pollen, nectar, berries and leafy browse – for numerous animal species. With their colorful flowers and fruit, shrubs are a delight to the eye as well. Wax currant is an early harbinger of spring; tradition holds that the hummingbirds return to the valley when the currants bloom. Serviceberry lights up the landscape with its white flowers in mid-spring, and some late-flowering specimens may be found at higher elevations into the summer.

In the shrub-steppe, where few trees survive, shrubs such as sagebrush, bitterbrush and rabbitbrush take their place, providing perches,

refuge and nesting places for birds.

Wildflowers are charismatic representatives of the forbs, bringing a color show that advances up valley and into the high country as days lengthen, temperatures rise, and snow melts to reveal bare soil. Bloom starts as early as March on the valley floor at the southern end of the valley, peaks in the high country in July, and lasts into fall where temperatures permit. Flowers range from tiny belly flowers like Whitflow-grass (best seen by lying on your belly) to big eye-catching species like balsamroot. Occasionally, following a fire, you may see swathes of a single species such as lupine, shooting star, or prairie star flower. In spite of their small size, wildflowers are key components of the valley's

ecosystem in their relationships with bees and other pollinators.

## ■ THE FAUNA

The valley's forest, shrub-steppe, riparian and aquatic habitats are home to a lot of kinds of animals. Hundreds of species spend at least part of their life cycles here; they include more than 270 species of birds, 70 species of non-avian vertebrates, and more invertebrates than we've been able to catalog. Those animal populations include a number of keystone species that provide broad support for the ecosystems to which they belong.

The concept of keystone species was introduced about 50 years ago. It is supported by our growing understanding that complex ecological relationships are often held in place by a single species or group of species – just as a single keystone is able to support an architectural arch, and all the weight above it, so can a keystone species play an outsized role in a natural system. Some of the Methow Valley's keystone animals are:

- **Beavers.** Beavers shaped much of the landscape of North America, and in recent years have gained increased appreciation for their role in creating habitat for plants and other animals and retaining water in the landscape. Birds, insects, fish, mammals, frogs salamanders and more thrive on beaver-engineered ground.

Some of the water trapped by beaver dams seeps into the ground to support moisture-loving plants; some provides habitat for fish, amphibians, reptiles and water-dependent mammals like muskrats and mink; some slowly makes its way through the dam and flows downstream, recharging rivers during the

- **Deer.** The Methow Valley is home to Washington state's largest migratory mule deer population. Deer are important both ecologically and economically. They are the wild mammals you are most likely to see here. They're especially important to remember when you're driving.

Although they are most likely to be encountered in certain places and at certain times of day, the best rule of thumb is to expect deer anywhere at any time. Keep an eye on the margins of the road and be aware that deer often travel in groups – if one deer crosses the road in front of you, others may follow. Does are likely to be accompanied by a fawn or two, which may lag behind their mother.

- **Wasps.** Yellow jackets and

hot dry summer months.

The plants that surround beaver ponds attract insects and birds; the insects feed the birds and also the fish. The beavers' role in watershed function has earned them the moniker "ecosystem engineers" along with recognition as a keystone species.

- **Gray wolves.** Once extirpated throughout much of their range, wolves are making a comeback in Washington, and two packs have become established in and around the Methow Valley. As predators that can feed on livestock, wolves are controversial. They also play a keystone role in the mountain systems they inhabit, keeping

# Be on the Lookout

bald-faced hornets (which are actually wasps, not hornets, biologically) both deserve your cautious attention. Yellow jackets, in particular, are likely to show up as uninvited guests at any outdoor meal.

- **Ticks.** Ticks can hitchhike on clothes and gear or fall into your hair as you travel through densely-vegetated areas. Since tick bites can cause disease, it's smart to examine your clothes, gear, and body – and those of any pets – after you've been outdoors during tick season (typically spring and summer). If you are bitten, consider follow the CDC's recommendations. You can find them at [www.cdc.gov/ticks](http://www.cdc.gov/ticks).

- **Rattlesnakes.** Keep your eyes and ears open for rattlers, and

give them a wide berth if you do encounter them. Rattlesnakes won't generally strike unless they feel threatened, but their bites can be dangerous. They are more common in some parts of the valley than in others – Pipestone Canyon is a notorious haven – but it's prudent to be watchful wherever you are.

Keep dogs under control, and consider vaccination and/or aversion training for your canines. See the Resources section for WDFW advice about what to do in case of snake bite.

- **Cougars and bears.** Encounters with large dangerous animals are unlikely, but both cougars and bears are present in the Methow, and it's safe to be cautious.

populations of deer and other prey species in check.

What does that mean for the system as a whole? Plants are protected from overgrazing by deer, elk and moose; trees and shrubs have a chance to mature and provide habitat for other animals, such as rodents, forest carnivores, birds, butterflies and other insects.

- **Native bees.** About 80% of flowering plants are pollinated by animals, many of them bees. Because animals ultimately depend on plants for survival, the role of bees in keeping both wild and cultivated lands healthy is immeasurable. Trees, shrubs, grasses and wildflowers all reproduce with the

aid of bees – and then provide food for many more kinds of animals. Washington is a diversity hot-spot for native bees, with more than 600 species living in the state.

- **Salmon.** As our streams and rivers flow toward the sea, they carry a load of nutrients with them – dissolved and suspended minerals, plant and animal detritus all leave the watershed by water power. Salmon journey to the oceans, then return, bringing loads of nutrients to replenish their home streams. Those nutrients support dozens of other animals that feed on the salmon, their eggs, and their carcasses, as well as microorganisms that also play a role in the food web.



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