

What Our Common Native Animals Eat

Animals can be divided into categories based on what they eat. Herbivores eat only plant material. Carnivores eat only other animals. Omnivores eat both plant material and other animals.

Among our native mammals, only bobcats and mountain lions are true carnivores, and they are not very common in the Hill Country. Foxes and coyotes are in the Order Carnivora, but their diet is truly that of an omnivore, as are the diets of raccoons, opossums, skunks, armadillos, and squirrels. True herbivores include rabbits, hares, deer and porcupines.

Specifically, here are the most common diets of our common mammals:

Gray Fox: omnivore; small mammals such as mice, rabbits and hares, also birds, berries, persimmons, nuts, fish, and carrion.

Coyote: omnivore; small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, bird eggs, insects, fruit, persimmons, carrion.

Raccoon: omnivore; crayfish, fish, reptiles, amphibians, nuts, fruit, small mammals, baby birds, bird eggs, insects.

Opossum: omnivore: insects, berries, fruit, bird eggs, fish, reptiles, amphibians, small animals, carrion, worms.

Ringtail: Omnivore; reptiles, amphibians, nuts, fruit, leaves, bird eggs, insects, small animals.

Striped Skunk: omnivore; insects, small animals, earthworms, grubs, bird eggs, amphibians, fruit, berries, nuts, seeds, reptiles.

Armadillo: omnivore; mainly insects, also carrion of small animals.

Porcupine: herbivore; soft bark, green plants, tree leaves, leaf buds.

Cottontails: herbivore; grass, other green plants, twigs, bark, and other woody plants in winter.

Jackrabbit: herbivore; green plants in summer, twigs, bark, leaf-buds, dried grasses and berries in winter. I have seen them digging for grass roots as well.

Rock squirrel: omnivore; green plants, seeds, insects, fruit, nuts, bird eggs, baby mice, carrion.

Fox squirrel: omnivore; acorns, nuts, seeds, fruit, mushrooms, bird eggs, baby birds, mice, insects, carrion.

White-tailed deer: herbivore; browse (woody plant leaves including trees, shrubs and vines), forbs (weeds and wildflowers), a small amount of fresh tender grass. In winter, acorns and nuts, twigs and buds and especially live oak leaves.

Our non-mammal critters have interesting food habits also. Lizards, snakes, frogs and toads are all carnivores. Lizards eat almost entirely insects (only live insects at that). Frogs and toads will eat just about anything that moves and will fit in their mouths, including smaller frogs, but again they will not usually eat anything unless it is alive.

Snakes have the ability to unhinge their jaws and so can swallow prey that are significantly larger than their own bodies. Prey can include anything from rats and mice to lizards, frogs, toads, and smaller snakes. Smaller snakes eat mostly insects, worms and other invertebrates they find in the soil and leaf litter.

Most songbird species fall into the category of insect eaters, which also eat berries and fruit, especially in the winter, or seed eaters which also eat insects, especially feeding insects to their young. Wading birds eat mainly fish, frogs, toads, and crustaceans. Some ducks eat mainly vegetation, some eat fish.

Raptors (hawks, owls and eagles) are carnivores and eat either birds, small mammals or fish.

Scavengers such as vultures, crows and ravens eat mostly carrion, but are also adept at finding human garbage.

All of the above diets are the common textbook lists given for these animals, edited somewhat for Hill Country conditions. This does not mean that any of the critters above won't also take advantage of things humans put out, including pet food, deer food, and bird food. With the exception of feeding birds, most all wildlife specialists advise against putting out food for the other animals, especially on a regular basis.

It is important to note that just about everything listed above is also the potential prey for something else, so while they are all out looking for food most of the time, they also have to keep an eye out for potential predators. Only the top predators don't have to worry about being prey, although they do have to worry about humans and their machines.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spiling It". He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.

