

# 12 animals that bounced back from the brink

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*By Annie Roth, 5 October 2018*



The rate at which humans are driving other species to extinction has reached new heights. Scientists estimate that 150 to 200 species of plants and animals now go extinct every day, most of which go unnoticed. At this rate, more than half of all species on Earth could be lost by 2100.

But this grim future is not set in stone; we have the power to save these species.

Over the last half-century, dedicated scientists and conservationists have changed the fate of several species on the verge of extinction. From the iconic giant panda, pushed to the brink by poaching and deforestation, to the island fox brought down in part by opportunistic eagles, humans have helped numerous species recover from dire straits. Here are a dozen heartwarming examples of the power we have to bring species back from the brink.



*The lesser long-nosed bat is one of only a few bat species that feeds almost exclusively on nectar. In Mexico, these bats drink nectar from agave plants, which inadvertently helps tequila producers pollinate their agave crop.*

*PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEL SARTORE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO ARK*

## Lesser long-nosed bat

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These fluffy brown bats made history in 2017 when they became the first of their kind to be removed from the [US endangered species list](#). Thirty years ago, fewer than a thousand remained in existence. Now, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that there are more than 200,000 of these bats spread out across the United States and Mexico.

Famous for their role in pollinating the plant used to make tequila, the lesser long-nosed bat is one of only three bat species in the US that feeds on nectar.

The bats were driven to near extinction by a combination of habitat loss and indiscriminate culling. Attempts to rid Mexico of its rabies-ridden population of vampire bats resulted in the incidental killing of hundreds of long-nosed bats.

After being declared endangered in 1988, government agencies on both sides of the border began protecting caves and abandoned mine shafts where the bats were known to roost. In Mexico, some tequila producers altered their agave cultivation practices to benefit the animals and some brands now market their products as bat friendly.

## Louisiana black bear

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Named after the state where it's recognised as the official mammal, this Louisiana ursine is one of 16 subspecies of American black bear. This southern subspecies has a longer, narrower skull than other black bears.

Found only in Louisiana, east Texas, and western Mississippi, the subspecies was declared endangered throughout its range in 1992. During the early 20th century, much of the Louisiana black bear's habitat was lost to agricultural development.

Since the species was added to the US endangered species list, government agencies and private landowners have restored more than 700,000 acres of the critical black bear habitat. These efforts have been so successful that scientists estimate that the number of Louisiana black bears has doubled since the subspecies was listed. Delisted in 2016, an estimated 500 to 750 Louisiana black bears now exist in the wild.



*The Louisiana black bear is the official mammal of its eponymous state, but its range extends into Mississippi and eastern Texas. These bears have dark fur but some sport a distinct white patch on their chest.*

**PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEL SARTORE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO ARK**

## Morelet's crocodile

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The Morelet's crocodile, also known as the Mexican crocodile, is a modestly sized reptile found in freshwater swamps and marshes in Central America that averages three metres in length.

Unlike most of its crocodile cousins, the Morelet's crocodile doesn't have bony plates embedded in its skin, which allows the skin to be more easily made into leather.

During the 1940s and 50s, the demand for their skin was so high that hunters killed all but a few hundred individuals. In 1970 the species was listed as endangered and conservation efforts began. Crocodile farms began to spring up all around Mexico, where they're raised for conservation and commercial purposes.

These efforts allowed the population to recover and to be de-listed in 2012.

## Przewalski's horse

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Przewalski's horses are the last truly wild horses. The so-called wild horses that roam Australia and North America's western plains and East Coast barrier islands are actually feral descendants of domesticated ancestors.

Named after the Russian explorer who first described it in the late 19th century, Przewalski's horse once roamed free in grasslands across Europe and Asia. Numbers dwindled as a result of intensive poaching and habitat loss.



**Przewalski's Horse**  
*Equus ferus przewalskii*

**TYPE:** Mammals  
**DIET:** Herbivores  
**GROUP NAME:** Herd  
**AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN CAPTIVITY:** 20 years  
**SIZE:** Height at the shoulders 48 to 56 in  
**WEIGHT:** 440 to 750 lbs  
**POPULATION TREND:** Increasing  
**IUCN RED LIST STATUS:** Endangered

These horses disappeared from the wild in the 1960s, but have since been reintroduced in Mongolia through captive breeding programs. Roughly 1,900 Przewalski's horses are alive today, all of which are descended from 14 horses that were caught in the wild between 1910 and 1960.

## Vancouver Island marmot

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The Vancouver Island marmot is a comically large rodent found only in the high mountains of Vancouver Island in British Columbia.

In the 1990s logging companies clear-cut much of the area's forests and the number of marmots began to fall. By 2003, a survey revealed their population had dwindled to less than two dozen individuals.

In response to the marmot's dire situation, a group known as the Marmot Recovery Foundation significantly ramped up their conservation efforts. The foundation posted a field crew on the island to monitor the marmots 24 hours a day to ensure they weren't eaten by predators.

This round-the-clock monitoring, combined with adjustments to their captive-breeding techniques, gave rise to a small but stable population of Vancouver Island marmots. Of the 150 to 200 marmots alive today roughly 10 percent was born in captivity.

"I never thought I'd see this species alive", photographer Joel Sartore [told National Geographic](#) in August. Sartore, who has been photographing rare and endangered species since 2005, photographed every animal on this list and thousands more. (Read more about [how Canada's most endangered mammal was saved](#)).

## Giant panda

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This iconic species has become the poster child for wildlife conservation. In 1980s excessive poaching and deforestation decimated China's population of giant pandas. When all but a few hundred bears remained a global movement to save them was born.

Millions of dollars are spent on habitat restoration, captive breeding, and protection enforcement for the giant panda each year, and it's paying off. There are now 1,864 giant pandas in the wild and another 300 in zoos and breeding centres.

Nearly two-thirds of all wild panda now live in protected wildlife reserves and a handful of captive-bred pandas has been released into the wild. (Watch this [video showing pandas being returned to the wild](#)).

## Whooping crane

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These elegantly adorned birds are the tallest birds in North America, and they were once one of the most endangered. Migratory and non-migratory flocks of the birds are spread across the United States and Canada, but fewer than a thousand individuals currently exist.

The current population is a mere four percent of its historic size. European settlers hunted the birds on a massive scale during the late 1800s. Habitat loss and one particularly destructive hurricane also contributed to the downfall of the whooping crane. By 1941 less than 20 individuals remained.



### **Whooping Crane**

*Grus americana*

**TYPE:** Birds

**DIET:** Omnivores

**AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN THE WILD:**  
22 to 24 years

**SIZE:** Body, 4.9 ft; wingspan, 7.5 ft

**WEIGHT:** 13.3 to 17.2 lbs

**POPULATION TREND:** Increasing

**IUCN RED LIST STATUS:** Endangered

When the species was declared endangered in 1967, protections and captive breeding programs were quickly established. Successful breeding and reintroductions have bolstered their ranks by several hundred birds. The wild population currently consists of roughly 600 birds, 400 of which are part of the last truly wild flock.

These statuesque birds live in tight-knit family groups and spend most of their day foraging for shellfish, insects, fish, and aquatic plants in marshes and lagoons.

## Sea otters

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The recovery of the sea otter is considered one of the greatest successes in marine conservation.

Nearly one million of these undeniably adorable marine mammals once inhabited coastal waters from Alaska to Baja California and around the Pacific Rim to Russia and Japan.

But in the 1700s, trappers began killing otters by the thousands for their luxurious fur, and soon the animals disappeared from much of their range. By 1911, fewer than 2,000 sea otters remained.

Without sea otters to keep invertebrate populations in check, kelp forests across the North Pacific became overrun with sea urchins, leading to an impoverishment of coastal ecosystems.

Protections for sea otters were put in place throughout their historic range. Eventually, the remnant populations in eastern Russia, western Alaska, and California started to show signs of recovery. Their global population now consists of just over 100,000 otters.



*Sea otters have the densest, and arguably the most luxurious, fur in the animal kingdom. Every square inch of fur contains an around one million individual hairs. Unlike other marine mammals, sea otters don't have blubber. Having such dense fur allows sea otters to trap air next to their skin, allowing them to stay dry and warm in the chilly waters of the pacific ocean. PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEL SARTORE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO ARK*

## Turquoise parrot

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The turquoise parrot has made a remarkable recovery over the last century. The Australian avian came close to extinction in the late 1800s as a result of habitat loss and poaching.

Although these pint-sized parrots can fly, they spend most of their time on the ground in search of seeds. When large-scale cattle farming was introduced to Australia in the early 1800s, much of the parrot's grassy woodland habitat was converted to pasture. To make matters worse, the hollowed-out eucalyptus trees that turquoise parrots nest in were removed in many places to make way for agricultural development. The birds also became a popular filling in Australian meat pies.

The species was presumed extinct in 1915, but in the 1930s the birds began popping up in New South Wales.

In recent years, farmers and conservationists have worked together to restore habitat for the bird. This includes encouraging landowners to leave hollow trees on their property. In 2,000, scientists estimated that the wild population had reached 20,000 birds.

## Island fox

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The six subspecies of island fox are spread across six of the eight Channel Islands, off the coast of southern California. Each subspecies is unique to the island it lives on. All six subspecies of the island fox are descendants of the mainland gray fox, but they're about two-thirds the size.

In the 1990s scientists noticed that the number of foxes on three of the northernmost islands—San Miguel, Santa Rosa, and Santa Cruz—was falling fast. By 2,000 local extinction seemed like an inevitability. Widespread use of DDT had poisoned the native bald eagle population, creating an opportunity for golden eagles from the mainland to move in. Unlike the bald eagles, the golden eagles prey on foxes. Between 1994 and 2000, the predators had eaten all but a few dozen foxes.

In response, researchers and conservationists from the National Park Service, Nature Conservancy and Catalina Island Conservancy flocked to the island to facilitate a recovery.

Golden eagles were relocated, non-native competitors such as feral pigs and cats were removed and island foxes were collected and bred in captivity. This effort took nearly two decades, but it was largely successful.

Both island foxes and bald eagles have returned to the island. More than 6,000 of these foxes now roam the isolated islands, and their numbers are growing.

## Blue iguana

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Just 16 years ago, less than 25 blue iguanas remained in the wild. Now, there may be as many as 1,000.

Found only on the Cayman Islands, the blue iguana once numbered in the thousands. Perfectly adapted to their tropical island habitat, these plant-eating lizards thrived on the islands for thousands of years until real estate development and the arrival of rats and feral cats threw the island ecosystem out of whack. By 1990 habitat loss and the proliferation of invasive predators had pushed the blue iguana to the brink of extinction.

The species was declared functionally extinct in 2005, but that didn't stop conservations from trying to save it. Captive breeding programs coupled with improved management of federal land and feral pet populations has helped the species avoid extinction. In 2012, the number of wild blue iguanas rose to approximately 750 and the species was downlisted from critically endangered to endangered. (Watch: [How one of the rarest reptiles made an epic comeback](#)).

## Black-footed ferret

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Across the Great Plains of North America, the black-footed ferret is making an unexpected comeback. One of only three species of ferret in existence, the black-footed ferret once numbered in the tens of thousands. But in the 1900s habitat loss and diseases brought in

from overseas all but wiped them out. By 1986, the entire population consisted of 18 captive ferrets.

Efforts to bring them back by means of captive breeding have been surprisingly successful. As of 2016, the population consists of nearly 500 ferrets spread out across 17 reintroduction sites in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Conservation efforts are ongoing as scientists say 3,000 ferrets are needed to facilitate a full recovery.