Muskrat

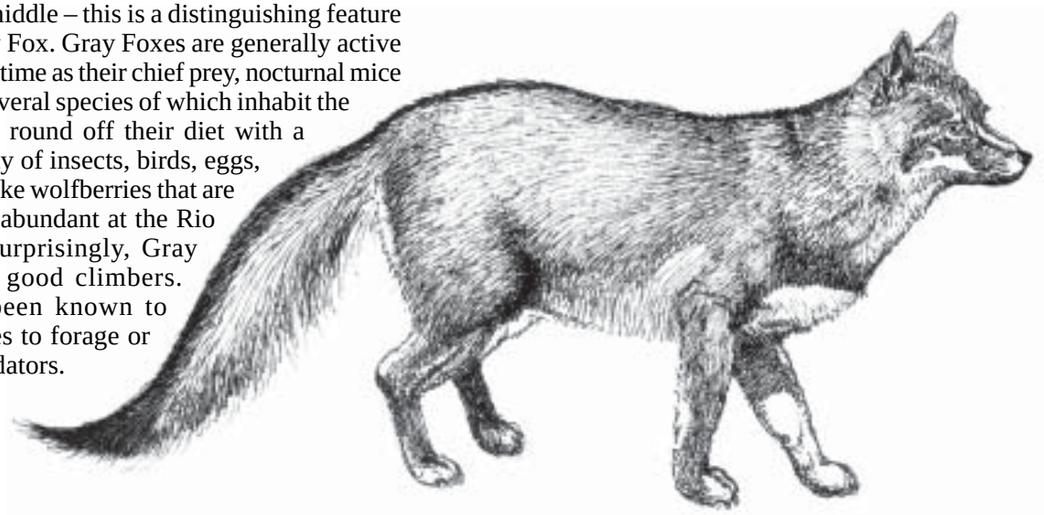
Ondatra zibethicus

Another rodent adapted to an aquatic lifestyle, the muskrat is smaller than the beaver and can easily be distinguished by its long, black, rat-like tail. Like the local beavers, muskrats burrow into the banks of water courses and make dry dens above underwater entrances. They can also construct lodges out of heaps of mud piled with cattails, sticks and leaves. Muskrats are primarily nocturnal vegetarians, but they are occasionally seen out and about during the day, and they have been known to eat clams, crayfish, fish, frogs and young birds.

Gray Fox

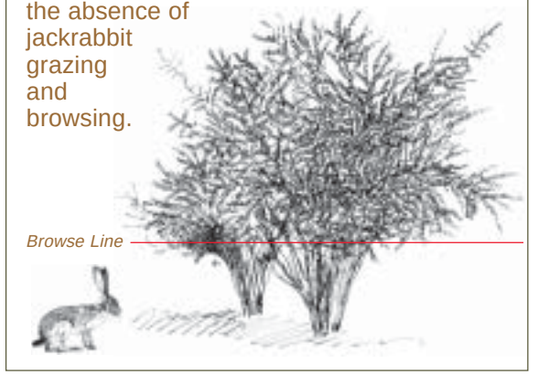
Urocyon cinereoargenteus

If you're lucky enough to see a fox, look for its long, bushy, black-tipped tail with a black strip down the middle – this is a distinguishing feature of the Gray Fox. Gray Foxes are generally active at the same time as their chief prey, nocturnal mice and rats, several species of which inhabit the park. They round off their diet with a wide variety of insects, birds, eggs, and fruits like wolfberries that are seasonally abundant at the Rio Bosque. Surprisingly, Gray Foxes are good climbers. They've been known to ascend trees to forage or escape predators.



Shaping the Landscape

Humans aren't the only ones influencing the structure and composition of the vegetation at the Rio Bosque. Black-tailed Jackrabbits browse on the foliage and shoots of shrubs like four-wing saltbush and wolfberry. Many shrubs have a distinct "browse line" where new growth survives only above the height a jackrabbit can reach. Jackrabbits are also highly effective mowing machines, probably the main cause of the scarcity of grasses in the park. The wire cages you see around some of the plantings in upland areas were installed to discourage jackrabbits. Two large areas in the north part of the park were fenced to exclude these animals. These exclosures will allow us to study how the Rio Bosque's vegetation develops in the absence of jackrabbit grazing and browsing.



On the Cover: Hispid Cotton Rat (Sigmodon hispidus), a common rodent active at night in the Rio Bosque.

Wetlands and riverside forests once graced the banks of the Rio Grande in the Paso del Norte region. They were the area's most productive natural habitats, but today they are virtually gone. At Rio Bosque Wetlands Park, the environment is still changing, but in a new way. Here, a diverse partnership is working to bring back meaningful examples of the unique and valuable ecosystems once found in our river valley.

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Text by Maria A. Trunk
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The Rio Bosque project relies on community involvement for success. Find out how you can participate: call **915-747-8663** or visit **www.cerm.utep.edu/riobosque/**

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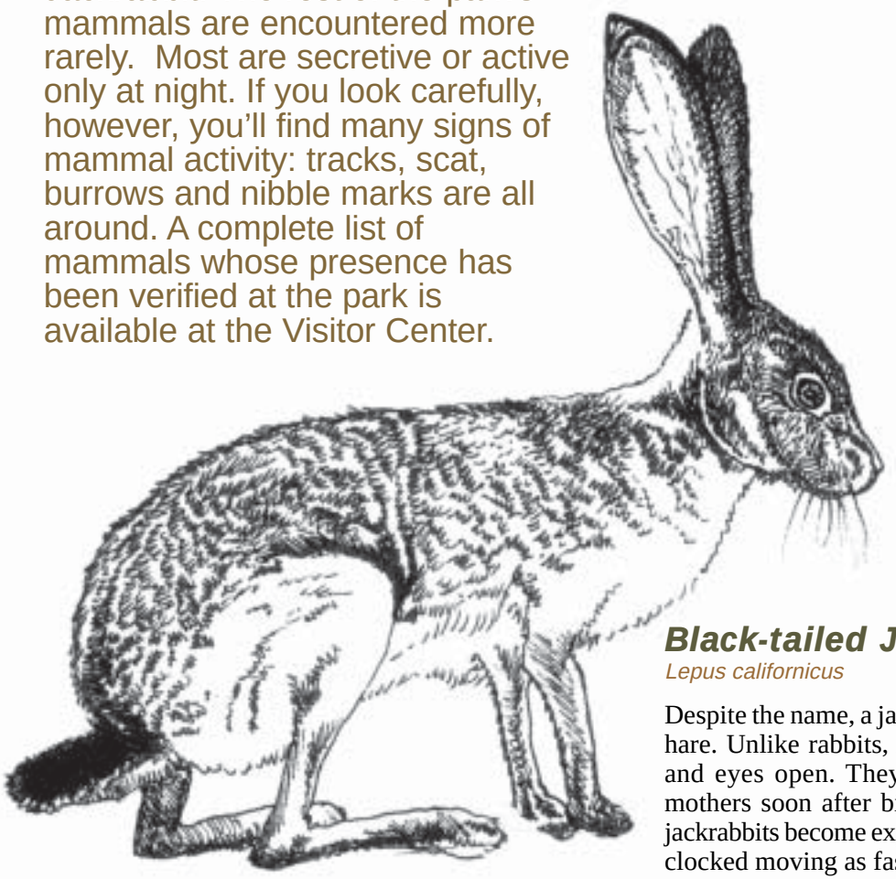
MAMMALS of the Rio Bosque

Rio Bosque Wetlands Park

El Paso, Texas

No matter what time of year you visit Rio Bosque Wetlands Park, chances are pretty good you'll catch a glimpse of a Black-tailed Jackrabbit. The rest of the park's mammals are encountered more rarely. Most are secretive or active only at night. If you look carefully, however, you'll find many signs of mammal activity: tracks, scat, burrows and nibble marks are all around. A complete list of mammals whose presence has been verified at the park is available at the Visitor Center.

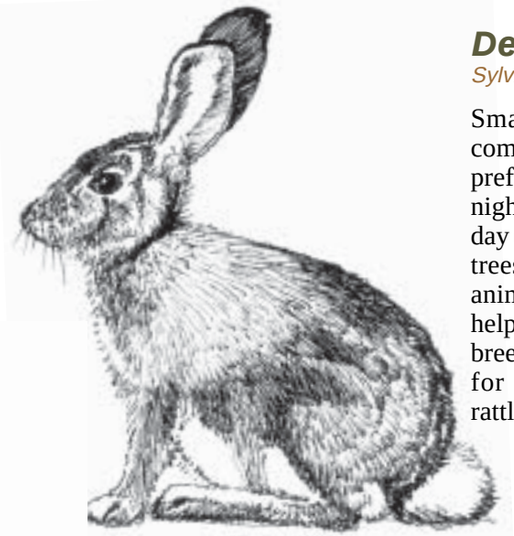


Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Lepus californicus

Despite the name, a jackrabbit isn't a rabbit – it's a hare. Unlike rabbits, hares are born with full fur and eyes open. They can hop along with their mothers soon after birth. In a short time, young jackrabbits become expert runners: some have been clocked moving as fast as 40 miles per hour.

Their most prominent features, those long ears, help jackrabbits detect predators. They also perform another very important function: packed with blood vessels, the ears act as radiators for the animal, allowing up to one-third of the body heat to escape. Look for jackrabbits in the upland, more sparsely-vegetated areas of the park.



Desert Cottontail

Sylvilagus audubonii

Smaller than jackrabbits, cottontails are less commonly seen at the Rio Bosque because they prefer to feed at dawn, dusk or throughout the night. Desert Cottontails wait out the heat of the day under cover; some have been known to climb trees or hunker down in the burrows of other animals. Cottontail young are born blind and helpless, but they develop quickly. Females can breed at 80 days old. Cottontails are staple prey for many other desert dwellers like hawks, rattlesnakes, bobcats and foxes.

Spotted Ground Squirrel

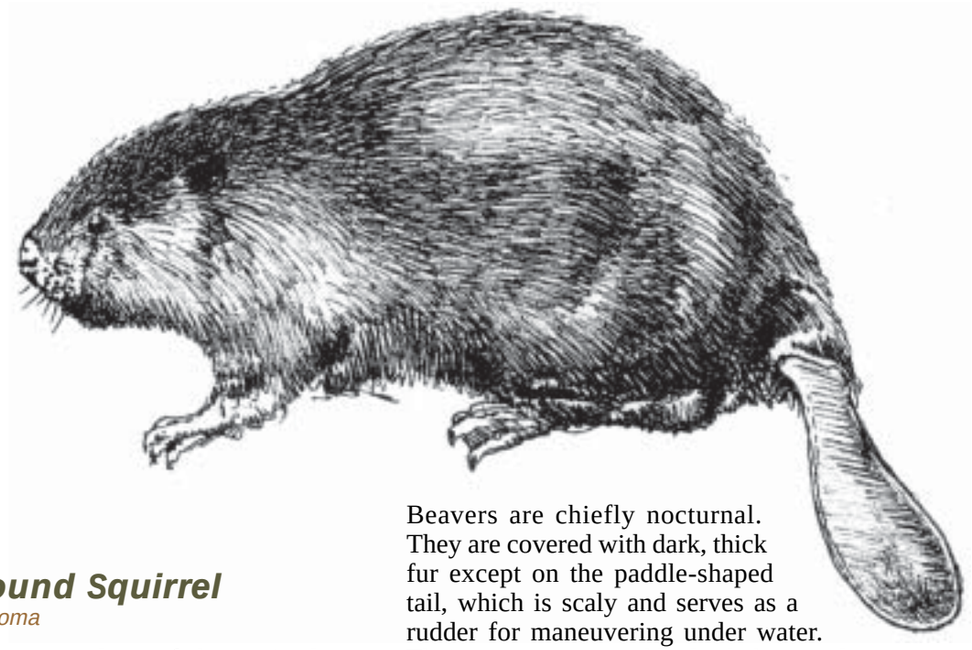
Spermophilus spilosoma

Unlike most rodents, members of the squirrel family tend to be active during the day. The Rio Bosque's representative from this group occasionally can be found sitting on its haunches, prairie dog style, near the entrance to a burrow. Spotted Ground Squirrels feed on green vegetation, seeds and insects. Their back fur is tan, blending in with the soil color, and randomly spotted with white. Their belly fur is white and their tails are small, not bushy, with a darkish tip.

Beaver

Castor canadensis

Before the Rio Grande was dammed and channelized, beavers were fairly common in the El Paso area. The broad river was unsuitable for construction of beaver dams and lodges, so the large rodents burrowed into banks, making underwater entrances that led up to snug, dry dens. The surrounding riparian forest provided abundant cottonwood and willow trees for food. As the character of the valley was altered, beaver habitat and populations declined. Today these supremely adapted aquatic mammals are found only in irrigation canals and refuges like the Rio Bosque.



Beavers are chiefly nocturnal. They are covered with dark, thick fur except on the paddle-shaped tail, which is scaly and serves as a rudder for maneuvering under water. Their rear paws are webbed to help propel them when swimming. Beavers can stay submerged for as long as 15 minutes thanks to their ability to reduce their heart rate and tolerate sizeable buildups of carbon dioxide in the blood. Beaver teeth make very effective tools for gnawing the bark off trees. Many of their favorite food species that have been planted at the Rio Bosque are encircled with cages to protect the young trees from hungry beavers.