

# Mammals

## Our seldom-seen family members

Text and photos by Joel Sartore

Say hello to your little friends. Actually, since many of them live with you, maybe you should think of them as family members, only with really odd hours and bad habits. Raccoons probably den in the storm sewers in front of your house during the day and raid your trash cans at night. Opossums get into the cat food, then play dead when your dog catches up to them. Bats sleep the day away behind your downspouts. Mice are making their home out in that pile of old stuff in the garage even as we speak, getting ready for the annual move to the basement once the weather turns cold.

Yet as populous and widespread as mammals might be, we don't often see many of them. All have been persecuted by humans since time began, so of course they're a little jumpy. The result is that most of us get only fleeting glimpses of our mammalian cousins at best, usually as they're running away in high gear.

In order to give you, the *NEBRASKA* faithful, a longer look, I've photographed as many popular mammals as I can against black and white backgrounds. Looking into their eyes was quite a revelation – each species had a personality



With lungs that take up a huge percentage of their body cavity, pronghorn antelope are built not only for speed but to run immense distances across the Plains. These two were photographed at the Great Plains Zoo in Sioux Falls, S.D.

all its own. It was also quite nice not seeing just their rear ends for a change.

For example, those groundhogs that I've always seen just as brown flashes diving for a hole under my barn are actually quite comic. One hand-raised version was brought over to my studio not long ago, where it proceeded to stand up and beg for carrots. "If you tried to do this with a wild groundhog, it'd take your face right off," said its keeper, Laura Stastny of Nebraska Wildlife Rehab. She said handling any wild animal is a bad idea.

I couldn't agree more. The badger is another example of something that's best left alone. They're the Nebraska version of a wolverine – inquisitive, energetic, feisty and more than willing to stand their ground. Again, the badger you see here, along with all the rest, came from either zoos or wildlife rescue folks, so all were conditioned to humans and at least tolerated the photographic process.

Of course, I'm still missing a few species. Most notably absent is the American bison. I tried photographing one last year at a zoo in Buffalo (how ironic), but it didn't work out as the animal wasn't hand-raised and wouldn't come close to me and my photo gear. But as the jewel in the crown of Nebraska mammals, I can't quit now.

And so a plea – if any of you know where a guy can find a hand-raised and halfway-tame bull bison that'll stand still for a quick portrait, please give me a call.

I'll be right over.

PS...I'm not kidding. ■



Thanks to the beaver, the ecology of the American West was historically much wetter than it is today. Their dams along streams created thousands of impoundments. That all changed, though, with European settlement.



Though this big brown bat looks ferocious, he's actually a sweetheart says his keeper, Laura Stastny. Bats play a critical role in our night skies, feeding on tons of insects each night across our state.



The **groundhog** goes by many names, but a favorite is 'whistle pig.' It got this nickname from the high pitch squeal it makes when danger approaches.



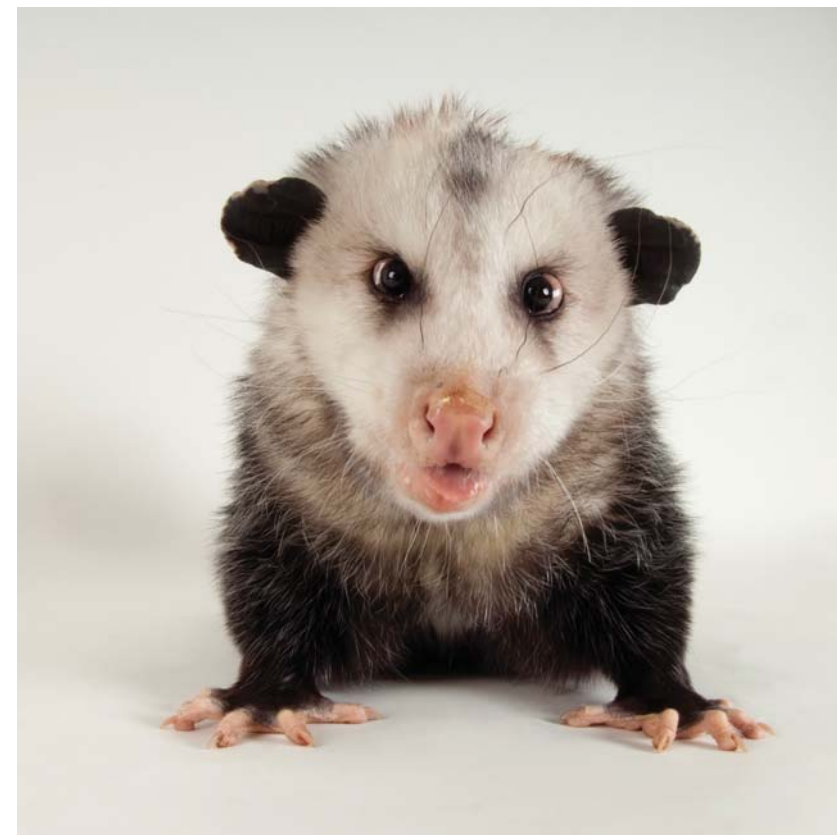
Perhaps the most-seen large Nebraska mammal in urban landscapes, the **raccoon** often travels in family groups at night. It is an extremely adaptable species, able to thrive in just about any environment.



Nocturnal and rarely seen by the average hiker, the **flying squirrel** uses folds of skin between its front and hind legs to actually glide from tree to tree.



The **red fox** is an adaptable canid, and can often be found within city limits.



When threatened, a wild **Virginia opossum** will 'play dead,' emitting a terrible smell, locking its jaws and appearing completely lifeless. It's an involuntary act in which the animal can be poked or even carried away without it waking up for several minutes or longer.



The long whiskers on a **white-footed mouse** are important touch receptors.

Though it has worked wonders with natural threats for thousands of years, the raised tail of a **skunk** is of no use against oncoming cars, hence the great number of this species you see dead along Nebraska roads.

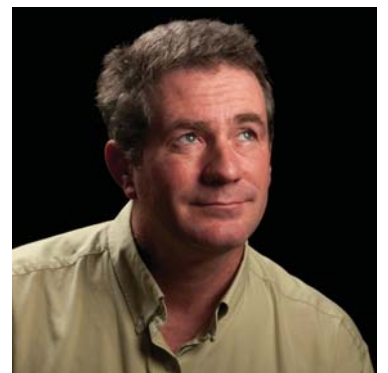


This hand-raised **badger** at a rehab center in Oregon didn't mind having his picture taken. Don't try this with a wild one.



The **coyote** is said to be one of the most adaptable and intelligent animals roaming our countryside. This animal knew to just strike a pose and wait patiently for dinner.

The **photographer** (*Homo sapiens sartoricus*) strikes a lifelike pose.



*Joel Sartore is a contributing photographer for National Geographic Magazine, speaker and author of RARE: Portraits of America's Endangered Species. To see more of his pictures of threatened and endangered species, go to [rarethebook.com](http://rarethebook.com).*