



# Whaley awesome animals!

## SPECIAL SPECIES: WHALE SHARK

We're treading away from whales this month to bring you something slightly different.

Imagine a **fish** as long as a school bus that eats some of the tiniest food in the ocean. That's the whale shark, the largest fish on Earth and one of the most amazing animals in the sea.

Whale sharks live in warm oceans around the world. Even though they can grow over 40 feet long and weigh more than 20,000 pounds, they are gentle giants. Instead of hunting big prey, whale sharks swim slowly with their huge mouths open, filtering tiny plankton, fish eggs, and small fish from the water.

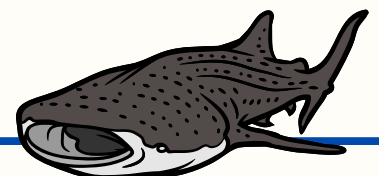
Every whale shark has a unique pattern of white spots and stripes on its dark gray skin. These patterns are like fingerprints. Scientists use photos of these spot patterns to identify and track individual sharks.

Whale sharks can live for many decades, and some scientists believe they may live more than 100 years. They spend much of their time near the ocean's surface, but they can also dive deep when needed.

Despite their size, whale sharks are not dangerous to people. They don't have sharp teeth for biting and are known for their calm behavior. In some places, swimmers and snorkelers can safely observe them from a respectful distance.

Whale sharks are often spotted near coral reefs and coastal areas where plankton is plentiful. Popular viewing areas include parts of the Gulf of Mexico, the Philippines, Mexico, and Australia. Seeing a whale shark in the wild is a rare and unforgettable experience – and a reminder of just how incredible our oceans can be.

Length: 30-40 feet  
Weight: 15-30 tons  
Food: Plankton, small fish  
Lifespan: 70-100 years  
Status: Endangered  
Number left: 100-200,000





## This Month IN SPACE!

March 3 - Total lunar eclipse (around 5 a.m. to 6:30 a.m.)

March 7-8 - Venus/Saturn conjunction: both planets will be close to one another at sunset

Mid-March - Potential launch for the Artemis II rocket

March 20 - March Equinox, equal parts night and day, plus the first day of spring!

Visible to the naked eye: Total lunar eclipse!!! and the Pleides star cluster

### Nature

## ANTLERED: WISCONSIN'S WILD ELK

Did you know that elk once roamed all across Wisconsin and were more numerous than whitetail deer, but disappeared from the state in the late 1800s? Thanks to careful conservation efforts, these impressive animals have made a comeback. Today, Wisconsin is home to two major wild elk herds that are exciting to learn about and even possible to see in the wild.

The Clam Lake herd lives in north-central Wisconsin, near the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. This is the largest herd in the state, with more than 300 elk. The herd has grown steadily since elk were reintroduced in the 1990s. Because of this success, Wisconsin now allows a very limited, bull-only elk hunt here. Only a few hunters are chosen each year through a special lottery.

The second herd lives farther south in Jackson County and is known as the Black River elk herd. This group is smaller, with around 150 elk, but it continues to grow naturally. No hunting is allowed in this area, making it an important place for research and elk watching.

Elk are one of the largest members of the deer family. Adult bulls can weigh over 600 pounds and grow huge antlers each year. In the fall, bull elk make a loud bugling call during mating season that can be heard echoing through the forest.

Elk are most active early in the morning or near sunset. Visitors may spot them along quiet forest roads, open meadows, and public lands in the Clam Lake area or the Black River State Forest. With patience and a little luck, you just might see one of Wisconsin's biggest wildlife success stories.





## SQUIRREL!



Citizen Science

### SQUIRREL MAPPER

[LINK HERE!](#)



One of the main reasons we're highlighting this project is because the name is awesome. *Squirrel Mapper* invites anyone to become part of real scientific research simply by observing squirrels and helping scientists answer

interesting questions about how animals adapt to changing environments. The project focuses on the eastern gray squirrel and its two color forms, gray and black, and asks why the frequency of these colors seems to be shifting across different landscapes.

Participants can get involved in multiple ways. You can upload your own squirrel photos where other citizen scientists help confirm the species. Once that happens, the images are brought into the Squirrel Mapper classification system. This data lets researchers map where different color morphs occur and begin to understand how urbanization, habitat change, and other pressures may be influencing squirrel populations.

The project also includes interactive activities like an online game called SquirrelSpotter, where players search for gray and black squirrels in different environments.

Squirrel Mapper is free to join and doesn't require prior scientific training. It's designed to welcome contributions from people of all ages and backgrounds, making it a great project for classrooms, after-school groups, or anyone who loves spending time outside and watching wildlife.



## Featured Fossil:

# Giant Ground Sloths

Long before cities dotted the Wisconsin landscape and before paved highways stretched from the Mississippi River to Lake Michigan, a very strange animal lived in North America: The giant ground sloth. These animals looked a bit like today's sloths, but were much, MUCH bigger. One type, called Jefferson's ground sloth, could grow as long as a pickup truck and weigh more than a ton!

Jefferson's ground sloth lived during the Ice Age, thousands of years ago. It walked on the ground, not in trees, and used its long, curved claws to pull down branches and eat leaves, twigs, and plants. When standing up on its back legs, it could reach high into trees to feed.

So did these giant sloths ever live in Wisconsin? So far, scientists have not found any giant ground sloth bones in Wisconsin. That doesn't mean they weren't here. It just means no one has discovered proof yet. Much of Wisconsin was covered by glaciers during the Ice Age, and thick layers of rock and soil can hide fossils deep underground.

What we do know is that Jefferson's ground sloth fossils have been found in nearby states, including Illinois, Ohio, and Kansas. These animals lived in forests and open woodlands that were very similar to what southern Wisconsin looked like when the glaciers were nearby. Because of this, scientists believe it is very possible that giant ground sloths wandered into Wisconsin too.

Maybe someday, a lucky fossil hunter will uncover a sloth claw or bone and finally prove that these Ice Age giants once roamed Wisconsin. Until then, they remain one of the most exciting "what if?" animals in the state's ancient history.



---

## THIS MONTH'S SCHEDULE:

- 3/7 - Tri-County Community Center (Public Event)
- 3/9 - School event
- 3/14 - Williams Bay Elementary (Public Event)
- 3/17 - School event
- 3/18 - School event
- 3/24 - School event



### BOOK AN EVENT

Want to inspire kids with a life-size whale? Contact Dave today with questions, size requirements, schedules, etc.



**ADVERTISEMENT**

**3M**  
Authorized Window  
Film Dealer




**WINDOW ENHANCEMENTS LLC**  
PROFESSIONAL WINDOW TINTING

Installing 3M security window film for schools,  
commercial and residential buildings  
for over 20 years.

[www.windowenhancementsllc.com](http://www.windowenhancementsllc.com)

And now for a  
really bad joke...

Why did the whale cross the ocean?



To get to the other tide.

## Wisconsin's Wild Wetlands

Did you know that one of the largest freshwater marshes in the United States is right here in Wisconsin? Horicon Marsh stretches across more than 30,000 acres in the eastern part of the state. That's bigger than many cities!



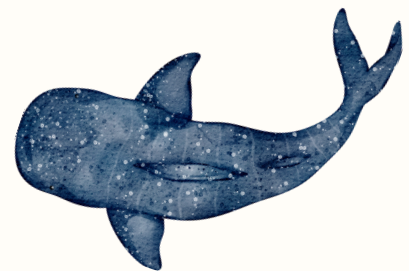
Horicon Marsh is a huge wetland filled with cattails, open water, grasses, and muddy islands. It might look quiet at first glance, but it's actually bursting with life. The marsh is famous for birds – especially migrating Canada geese. In the fall, thousands of geese gather here, filling the sky with honking and wingbeats. In fact, Horicon Marsh is one of the most important migration stopovers in North America.

But geese aren't the only animals that call this place home. Visitors might spot herons, ducks, pelicans, turtles, muskrats, frogs, and deer along the edges. Because wetlands provide food, shelter, and nesting areas, they are some of the most important ecosystems on Earth.

There are two main public areas to explore: a state wildlife area and a national wildlife refuge. Both offer trails, observation towers, and visitor centers where families and school groups can learn more about marsh habitats. Horicon Marsh shows how powerful nature can be, turning shallow water and plants into one of Wisconsin's richest wildlife habitats.

## Want Whale Mail?

Did you receive this copy from someone else?  
Whale Mail is free, and you can sign up at  
[www.forestwhales.com/education](http://www.forestwhales.com/education)



Each month, we will have a featured whale and fossil, plus we will include fun activities, ideas, astronomy news, videos and even the occasional contest where we give away free prizes like fossils, or an official Forest Whales school/library program!!!