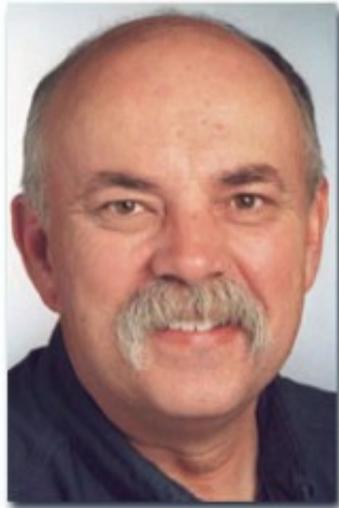




Henckel Column: Montana Animal Field Guide a great tool

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Mark Henckel MONTANA OUTDOORS



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All right, so I'm not the best at identifying birds and other miscellaneous wildlife.

All little brown birds are referred to as LBB's - Little Brown Birds. Big hawks are called, not surprisingly, Big Hawks. And then there are the pretty-sounding birds, the birds with the red on them and the wow-that's-a-little-bitty-fluff-of-feathers.

All that may change in the future however. I might even be able to tell the difference between a mountain cottontail and a desert cottontail. Or a bull snake from a western

hognose snake. But don't hold your breath that I'll ever get a handle on those pesky salamanders and newts.

All of those Montana critters, however, are included in the internet-based Montana Animal Field Guide, unveiled jointly by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Montana Natural Heritage Program.

It's a spectacular resource - and promises to get even better in the future as the field guide is added to and filled in.

The field guide includes information on 640 different species of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates that can be found in Montana.

You can either plug in the name of the critter into a search on the site or explore by clicking on the different families and sub-families until you find what you're looking for.

Just clicking through the various animal families is an education in itself as to the variety of the animals that call this state home. As you read more about them, you learn even more interesting facts and figures about them.

Duane Anderson, the GIS and information systems development manager for Montana's Natural Resource Information System, gave me a quick click-through on the field guide last week.

When he said that this was two years in the making so far, that was easy to believe. It includes an incredible amount of info.

Information on the pronghorn antelope, for example, provides you with a general description, diagnostic characteristics, migration, habitat, food habits, ecology and reproduction characteristics. There's a species distribution map. There are a number of photos. There are outlines of antelope tracks. There is a list of the literature where the facts were found and where you can find out more.

Many of the bird pages in the field guide include that information plus a sound file that lets you hear the bird's call. Some animal pages have them as well.

The field guide remains a work in progress.

There are still some holes to fill in on the site. Many of the lesser-known animals don't have photos yet. Some information categories need to be filled in as well.

But there's certainly enough information there that you can spend many hours clicking through and learning about the varied wildlife species that call the state home.

The site also includes portions on rare plants and Montana's Bird Distribution Database. It has links to Species of Concern, Endangered Species, Recreating in Wildlife Habitat and Living With Wildlife.

Funding for Montana Animal Field Guide came from Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Montana Natural Heritage Program and grants from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to the Montana State Library's Natural Resource Information System and additional funding from the Bureau of Land Management.

You can access the field guide on the Fish, Wildlife and Parks home page at fwp.state.mt.us or on the Natural Resource Information System Montana Natural Heritage Program's home page at nhp.nris.state.mt.us.

It's well worth a look for you, your kids and anyone interested in wildlife.

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