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Threatened Species and Habitats Along the Lewis and Clark Trail

During the Lewis and Clark expedition from 1804 to 1806, the two explorers documented 120 different species of mammals, birds, reptiles and fish, and more than 180 plant species.

The men and their Corps of Discovery traveled 8,000 miles through the grasslands, mountains, forests and waterways of the western United States, describing the huge numbers of species that lived in those habitats. At one point, the expedition even wrote that animals were so abundant, the team had trouble moving forward past them.

“The game is getting so plenty and tame in this country that some of the party clubbed them out of their way,” wrote one member of the expedition on May 9, 1805, as the team crossed through Montana.

But today, many of the habitats documented by Lewis and Clark face severe threats and the diverse species that rely on them are quickly disappearing from the American landscape.

The Tallgrass Prairie, which once spanned 142 million acres across 14 states, is today one-tenth its original size.

The great Missouri River, along which the men first began their journey, would not be recognized by the Corps of Discovery today. Six dams and countless levies have transformed the river, making it 127 miles shorter and one-third as wide as it was in 1804

And the animals that depend on these diverse habitats are facing serious threats.

Many species first documented by Lewis and Clark are now federally listed as threatened or endangered. They include: the grizzly bear, the least tern, white sturgeon and the sea otter.

Many others are candidates for federal or state listing, such as the Black-Tailed Prairie Dog, the Oregon Spotted Frog, Lewis’s Woodpecker, and the Swift Fox.

Audubon’s Mountain Sheep, first sited by Lewis and Clark in 1805 near the mouth of the Yellowstone River in North Dakota, are now extinct.

Following is a list of animal species prevalent during Lewis and Clark’s expedition that now face serious threats to their survival.

Grizzly Bear

Status: Threatened

The Corps of Discovery killed and documented its first grizzly bear on April 29, 1805, near Big Muddy Creek in Montana.

More than 100,000 grizzlies roamed the West two centuries ago. Now, outside of Alaska, there are fewer than 1,000 grizzlies left in the United States. They can be found in pockets in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Washington.

Bison

Status: Extirpated and imperiled in numerous states

Bison, or buffalo, once totaled tens of millions in the United States. But in the late 1800s the bison were almost entirely eliminated to make room for cattle and agriculture, with only a few hundred left at the lowest point. Today they total about 1 percent of their original numbers, but enough so that the bison are no longer in danger of extinction. About 15,000 reside on public lands in the US, the rest are private herds, such as those maintained by The Nature Conservancy.

Least Tern

Status: Endangered

This small but fast bird was first spotted by Lewis and Clark in 1804 along the Missouri River in Nebraska. Least terns breed along the East and West coastlines and along rivers in the Mississippi Valley. They winter from Baja California to southern Mexico and along coasts of South America. Dams, reservoirs, and other changes to river systems have eliminated most historic least tern habitat.

White-Tailed Deer

status: Two subspecies of the white-tailed deer (the key deer and the Columbian white-tailed deer) are on the U.S. Endangered Species List.

The Key Deer is classified as endangered in Florida, and the Columbian White-tailed Deer is classified as endangered in Washington and Oregon. The Key Deer declined in number as its habitat in the Florida Keys underwent development throughout the 20th century. Development continues to be a threat to the subspecies today. The Columbian White-tailed Deer once ranged from Puget Sound to southern Oregon, where it lived in floodplain and riverside habitat. The conversion of its habitat to agriculture and unrestricted hunting greatly reduced its numbers. White-tailed deer were first documented by Lewis and Clark in 1804 at St. Charles, MO.

White Sturgeon

Status: Endangered

First documented by Lewis and Clark on November 11, 1805, at Cape Disappointment, WA, white sturgeon are now classified as endangered in Idaho and Montana. The construction of river dams as well as other human activities have affected the sturgeon's spawning, egg incubation, and offspring-rearing habitats. Efforts are underway by both Canadian and U.S. organizations to monitor the sturgeon population and the dams and waterways that affect its habitat.

Black-Tailed Prairie Dog

Status: candidate for Federal Endangered Species List

It is estimated that as many as 25 billion prairie dogs once inhabited the plains. One colony of 400 million observed in Texas in 1900 covered more than 25,000 square miles. While the burrowing behavior of prairie dogs tilled the soil and kept the plains grassy for thousands of years, Ranchers believed prairie dogs harmed the land and began slaughtering them in unbelievable numbers around the turn of the century.

First documented by Lewis and Clark on Sept. 7, 1804, in Nebraska, a live prairie dog was among the specimens sent to President Jefferson from Fort Mandan in 1805. Upon seeing their first prairie dog “town,” the team documented “The village of those animals covered about 4 acres of ground on a gradual descent of a hill and contains great numbers of holes on the top of which those little animals sit erect, make a whistling noise and with alarm step into their hole.”

Oregon Spotted Frog

Status: candidate for Federal Endangered Species List

March 29, 1806, near the mouth of Lewis’ River in WA.

Significant declines in distribution and abundance have occurred in much of its range from southwestern British Columbia to northeastern California. Major threats include introduced predators, habitat loss and degradation, and possibly global climate change.

Decline also probably is related to loss and degradation of breeding habitat such as may result from dam construction, alteration of drainage patterns, dewatering due to urban and agricultural use of water, excessive livestock grazing, and other human activities that reduce or eliminate lentic shallow water

Plains Gray Wolf

Status: Endangered

Once living across most of North America, the plains gray wolf was widely thought to be extinct by the 1920s. But recent studies suggest that gray wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan are descendants of the plains gray wolf. Today, the gray wolf is on the U.S.

Endangered Species List, and is limited largely to Alaska, Canada, Montana and Minnesota. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is now considering removing the western population of gray wolves from the Endangered Species List.

The plains gray wolf was first noted by Lewis and Clark on May 30, 1804, near present-day Leavenworth, Kansas.

For more information on America’s natural heritage and the Lewis and Clark expedition, visit:

www.nature.org

www.nationalgeographic.com/lewisandclark/index.html

<http://www.nps.gov/jeff/LewisClark2/HomePage/HomePage.htm>

www.sierraclub.org

www.enature.com

www.natureserve.org