

Swift fox mothers encourage their young to play so they can learn the skills needed to survive into adulthood.  
(Photo by Sam Hayes)

# MOTHERHOOD IN THE WILD

**Wildlife moms have fierce instincts to protect their young and prepare them for life as adults**

By Dawn Wilson





# A MOTHER'S LOVE, PROTECTION AND NURTURING BUILD A BOND THAT LASTS A LIFETIME. IN HUMAN FAMILIES, CHILDREN CAN OFTEN SEEK THE ADVICE AND SUPPORT FROM THEIR MOM FOR AS LONG AS SHE IS ALIVE.

In the animal kingdom, however, mothers teach their offspring to be independent, and they don't have much time to do it. It is important for these wild mothers to prepare their offspring for a life of living in the elements before the next litter is born. In many species, the mother is the only one that takes on this role. Many wild animals fiercely protect their babies from predators to ensure their survival into adulthood.

Across Wyoming, this year's babies are starting to make their appearance to the world. Swift fox kits are venturing from their

dens in the grasslands. Elk calves and pronghorn fawns will start dropping in late May as meadows turn lush with food. Grizzly bear cubs wander curiously behind mom as they navigate their big world in western Wyoming.

Each species uses different tactics to successfully raise its young, with differing approaches between prey and predator moms.

For example, the techniques of two grasslands animals — a predator like the swift fox and a prey animal like the pronghorn — have distinct behaviors that are key to their survival.

A pronghorn fawn walks through a ranch field near Laramie. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)



A pronghorn doe watches for threats as her newborn fawns stay close on the plains near Yellowstone National Park. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)



A herd of pronghorn run across the sagebrush sea during their winter migration. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)

## PRONGHORN PARENTING

After about a 250-day gestation period, pronghorn mothers give birth to one or two fawns in late May or early June. To the excitement of animal watchers, all pronghorn in a particular area give birth within a few days of each other.

"Pronghorn have a high explosion of fawns at one time," said Martin Hicks, a wildlife biologist based out of Wheatland with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. "These synchronized births happen at one time to avoid high predator loss."

Fawning season takes place at the peak of green-up to ensure there is a lot of food for mothers so they can produce enough milk for those babies.

"Pronghorn don't get the respect they deserve for as hardy as they are," continued Hicks. "Pronghorn moms do an excellent job of providing milk to fawns even though they don't have a lot of body fat. I find that pretty amazing. That is one adaptation they have over other ungulates."

Pronghorn fawns rely on their mother's nutritious milk for four to five months as mom helps them transition to plants until the forage stops growing in October. Mom's preparation helps ensure fawns are healthy enough to make it through the harsh Wyoming winters.

Pronghorn are the fastest land animals in North America, a skill they exhibit soon after birth. Within 30 minutes, newborns can take their first wobbly steps and can outrun an adult human by the time they are 4 days old. The mother teaches fawns that running fast will protect them from predators and encourages her young to get up, move and run as soon as possible. Fawns join their mothers in larger herds within a couple of weeks after birth, so they need to keep up with the constantly moving group, which is a stark contrast to how other species treat their young.



### SWIFT MOTHERS

Swift fox stay close to the den during the early weeks of their kits' lives.

These small predators of the prairie grow to about 1-foot tall and 5 to 7 pounds. After a 50- to 60-day gestation period, they give birth to a litter of three to six kits in a den in April.

Kits spend the first few weeks in the den, which is usually an underground burrow on high ground such as hilltops, eating meals brought by mom and dad. By May, the kits are strong enough to start venturing from the den.

"One parent stays at the den and one parent hunts," said Ron Hayes, former technician and law enforcement officer with Game and Fish, who is co-host and co-founder of the "Wild and Exposed Podcast."

"Mothers in particular do a lot of game-play to teach kits how to survive. There is also a lot of vocalization between kits and mom. She will quickly return to the den to check on her kits as soon as she hears any vocalization," he said.

Swift fox consume about anything they find on the prairie small enough to eat, such as rodents, insects, fruits, snakes and other reptiles, squirrels and birds.

"In 2016, I was in a blind observing a den and thought mom had moved the kits," Hayes said. "When swift fox actively hunt they never move in a straight line. I caught sight of mom leaving a tree line and she went straight to the den so I knew she had food. It was a lark bunting."

Human parents lecture kids not to play with food; swift fox moms encourage it.

"They always play with food and ambush it like they are learning to kill," Hayes said. The adults will interact in this play to teach the kits."

Swift fox use more than one den, sometimes moving kits to another den. The theory is parasites, such as fleas and mites, quickly develop within the heavily-used den. By moving to new dens, parents reduce the chance of their family becoming infested by them.

By 7 weeks, kits are weaned and out on their own. But prairie life's challenges are much different than those in the forest and mountains.



A mother swift fox watches over her kits outside their den at sunset. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)



Swift fox grow to about a foot tall and weigh 5 to 7 pounds when full grown. (Photo by Ron Hayes)



Swift fox eat snakes and other small animals they find on the prairie. (Photo by Ron Hayes)



A newborn elk calf looks up at its mother during a light drizzle. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)



A newborn elk calf hides in the bushes on a sunny afternoon. While they eat, elk mothers often stash their odorless young in the brush or other vegetation. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)

### ELK MATRIARCHS

On the western side of Wyoming, in the mountains and timber of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, larger mammal mothers are giving birth and readying their young for adult life.

Cow elk are known to be protective mothers. Starting in late May, cows give birth to 35-pound calves after about a 250-day gestation. These babies with brown fur and white spots spend their first few weeks camouflaged in tall grass and forest cover, and only get up to nurse.

Elk calves are born almost odorless, a trait shared with pronghorn fawns. This allows mom to tuck her calf in the brush and focus on eating while the calf is undetectable to predators. Doubly clever, it is a strategy elk moms employ to draw attention to herself and away from her calf if there is any nearby danger.

"I have watched cow elk in Yellowstone as the calf beds down," said Bart Kroger, wildlife biologist with Game and Fish. "She'll play interference with an oncoming bear to protect her calf. A lot of times it is better to deter rather than fight the bear."

Elk moms, who raise calves without the help of males, move a lot. After the cow gives birth away from the herd, sheltered by trees, the calf will begin nursing within 20 minutes. In a couple of weeks, mom and baby rejoin the herd of cows and other newborn calves. It is important for calves to quickly develop the strength and speed to escape danger and move to summer feeding grounds.

Game and Fish have fitted elk with radio collars to study the species' movements for more than a decade, which gives biologists important information about where elk have their young and also annual movements.

"We are starting to learn a lot about elk as a result of collars," Kroger said. "We have learned about where they go. They move farther than we thought, more than just summer to winter range. The moms teach their calves how to get from winter to summer ranges and back. And these are not necessarily long migrations. They go to feeding and bedding spots, too."

Even during long journeys, elk calves are kept close by a series of vocalizations between mother and baby. A mother elk can pick out the sound of her calf among a herd. It's common to see a calf run over a hill or stand

in a large group of elk bleating out for its mother and have mom turn and look directly at her offspring.

Elk calves are weaned at about 2 months but will stay with mom until she gives birth again the following spring. During this time, calves will migrate with the herd of other cows, calves and spike bulls, which is led by a matriarch cow. She teaches the herd how to navigate the rough terrain to safe winter grounds and back again in the spring.

"Every herd has some dominant cow," Kroger said. "She knows the best and safest way to migrate."





A grizzly bear and her cubs walk through a meadow in Grand Teton National Park. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)

### MAMA BEARS

In the same region, the oldest babies of the year are still some of the smallest.

Grizzly bear cubs are born during the winter while their mother sleeps in her den. These cubs — usually twins but sometimes triplets — are only 1.5 to 2.5 pounds at birth, blind, hairless and nurse on mom as she sleeps.

By May, these cubs are about 5 months old and growing quickly — as much as 15 to 20 pounds by this point. They leave the den and follow mom around, the sole parent to teach them the foods to eat and where to find sources of nourishment. Even with mom's fearless attention, nearly half the cubs don't make it through their first year.

Grizzly bears are omnivores and eat a variety of foods including moths, fruits, nuts, leaves, roots, insects, small mammals, carrion and fish.

Research conducted by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team gives some insight into how much mother bears teach their offspring. Grizzly bear 179, who lived to be at least 24 years old, taught her cubs and scientists about the life of being a mom.

"We had pretty good knowledge of how many cubs she raised from the genetic data collected from bears captured in the area," said Dan Bjornlie, large carnivore biologist with Game and Fish. "Over that many years, she raised a lot of cubs."

Unlike many animals, grizzly cubs spend up to three years with their mother. After they are born in the den, the cubs follow mom during the summer. They den with her that winter, spend the next summer with her as yearlings, den with her another time and then get pushed off by mom the following spring or early summer during mating season.

Sometimes these 2-year-olds reunite with their mom after mating season and travel with her for a while, but they will not den with her again.

"They learn so much from mom because of how much time they spend with her," Bjornlie said.

These comparisons show there are many different ways to bring young to adulthood in the animal kingdom. Some seem harsh and uncaring, others seem affectionate and doting. The innate approach suits the species as they navigate the challenges and obstacles of raising their offspring in the West to teach them life skills, grit, risk assessment and resilience.

— Dawn Wilson is a professional and award-winning nature photographer and writer who focuses on telling stories about wildlife of the Rocky Mountains and Alaska. Visit her website at [www.DawnWilsonPhotography.com](http://www.DawnWilsonPhotography.com).



A grizzly bear sow and her cub walk in unison in Grand Teton National Park. Cubs will spend up to three years with their mother. (Photo by Dawn Wilson)