Chapter Introduction: Wildlife of the Table Rocks

Wildlife refers to any animal that has not been domesticated by humans, from the smallest microscopic organisms to the largest mammals. The wildlife of the Table Rocks is plentiful and diverse. Animals regularly encountered at the Table Rocks include the western fence lizard, California ground squirrel, Turkey Vulture, Violet-green Swallow, Spotted Towhee, and Oak Titmouse. Others you have a fair chance of seeing on your hike are the black-tailed jackrabbit, Pacific treefrog, alligator lizard, western skink, racer, western rattlesnake, gopher snake, Pileated Woodpecker, Acorn Woodpecker, Wild Turkey, and Red-tailed Hawk. However, most wildlife is encountered very infrequently. For example coyote, black bear, mountain lion, black-tailed deer, bobcat, dusky-footed woodrat, and Roosevelt elk are all present at the Table Rocks, but rarely seen. The true student of wildlife must infer their presence from clues such as scat (droppings), fur, burrows, nests, and tracks. Your students may or may not be lucky enough to enjoy a snake or deer sighting, but there will be plenty of evidence of wildlife along the trail. Seeing wildlife and evidence of their existence provides teachable moments in which students can learn about the wildlife in southern Oregon.

Mammals

Most mammals of the Table Rocks are nocturnal, elusive, uncommon, or spend the bulk of their time underground. They are, therefore, the least often seen group of animals on the Table Rocks. The largest mammals present are mountain lions, black bears, and Roosevelt elk. Mountain lions, like most cats, are very solitary and are most active during dawn and dusk. Because they require such extensive territories, these large predators are few and far between. Their scarcity and elusive habits make encounters with them very rare. The mountain lion's primary prey is the black-tailed deer. The black bear, like the mountain lion, is another uncommonly seen resident of the Table Rocks. Though they are the largest hunter in our area, black bears are omnivores and eat mostly vegetable material, including seeds and fruits. Mountain lions and black bears give away their presence via clues such as scat, tracks, and claw markings on trees. Elk are herbivores and feast on the lush vegetation in and around the vernal pools on top of both Upper and Lower Table Rocks. They are also rarely seen but leave behind their tracks and scat as clues that they use the site.

Many of the mammals living at the Table Rocks are rodents, several of which spend most of their time underground. Mounded tunnels are evidence of moles, which burrow through the soil hunting for earthworms and insects. A large pile of dirt likely hides the entrance to a pocket gopher's burrow. Pocket gophers are herbivores, feeding on the roots of plants. A third burrowing mammal is the California ground squirrel, which is one of the boldest animals on the Table Rocks. They are often seen scampering across the trail as you hike. One rodent that builds a nest instead of a burrow is the dusky-footed woodrat (sometimes known as the pack rat). Look for a heaping pile of sticks near the trail in the mixed woodland habitat at Lower Table Rock – this is an active woodrat nest!

Slightly larger herbivores found on the Table Rocks are cottontail and black-tailed jackrabbits, which are often seen bounding through the chaparral and mounded prairie plant communities. These rabbits are prey for the elusive bobcat and coyote.

One virtually never observed mammal of the Table Rocks is the ringtail. This small carnivore spends its days hiding in the crevices along the rocky talus slopes that flank the Table Rocks, or perhaps in a comfortable tree cavity. Although often referred to as the ringtail "cat," stemming from miners who appreciated the ringtail's keen ability to catch rodents, the ringtail's closest relative is actually the raccoon. Southwestern Oregon is the northern extent of the ringtail's range.

Reptiles

Reptiles, being ectothermic (or "cold-blooded"), must warm their bodies in the sun before beginning their day's activity. Therefore your best chance of spotting reptiles is on a warm sunny morning. On such days the trail abounds with western fence lizards, the most common reptile found on the Table Rocks. These agile climbers can also be found clinging to the trunk or limbs of oak trees. Alligator lizards, on the other hand, prefer the cover of low-growing vegetation. They are often mistaken for snakes due to their coloration (they look like gopher snakes), their short legs, and their slithery locomotion. A third common lizard is the western skink, easily identifiable by its bright, blue tail. All three of these lizards, and several others, have the adaptation to detach from its tail when attacked. Often the tail will continue wiggling for several seconds after it is severed from the body, holding a predator's attention and allowing the lizard to escape. The lizards of the Table Rocks feed mainly on insects, but will also eat other invertebrates such as spiders, snails, and earthworms, and sometimes bird eggs.

The most common snake at the Table Rocks is the gopher snake. It is often seen along the trail or slithering through low vegetation nearby. The gopher snake eats a wide variety of prey, but prefers small mammals and nesting birds. Although they do not burrow, gopher snakes often use abandoned gopher or ground squirrel burrows for homes. Gopher snakes are sometimes mistaken for rattlesnakes. They mimic rattlesnakes by hissing loudly, vibrating their tail against dead leaves or dry grass, and flattening their heads when confronted or threatened. Their bite, however, is not venomous. Other commonly seen snakes on the Table Rocks are the racer and the western rattlesnake. The aptly named racer is usually spotted sprinting away through grass or underbrush. Although glimpses of it are usually brief, it's easily identified by its uniform drab olive-green, brown, or gray color. The western rattlesnake (southwestern Oregon's only poisonous snake) is occasionally seen basking in open or grassy areas. It has a broad diamond-shaped head and dark dorsal patches along its body. Its venom is a valuable asset in killing its prey, which consists of small mammals, birds, lizards, and amphibians. The rattlesnake is rarely aggressive toward humans. If you come across a rattlesnake exhibit caution and stay a safe distance away to avoid the threat of a strike. On the top of the Table Rocks, one might also spot a garter snake. These snakes prefer moist, grassy meadows like those surrounding the vernal pools, where they hunt for tadpoles. The snake diversity at the Table Rocks is remarkable; in addition to the four previously mentioned species, a very lucky hiker might spy a ring-necked snake on the shady forest floor of the mixed woodland or a striped whipsnake cruising through the chaparral.

Amphibians

The only two amphibians living on Table Rocks, the western toad and the Pacific treefrog, lay their eggs in the vernal pools on the tops of the Table Rocks. Due to the

absence of fish predators, these shallow, seasonal pools provide an ideal place for tadpoles to mature. Upon completing metamorphosis, they leave the pools and move into the moister, cooler environment of the mixed woodland. They tend to be nocturnal, taking shelter during the day in dense vegetation or leaf litter, within rock or log crevices, or perhaps inside the nest of a dusky-footed woodrat. Both species eat insects, spiders and earthworms.

Birds

Because of their diversity of habitat types, the Table Rocks host a remarkable wealth of bird life. Upon arrival at the trailhead, keep an eye (and ear) open for Oregon's state bird, the Western Meadowlark. The Meadowlark prefers the open pastureland and oak savannah habitat that surround the Table Rocks. As you move up the trail through the oak savannah, you stand a good chance of seeing an Acorn Woodpecker, Oak Titmouse, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Western Bluebird, California Towhee, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Western Scrub-jay. While several of these birds will eat acorns, most depend on the oaks for the insects that live on their bark and foliage or as perches from which to look for flying insects. Several species use cavities within the oaks to build their nests.

As the terrain becomes steeper and rockier, the vegetation shifts to the denser shrubs of the chaparral. This habitat is home to the greatest concentration and diversity of birds, because the dense vegetation provides great hiding and nesting places as well as plenty of insects to eat. Additionally, manzanita, a prominent shrub species in the chaparral, produce berries that are an important food source for many of the birds in this environment. Characteristic chaparral species include the Anna's Hummingbird, Spotted Towhee, Lesser Goldfinch, Lazuli Bunting, House Finch, Bewick's Wren, Chipping Sparrow, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

As you get closer to the top of the Table Rocks you enter the mixed woodland which boasts a dense canopy and cooler temperatures than the previous plant communities. Common birds seen here are the Black-headed Grosbeak, American Robin, and Western Tanager. Keep an ear open as well for the Pacific Slope Flycatcher whose call sounds like someone whistling to their dog.

Eventually the trail leads to the top of the Table Rocks and you find yourself in the mounded prairie/vernal pool habitat. These springtime pools offer a quick dip for Mallards and Lark Sparrows. Along the edges you see Violet-green Swallows hawking for insects and Turkey Vultures gliding on wind currents. Both these species nest in crevices in the rocky cliff faces. A lucky visitor might also spot a Red-tailed Hawk soaring above or an American Kestrel hunting for grasshoppers or small mammals in the grasses of the prairie.

Invertebrates

Most of the invertebrates seen at the Table Rocks are insects. Among the most noticeable insects are the western tent caterpillars. Colonies of caterpillars weave silk-like nests between the branches of buckbrush and mountain mahogany in the chaparral. These nests almost always prompt curious inquiries from students. Likewise, students often notice apple-like galls growing on oak limbs. The galls house the larvae of the oak gall wasp. In addition to these fascinating insects, the Table Rocks are home to many species of bees,

flies, and beetles, which abound on the trailside wildflowers. Butterflies and moths are common as well. All of these insects serve important roles as pollinators for the flowers.

A close observer has a good chance of seeing some non-insect invertebrates as well. Crab spiders can often be seen lurking on flowers. These predators use their long front legs to ambush visiting pollinators. A well-known relative of spiders is the tick, a parasite responsible for transmitting Lyme disease. Ticks have several hosts during the course of their life cycle, and it's thought they contract Lyme disease when they feed on infected hosts. New research indicates the blood of the western fence lizard contains a protein that kills the Lyme disease bacterium. Infected ticks that feed on western fence lizards no longer carry the disease, nor will they contract it again. This is believed to be one reason Lyme disease is less common in the west, where western fence lizards occur, than in the east.

Another noteworthy invertebrate at the Table Rocks is the vernal pool fairy shrimp. This endangered crustacean lives in the vernal pools on the tops of both Table Rocks. In order to persist in these seasonally dry habitats, the fairy shrimp has specially adapted hard-shelled eggs, called cysts, which can lie dormant in the soil for extended periods and then hatch when the pools fill again and environmental conditions are favorable. In one case, scientists found that fairy shrimp cysts several thousand years old hatched when placed in water!

The water boatman is another fascinating invertebrate that can be spotted in most vernal pools. If you observe them closely, you will see they have a set of large legs that look like boat oars. These legs allow them to paddle through the water. They are interesting because they come to the surface of the pool and form a bubble of air that is attached to their abdomen. The bubble is like an oxygen tank in that it allows them to stay underwater longer while they draw oxygen from the bubble.

"We Are Guests"

The Table Rocks are a unique environment which house a remarkable multitude of wildlife species. When we hike the Table Rocks, it is important for us to remember we are visitors to these animals' home. We must respect all of the wildlife to ensure their survival for generations to come. We are indeed lucky to have such a place right in our backyard!