

Wildlife & Plant Image Sources

Free to Use

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A curated collection of reputable sources offering free-to-download photographs, illustrations, and historical artwork of wildlife — particularly species that may be threatened or endangered. Scan any QR code to visit a site directly on your phone.

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The badge labels below reflect general collection-level guidance, not a guarantee about every individual image. Many collections — including USFWS, iNaturalist, and Macaulay Library — contain images with different license types within the same database. You should always verify the copyright or license status of each individual image before downloading or using it. Where a collection is labeled 'Verify Each Image,' this is especially important. The only collections where every image is reliably in the public domain are those featuring historical naturalist art published before 1928.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

No copyright — free for all uses

CC / FREE USE

Generally free — check specific terms

VERIFY EACH IMAGE

Licenses vary — always check individually

VARIES / MIXED

Collection has multiple license types

■ ■ [GOV] Government & Agency Sources

USFWS National Digital Library

Verify Each Image

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's official image library with thousands of wildlife photos. Most images taken by federal employees are public domain, but the library also accepts photographer contributions that may carry copyright. Always check the copyright field shown alongside the photographer's name for each individual image.

<https://digitalmedia.fws.gov>

Important: License varies per image. Check the copyright designation on each photo before downloading.



Flickr Commons

No Known Restrictions

Hundreds of government agencies and cultural institutions share photo archives here. Images are marked "no known copyright restrictions," meaning the host institution believes them to be free of restrictions — but this is their best judgment, not a legal guarantee.

<https://www.flickr.com/commons>

Note: "No known copyright restrictions" is not the same as confirmed public domain. Verify with the source institution for sensitive uses.



National Park Service — Photo Gallery

Mostly Public Domain

Wildlife and landscape photography from America's national parks. Photos taken by NPS employees are public domain as U.S. federal government works. Some galleries may include donated or contracted photography — check individual image credits.

<https://www.nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm>

Note: NPS employee photos are public domain. Check credits for any images attributed to outside photographers.



NOAA Photo Library

Mostly Public Domain

Excellent source for marine wildlife, coastal species, and ocean ecosystems. Managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Images by NOAA employees are U.S. government works and public domain; verify any externally credited images.

<https://photolib.noaa.gov>

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Smithsonian Open Access

CC0 — Public Domain

Millions of images from the Smithsonian's collections released under the CC0 "no rights reserved" dedication — natural history specimens, taxidermy, fossils, and field photographs. One of the most reliable truly unrestricted collections available.

<https://www.si.edu/openaccess>

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Internet Archive

Varies — Check Each Item

A vast digital library hosting scanned natural history books, Audubon's complete works, historic field guides, and millions of images. Many items are firmly public domain; others are in-copyright works shared with permission. Each item page states its license clearly.

<https://archive.org>

Check the "Rights" field on each item's page. Public domain items display "No known copyright restrictions" or a CC0/public domain mark.



■ ■ [SCI] Scientific & Research Platforms

iNaturalist

License Varies Per Photo

A citizen science platform with tens of millions of species observations and photographs. Each image carries its own license chosen by the photographer — ranging from CC0 (unrestricted) to CC-BY-NC (non-commercial only) to "All Rights Reserved." You must check the license tab on each individual observation.

<https://www.inaturalist.org>

Important: Always click the license tab on each observation. Do not assume all iNaturalist images are free to use.



Macaulay Library — Cornell Lab of Ornithology

License Varies Per
Photo

The world's largest archive of wildlife audio and video, with extensive bird and animal photography. As with iNaturalist, licenses are set by individual contributors and vary widely. Many images are available under Creative Commons licenses; some are not. Check each image individually.

<https://www.macaulaylibrary.org>

Important: Verify the license on each individual image or recording before use.



Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL)

Mostly Public Domain

The world's largest open-access digital archive for biodiversity literature. Over 150,000 animal and botanical illustrations from 15th-20th century publications — the vast majority firmly public domain. BHL also hosts some in-copyright works shared under Creative Commons licenses; the status of each item is clearly stated. Browse their Flickr photostream (300,000+ images) at [flickr.com/photos/biodivlibrary](https://www.flickr.com/photos/biodivlibrary)

<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>

Pre-1928 publications are firmly public domain in the U.S. Check the copyright statement on each title page for newer items.



■ ■ [CC] Creative Commons Photography Platforms

Wikimedia Commons

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A massive, searchable repository of freely licensed media including photography and natural history illustrations. Licensing varies image by image — some are CC0, many are CC-BY or CC-BY-SA requiring attribution, and the license terms differ. Always read the license listed on each file's description page.

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Pexels

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Professional quality photographs under the Pexels License — free for all uses including commercial, no attribution required. Good selection of wildlife and nature imagery. Licensing is more consistent than many platforms but still worth a quick check on each image.

<https://www.pexels.com>

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Unsplash

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Free Use

A curated library of professional photography free for commercial use under the Unsplash License. Strong collection of nature and wildlife photography. The Unsplash License is broad but does have some restrictions (e.g., cannot resell photos as-is); read the full license for commercial applications.

<https://unsplash.com>

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■ [ART] Historical Naturalist Art — Solidly Public Domain

The following collections feature artwork by naturalists who died centuries ago. Works published before 1928 are firmly public domain in the United States. These are among the most reliably free resources available — and some of the most beautiful wildlife art ever created.

National Audubon Society — Birds of America

Public Domain —
Confirmed

John James Audubon (1785-1851). All 435 life-size hand-colored prints from his landmark 1827-1838 masterwork, freely downloadable in very high resolution. The Audubon Society explicitly states these images are in the public domain. Files are extremely large — suitable for high-quality printing.

<https://www.audubon.org/art/birds-of-america>

Confirmed public domain. The Audubon Society explicitly states: "Images from Birds of America are in the public domain."



rawpixel — Public Domain Natural History Art

CC0 Public Domain

Digitally enhanced, high-resolution downloads of Audubon's birds and mammals, Ernst Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* (1904, sea creatures and organisms), and Maria Sibylla Merian's botanical-insect illustrations (1705). All released under CC0 — no rights reserved, no attribution required.

<https://www.rawpixel.com/category/53/public-domain>

CC0: No rights reserved. The original artworks are public domain; rawpixel's enhanced versions are also CC0.



The Public Domain Review — Natural History Collections

Public Domain

A beautifully curated gateway to historic natural history collections. Includes Merian's *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705), Haeckel's art forms, rare botanical atlases, and more. Each collection receives scholarly editorial context — excellent for understanding what you're looking at.

<https://publicdomainreview.org>

All featured collections are confirmed public domain. Editorial text on the site is separately copyrighted.



Internet Archive — Audubon's Birds of America (Full Folio Scans)

Public Domain —
Confirmed

The complete double-elephant folio of *Birds of America*, scanned from an original copy held by the Oak Spring Garden Foundation. Freely downloadable, no restrictions. The archive page explicitly states: "This resource is in the public domain and may be used without restriction."

<https://archive.org/details/audubon-4477-binder>

Confirmed public domain. Attribution is customary and requested but not legally required.



BHL Flickr — Historic Natural History Illustrations

Mostly Public Domain

BHL's Flickr photostream contains over 300,000 curated images from historic natural history publications, including dedicated albums for Haeckel, Merian, and countless 18th-19th century naturalists. A wonderful place to browse and discover little-known illustrators.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/biodivlibrary/albums>

Mostly public domain (pre-1928 publications). Check the license note on each album or image to confirm.



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