

YOU'LL NEVER BELIEVE WHAT I SAW!



MONTANA'S WEIRDEST FISH AND WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

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LIMA RESERVOIR, A REMOTE impoundment in Montana's far southwestern corner, is an unlikely place to see a visiting celebrity. But on its glassy surface in 1998, Bill Schenk spotted Pink Floyd.

Not the psychedelic British rock band, but rather a Chilean flamingo. The leggy South American native apparently had escaped from a Utah aviary and was observed frequently enough in the Salt Lake City area through the 1990s to earn the colorful monicker. Schenk, a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist in Helena, was helping a friend monitor sage grouse in the southwestern valley that contains the reservoir when he spotted the flamingo.

"Our first glance at the open water revealed an assortment of ducks and Canada geese," says Schenk. "Then we saw this bright pink bird. At first I thought it was a joke, a lawn ornament floating on the water. Then it swam around and flapped its wings."

Schenk's sighting solved a mystery. Originally brought to Utah from its native range in Florida or farther south, the liberated Pink Floyd spent winters on Utah's Great Salt Lake, where he waded shallow flats and ate enough brine shrimp to maintain his bright pink plumage. But no one knew where he went in summer. After quizzing other southwestern Montana birders, Schenk learned the flamingo had also been spotted at Clark Canyon Reservoir and the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, consorting with tundra swans and geese (and probably pining for a mate).

Pink Floyd is just one of many oddball animal sightings that occur regularly in Montana. Others include large mammals searching for new places to live, foreign migrating birds veering far off course, all types of albino critters, strange hitchhikers that appear from southern states, and animals intentionally imported to or transplanted within Montana.

Montana contains a wide variety of native animals—from picas to porcupines—because Montana contains so many different types of habitats, including alpine peaks, mountain streams, farmlands, and prairie potholes. Montanans expect to see a variety of wildlife. But when an animal appears outside its usual habitat, that's when people really sit up and take notice—and when the telephones at FWP and newspaper offices start ringing.

Pink Floyd's Montana appearance was hard to miss, but the bull moose that loitered around Nelson Reservoir in northeastern Montana a few years ago was cleverly disguised. During a scorching hot

day in 1999, FWP technicians surveying fish in the Phillips County impoundment noticed a black stump poking from the water. At first they attributed it to the low water level, but because Nelson is a flooded prairie, not forest, a stump under the surface seemed unusual. So the crew boated closer. The "stump" turned out to be a young bull moose, completely submerged except for his head, probably to stay cool and keep the area's notorious mosquitoes from sucking him dry.

The moose stayed around Nelson for a week, then moved on. His presence caused a momentary stir. Though moose are considered woodland creatures, they periodically roam from their preferred habitat, and every couple of years eastern Montana coffee shops are abuzz with reports of a moose on the prairie, looking as out of place there as a steamship.

Yet flatland moose are not as far off course as many people might think. "Much of north-central Montana is prairie between islands of moose habitat," says Al Rosgaard, FWP wildlife biologist in Havre. "Moose are found north of us in the Cypress Hills of eastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan, and south of us in the small mountain ranges between Great Falls and Lewistown."

Rosgaard explains that yearling moose are pushed out of their mother's home range. If they can't find vacant habitat in the woods, they often follow streamside corridors such as the Milk River and Frenchman Creek looking for unoccupied living places. Sometimes the straying youngsters end up in highly visible areas such as Nelson Reservoir.

Or Medicine Lake. This prairie pothole in extreme northeastern Montana has had its share of unlikely visitors. People have reported seeing woodland species such as moose, black bears, wolverines, and even caribou in the open, treeless prairie near the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Often, strange wildlife sightings aren't hard to miss. Dave Yerk certainly noticed the tan-and-white forms bobbing along the surface of Holter Lake, where he worked as an FWP fisheries biologist. They were antelope, swimming across the reservoir. Yerk, now stationed in Choteau, also once spotted a mountain goat paddling across Canyon Ferry Reservoir.

Other white animals seen around the state are true oddities. Rare albino animals have a complete lack of pigment, including in the iris (accounting for the pink eyes). Crows, squirrels, white-tailed deer, and raccoons are among the species most prone to albinism. More common are "partially albinistic" animals, which have some white coloration mixed with normal pigmentation. The most well-

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known examples are the piebald (or spotted) deer reported every few years. An even rarer color aberration is all-black. It shows up in some squirrels and

other critters that have overactive pigment cells.

Indigenous animals naturally wandering into new surroundings are curiosities but rarely biological problems. That's not true for the many exotic animals that people move into new habitats. Wildlife and fisheries professionals say exotic creatures are becoming more than just oddities and are actually taking root and even displacing natives.

Piranha-like pacu have turned up in Foy's Lake west of Kalispell and Lake Elmo in Billings. The hand-sized fish, native to the Amazon Basin, likely arrived in Montana through the tropical fish trade.

"Somebody probably raised the pacu in an aquarium and got tired of them," says Jim Vashro, FWP regional fisheries manager in Kalispell. "Instead of killing the fish or flushing them down the toilet, they turned them loose in the neighborhood pond."

Vashro, who maintains a database of illegal fish introductions across Montana, has logged 440 separate introductions, ranging from an oscar (another tropical fish) in Lake Josephine near Billings to channel catfish in Kalispell's Woodland Park Pond. And in Little Bitterroot Lake, west of Kalispell, someone actually found a starfish.

Illegal introductions aren't as frequent with terrestrial animals, thanks to a rigorous new system requiring anyone who wants to import exotic wildlife into Montana to apply for a permit. Previously, however, nearly any animal could be brought into the state, as game warden Mark Earnhardt found out in 1991 outside Havre.

"We got calls from some folks that a black mountain lion had been killing pet peacocks," says Earnhardt, now based in Helena. "I followed leads to an abandoned trailer house outside town and shined my flashlight under some outbuildings. Staring back at me was a big black cat, about 3 feet long." It turned out to be a black leopard being kept as a pet. "When the owner

arrived, he crawled under the trailer, grabbed the leopard by the tail, and carried it off," says Earnhardt, who never learned where the cat's peacock snacks came from.

Some wildlife take advantage of human development to expand their range into strange places. That's likely the case with the dead opossum found near railroad tracks in

Decker, the coal-mining community of southeastern Montana.

Highly omnivorous



and nocturnal, opossums aren't native to Montana, where harsh winters limit their survival.

"We suspect it hitched a ride on a coal train from points farther east and south," says Jack Austin, FWP warden sergeant in Miles City. "Apparently it was hit by a car or a train at a railroad crossing."

Because mammals typically walk to new habitat, their distribution is limited largely by landscapes. That's not the case with birds, however, which can have a far more expansive distribution. This past winter, the birding world was abuzz with reports of a Siberian accentor spotted near Gardiner. Birders from 27 states descended on Paradise Valley to catch a glimpse of the rare warblerlike bird, which had strayed from northern Asia.

Sometimes an unusual bird is detected only after being killed. That was the case with an ancient murrelet downed by waterfowl hunters on the Missouri River. "My hunting companion mistook it for a hen bufflehead," says John Little, FWP regional parks manager in Miles City. "That's what I thought it was, too, until I saw it had a beak instead of a bill."

Related to the puffin, the ancient murrelet is an ocean bird more commonly found on the North Pacific than on inland rivers.

Some exotic animals, such as ring-necked pheasants and yellow perch, were intentionally imported into Montana and are actively managed for recreational opportunities. Others, such as starlings and carp, are unwelcome visitors so imbedded in the state that eradicating them would be impossible.



Gray wolves and grizzly bears are native to much of Montana, but human activity has pushed them into small, remote enclaves. Recovery plans encourage these species to reoccupy some of their historic range. If that happens, you can expect to hear about more unexpected sightings in nontraditional habitats. That's certainly been the case with elk, historically more common in Montana prairies than the mountains. They now seem to be spreading back to their native grasslands.

If you see an animal you suspect is out of place, pick up a nature guide and study animal descriptions and distributions. There's a good chance the animal actually belongs there. If not, note its location and any distinguishing marks or colorations, take a photograph if possible, and report the sighting to an FWP office.

Sometimes a strange sighting indicates gradual and potentially significant habitat changes, says FWP's Steve Carson, who is compiling a database of unusual wildlife sightings around the state. The presence of warm-weather species such as opossums, flamingos, or even tarantulas could indicate that Montana's climate is becoming warmer and drier.

Other times, the appearance of an unusual critter is simply an innocuous footnote to a person's day, an indication that we live in a world where nature's rules are elastic and wildlife can be far more mobile than we ever thought possible. 🐾