



*Kit foxes, not much larger than house cats, live in the open desert where they make their dens and hunt in sparsely vegetated habitats. They rely on speed and proximity to their dens for safety.*

## Finding a Home at the Nevada National Security Site

A wide variety of plant and animal species can be found at the Site, located in Nye County about 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas. About 1,500 animal species and 800 different kinds of plants are documented at the Site, which spans both the Mojave and Great Basin deserts.

The varying elevations and climatic conditions at the Site contribute to the distribution of plant and animal communities. On the south end of the Site, Jackass Flats lies at 2,688 feet above sea level while Rainier Mesa, in the north, rises to 7,679 feet above sea level.

# Plant and Animal Life

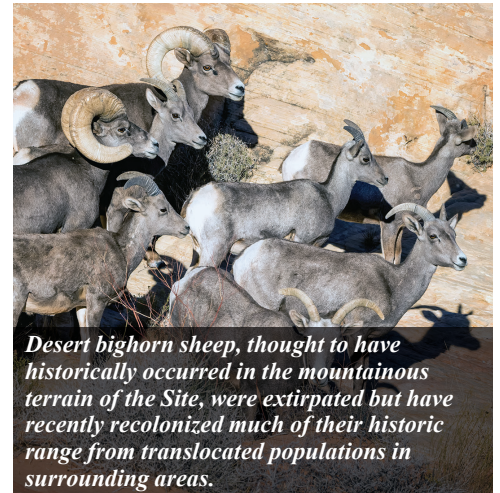
## Animals

The diverse habitats and climate found at the Site make it an ideal environment for many animal species.

Mountain lions, kit foxes, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, desert tortoises, sidewinder rattlesnakes, golden eagles, spotted bats and kangaroo rats are just a few of the animals that find a home at the Site, which encompasses both open desert and mountainous terrain across 1,355 square miles. Invertebrates comprise the majority of animals at the Site with about 1,200 species. Spiders, scorpions, beetles, centipedes and ants are some of these species.

Other animals include:

- A herd of about 40 wild horses roam the north-central part of the Site.
- 50 to 60 pronghorn antelope are found primarily in Frenchman Flat and Yucca Flat.
- 20 to 30 desert bighorn sheep live in the canyons and mountains in the southwest portion of the Site.
- Desert kangaroo rats are associated with loose, sandy soils at lower elevations while dark and pale kangaroo mice prefer sandy soils at middle elevations.
- Migrating birds and waterfowl are attracted to the many natural springs and man-made ponds across the Site.
- Fifteen bat species utilize a variety of habitats throughout the Site including several abandoned mines, tunnels and water sources.



*Desert bighorn sheep, thought to have historically occurred in the mountainous terrain of the Site, were extirpated but have recently recolonized much of their historic range from translocated populations in surrounding areas.*

## Plants

In addition to the large variety of animal species, the Site contains more than 800 varieties of plants. Because the Site lies on the transition between the Mojave and Great Basin deserts, elements of both deserts are found in a diverse and complex flora. About 67 families of plants are represented; however, one-third of them belong to just three families: sunflowers, grasses and buckwheat.

Joshua trees are plentiful across the Site with the greatest concentrations in the lower-middle elevations. The majority of them are around 100 years old but exact ages are difficult to pinpoint because they do not have annual growth rings like most trees.

Pinyon pine and juniper trees grow at the higher elevations, usually 5,500 feet above sea level, primarily on Rainier and Pahute mesas. Other vegetation includes grasses, flowering desert plants, succulents (yucca and cacti), sagebrush and creosote bush.





*Three species of yucca, including the Mojave yucca can be found across the Site. They have sword-like leaves that end in a spear-like spine.*



*Desert dandelion (yellow flowers) is one of the most common wildflowers in the Mojave Desert portion of the Site with spectacular blooms after abundant winter and spring precipitation.*



*Pronghorn can be spotted across the NNSS, particularly in the eastern half of the Site.*

## Native American Use of Plants

Many of the plants at the Site were used by Native Americans for food, beverage, medicinal, ceremonial and utilitarian purposes. Native Americans used yuccas, such as Joshua trees, for soap and as a fiber source for baskets. Leafy plants and the flowers on yuccas, as well as pine nuts from pinyon pine trees, provided traditional sources of food in the desert. Pahute Mesa offered several leafy food plants that Native Americans ate as greens or added to other food. The Ephedra plant, commonly found on the mesas of the Site, also had several uses. While it was most commonly used to make Ephedra tea, Native Americans also used the plant to treat kidney ailments and as an astringent.

## Protected Species

The desert tortoise is the only animal species commonly found on the Site that is protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 and it lives in the southern third portion of the Site. It is listed as a threatened species, and the Nevada Field Office is required to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that activities at the Site do not jeopardize the continued existence of the desert tortoise or destroy its habitat. Currently, there are no threatened or endangered plant species known to occur on the Site.



*Desert tortoises find shade under rocks during the hot summer days.*



For more information, visit:

[www.nnss.gov](http://www.nnss.gov)

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