

# Encounters with Illinois Wildlife

Illinois is home to hundreds of species of wildlife. Most are secretive and rare, but some are so widespread and common that they are an everyday part of most people's lives. For some people who are new to Illinois, many of these animals may be familiar as they have ranges that extend north from Central or South America. Other species may only resemble animals from home, may be very different in size, or be completely new.

Humans should never approach or feed wildlife, even if they appear calm or friendly. If an injured animal is found, please contact a wildlife rehabilitator. A list is available at [Wildlifellinois.org/Get-Help-For-Injured-Wildlife](http://Wildlifellinois.org/Get-Help-For-Injured-Wildlife), or reach out to an Illinois Department of Natural Resources biologist at [Wildlifellinois.org/IDNR-District-Wildlife-Biologist](http://Wildlifellinois.org/IDNR-District-Wildlife-Biologist).

## Wildlife and Diseases

Some insects, birds, and other animals can carry diseases that are extremely dangerous to your health. Note, most wild animals will not attack you.

Rabies is a fatal viral disease that impacts the brain and spinal cord. It can be transmitted through the bite or scratch of an infected animal, most commonly bats, raccoons, skunks, or foxes. If an animal is affected, it may have trouble walking, eating, or drinking. Nocturnal animals may be active during the day.

While there are fewer than 10 human deaths from rabies each year in the U.S., this low death rate is only possible because of prompt medical treatment. Without this treatment, rabies is 100% fatal. If you are bitten or scratched by a wild animal, it is vital to take action. Immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Call a health care provider for medical attention, and be prepared to provide information on the date, time, and location of where you were bitten. If you find a bat in your home, it may be necessary to test it for rabies and possibly pursue a vaccine, especially if there are children in the home or if the bat may have been near sleeping people. Call your local department of animal control to assist with bat removal and testing.

## Red Fox

The red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) is known for its red fur and white belly. Their ears, legs, and top of their feet have black fur and their tail has a white tip. Foxes can be found in grasslands, the edges of fields, and forests. Their diet is seasonal. In the summer and fall, foxes enjoy eating plants and insects, while in the spring and winter, they mostly hunt small mammals such as mice, voles, squirrels, and rabbits. They are active at night. A male fox is called a dog, and a female is a vixen. Foxes mate in January and February, and pups are born from March to April. Families are raised in underground burrows called dens. Families stay together until the fall. Red foxes can live three to seven years.

Foxes are beneficial to have around as they help control small mammal populations such as rabbits. Researchers have seen foxes moving into suburban and urban areas to avoid competition and predation from coyotes. They may make a den under porches or take refuge in other house spaces. They can become a nuisance if they kill poultry or dig their burrows under buildings.



Red Fox

## Bats

There are 13 different species of bats in Illinois. Bats are small night-flying animals, usually brown, but some species are reddish, blackish, or the color of fire ashes. During the day or when a bat is at rest, you may find them on a tree branch or trunk, in a building, under a bridge, or on the ground.

Bats are the only mammals that can fly. They are primarily nocturnal and use echolocation to navigate in the dark. Echolocation also helps bats find insects to eat. They consume 60-80% of their body mass in insects in one night. Most species of female bats give birth to a single pup at a time. Female bats produce milk from the mammary glands for the young until they can hunt on their own.

Six bat species in Illinois are listed as state-endangered or threatened. Habitat loss, a fungal disease called white-nose syndrome, wind turbines, and other causes heavily impact their population numbers. The southern Illinois region, along with the Mississippi and Illinois rivers' valleys, likely have the highest bat populations and natural bat habitat. While they do not build nests, bats may find homes in caves or roots in hollow trees, under loose tree bark, or in buildings.

Bats do not attack humans but may bite in self-defense. If a bat is in your home, do not panic. Do not try to knock the bat out of the air or catch it. Confine the bat to a room with outdoor access, open a window or door to the outside, and leave the room. Let the bat escape on its own, keeping children and pets out of the room until the bat has flown away. If a person is bitten or finds themselves in a room with a bat and is unable to adequately report if they were bitten, they should seek medical attention right away.



Little Brown Bat

## Coyote

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) range north into Canada and as far south as Panama, but the subspecies common in most of Illinois may be larger or differently colored than subspecies found further south or west on the continent. Coyotes are typically covered in gray or red-gray fur, with pointed ears and a fluffy tail. They are primarily carnivores and can be found in woodlands or prairies, hunting mice, rabbits, or foraging for fruits. You may hear them vocalize with barking, yips, and howls if you are near a pack's hunting grounds.

Coyotes may keep the same mate for over a year, with a litter of about six or seven young being born around April. The male brings food to the female and pups in their burrow or den. About six weeks after birth, the pups can eat solid food.

Coyotes are key to a healthy ecosystem as they help control small mammal populations. Coyotes may hunt small pets and livestock as they would other wild animals. It is common to see a coyote out during the day. They typically do not pose a threat to people. If a coyote approaches you, do not run. Yell, stand up straight, or throw something towards the coyote to scare it away. Like foxes, coyotes will sometimes venture into urban areas to forage for discarded food or hunt small mammals. While more common in rural areas, coyotes can thrive in cities. Packs have even been found foraging in the city of Chicago.



Coyote

## Canada Goose

Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) have brown feathers on their bodies, with black feathers on their long necks and heads. The head has white patches on both sides, and the chest feathers are light gray. Males and females look the same, and young geese, known as goslings, are yellow with green- or olive-colored feathers on the back and top of the head. Geese reside around lakes and ponds, but also explore fields and urban areas as they forage. They can go about 30 days without feeding if snow prevents access to food. Canada geese are migratory birds, leaving Illinois in the winter, but some have adapted to urban environments, and they can be found in Illinois year-round. When flying, geese align in a “V” shaped formation, which helps reduce wind resistance and conserve energy.

Geese nest from March through June, laying one to 12 tan eggs in a depression in the ground. This nest is often lined with straw, grass, and down feathers. Males may be aggressive toward humans or animals during the breeding and nesting season if outsiders come too close. Canada geese mate for life and can live for more than 20 years.

Geese do not cause much damage when in small numbers, but over a few years, one pair of geese can multiply into a large flock as the young migrate back to the areas where they were raised. Large flocks of geese can harm agricultural crops, cause traffic jams, reduce water quality, pose threats near airports, and be a nuisance with their droppings. Canada geese in Illinois are protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the state Wildlife Code, meaning it is illegal to kill or remove geese or to destroy, move, or disturb their active nests, eggs, or young without a permit from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Canada Goose

## Eastern Cottontail Rabbit

The eastern cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) has rust-brown fur with a white belly and throat. They have a short, stubby tail and large ears. They are common throughout the state, living in brush, lawns, and wooded areas. Rabbits enjoy eating alfalfa, dandelions, grasses, fruits, seeds, and bark.

Rabbits mate often, with females giving birth to four to six young at a time, producing about 25 young per year. Young rabbits stay in nests comprised of grasses and leaves either on or in the ground, and the mother only comes to nurse the young twice a day. After three weeks, the young leave the nest. Cottontails usually live less than a year.



Eastern Cottontail Rabbit

## Raccoon

Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are primarily nocturnal animals known for their black fur in the shape of a mask on their face. Their body fur is gray-black, and they have five to seven bands on their tail that alternate between light and dark shades. Raccoons can live in various habitats if water, shelter, and food are available. It is common for them to be in urban areas. They are great climbers and swimmers. In neighborhood settings, they may be found looking for food in trash cans. They are not picky eaters, enjoying berries, fish, fruits, insects, mice, and other treats. Raccoons growl, wail, and make a trilling noise.

When preparing to have young, raccoons often pick tree cavities as den sites, but attics, barns, and brush piles are also suitable. Breeding takes place from December to May, with gestation lasting about two months. Litter sizes average between two to four kits.

Raccoon feces, which are dark and tubular, can pose health risks. Raccoons can host roundworms, called *Baylisascaris procyonis*, and the eggs are passed in their feces. Humans can accidentally ingest these eggs from contaminated hands, soil, or objects and become infected. Raccoons often defecate in communal areas such as trees, decks, attics, garages, and raised surfaces like fallen logs, stumps, or large rocks. Look for and clean up raccoon feces, especially in places where young children play.



Raccoon

## Striped Skunk

Several varieties of skunk range across North, Central, and South America. Illinois is home to the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). Like other skunks, the striped skunk can spray a powerful-smelling liquid from glands beneath its tail.

Striped skunks have a black body and feet, with a white stripe on the back through the fluffy tail and a small white stripe on the nose and forehead. They can be found in grassy areas, weedy roadsides, or open woods and eat birds, carrion, garbage, insects, fruits, vegetables, and more. Skunks mate in February and March, giving birth to four to eight young, which are raised in a den. The female cares for the young alone, and the young are fully weaned by two months old.

Skunks are primarily active at night. When disturbed or threatened, a skunk will arch its back, raise its tail, and stomp the ground. Then, it releases a foul-smelling spray that can travel over 10 feet (3 meters). This scent deters any potential predators from coming closer.

If you or a pet gets sprayed by a skunk, mix 1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide, ¼ cup of baking soda, and 1 teaspoon of liquid soap. This mix can be used to wash skin, clothes, or pets that have been sprayed. The solution may discolor clothing or lighten pet fur. Do not use the solution near the eyes. A product called Tecnu cleanser, which also breaks down skunk odors, is available in stores.



Striped Skunk

## Tree Squirrels

Illinois has four species of squirrels, including a flying squirrel, varying in fur color from rusty-yellow to black, red, white, and gray. They live on forest edges, in woodlands, and in cities. Squirrels often eat fruits, tree buds, nuts, corn, flowers, fungi, and insects. Most squirrels are active in the morning and evening around trees and the ground (Southern flying squirrels are nocturnal). All squirrels are solitary but are not territorial. There are two mating seasons, with one in winter and one in spring. To raise young, tree squirrels build leaf nests or use a tree cavity. Most squirrels only live for a year or two.

Squirrels are great at climbing and jumping. They can become a nuisance when eating from bird feeders, digging lawn holes, damaging gardens, or chewing through siding to gain indoor access. They can do further damage by chewing on electric wiring and causing power outages. Habitat modification, exclusion, and repellents can help deter squirrels from your home as needed.



Eastern Fox Squirrel



## White-Tailed Deer

The white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) is found throughout the Midwest. White-tailed deer are about 6 feet long (1.8 meters) and 3.5 feet (1 meter) tall at the shoulder. Deer species sizes vary significantly across the Western Hemisphere. The marsh deer, native to South America, is similar in size to the white-tailed deer.

White-tailed deer in Illinois live in wooded areas but do stray to find food, sometimes venturing into farmlands and urban areas. Deer are herbivores, eating grasses, crops like corn and beans, and mushrooms. In the summer, deer hair has a red tint, but in fall and winter, it is a gray brown. The belly fur is always white. When startled, white-tailed deer run and flip their tails up, showing the white side. A “buck” refers to a male deer, while a “doe” is a female deer. Bucks have antlers that are shed and replaced each year. When their antlers are finished growing in the fall, deer will rub the “velvet” skin on the outer surface off onto trees. Their antlers will fall off during February and March. Deer mate from October through January. After seven months, a doe usually gives birth to one or two offspring, which can run for a few hours after birth. Young white-tailed deer, called fawns, are characterized by white spots on their back.

Deer can be a nuisance in communities where they eat from fruit trees or garden beds. It is important to drive carefully around dawn and dusk, particularly in the fall during breeding season, when deer are most active. Deer often travel in groups, so if you see one deer, always be prepared for more. If you see the deer, often you can see the reflection of your headlights in their eyes, slow down, honk your horn, and be prepared for deer to stop in the middle of the road. Do not try to swerve to avoid hitting a deer. If you hit a deer, pull off the side of the road, turn on your hazard lights, and call 911 to report the

accident and wait for authorities to arrive. For safety reasons, do not get out of the vehicle to check on the deer or try to move the deer.

Hunting deer is legal during specific times of year with the proper permits and licenses. To learn more about deer hunting, please visit [HuntIllinois.org](http://HuntIllinois.org).

## Virginia Opossum

While there are many species of opossums that live across South America, the Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is the only one found in North America.

Opossums are marsupials, meaning they are born very immature and continue to grow in the mother’s pouch for another two to three months, feeding off the mother’s milk. Virginia opossums gradually grow to eat insects, fruits, seeds, worms, and scavenged materials such as trash and roadkill. When fully grown, opossums have long, coarse hair, a pink nose, and a long, hairless tail. Their body hair is gray with darker tints near the legs. Their tail helps maintain balance during climbs, while an opposable toe on the hind foot assists in climbing and grasping. When frightened, an opossum may choose to play dead, hiss, or bare its teeth. They have more teeth than any other land mammal in Illinois.



Virginia Opossum

## Red Tailed Hawk

The red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is found year-round across the state. They nest high in the trees, between 30 to 90 feet (10 to 27 meters) above the ground, and reuse their nests, adding to them each year. These hawks have rounded wings and measure between 18 to 24 inches (48 to 63 centimeters) in length. As their name suggests, adults usually have red tail feathers. Their breast feathers are white, with a streak of darker feathers forming a band across the belly. Males and females look alike, although females are larger.

Red-tailed hawks prefer woodlands and often soar above open fields, but they also often sit on posts beside roads. As raptors, they feed on rabbits, squirrels, mice, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. You may hear their distinctive call, “keeerrr.”



Red-Tailed Hawk

## More Resources

- About wildlife in Illinois: [WildlifeIllinois.org](https://WildlifeIllinois.org), [Extension.Illinois.edu/Wildlife](https://Extension.Illinois.edu/Wildlife)
- About hunting and trapping in Illinois: [HuntIllinois.org](https://HuntIllinois.org)
- The Illinois Department of Natural Resources: [DNR.Illinois.gov](https://DNR.Illinois.gov)
- Find a University of Illinois Extension office in your area: [go.Illinois.edu/ExtensionOffice](https://go.Illinois.edu/ExtensionOffice)

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Modified August 2025



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