



# BE A NATURE DETECTIVE

## YOUTH AND FAMILY ACTIVITIES

May 1, 2020

Stop, look, and listen! There are clues to be found from the wildlife all around us. This week we will explore signs of animal presence through a lesson, nature walk and art activity.

### WHO HAS BEEN HERE?

*Learn about animal sign and how to look for clues to the wildlife living in your area.*

**What you need:** No supplies required; *Optional: nature journal, writing utensil*

**Time:** 20 minutes

1. Start by considering the question, "How might we know animals were living in an area without seeing them directly?" Come up with as many different types of evidence as you can. Think about how different kinds of animals, such as mammals, birds, or insects might leave different clues behind. You may wish to make a list of your ideas in your nature journal.
2. When thinking about evidence that animals leave behind, we generally think of tracks and sign.
  - Tracks are the impressions left by an animal's feet in a substrate, such as mud, sand or dirt.
  - Animal sign is other evidence that an animal leaves behind such as hair, feathers, scratch marks, scat (animal poop) and chewed leaves or plants.
3. Animal tracks are one type of evidence that can provide rich opportunities for further exploration. Observing an area with tracks closely can lead us to ask questions and construct ideas about who has been here, using the tracks as evidence. Observe the snowy track scene and consider the following questions:



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- What do you notice?
  - How many different types of tracks do you see?
  - What types of animals do you think made these tracks? Why do you think that?
  - What direction do you think they were moving?
  - How were they moving? Were they running or moving quickly, or walking and moving more slowly
4. If doing this with another person, talk and share your ideas. You may not always agree, and that is okay. The goal is to use what you observe as evidence to support your thinking.
5. Animal tracks vary by species and taxonomic group. Comparing tracks up close can help you learn what features to look for and how to begin to identify who made the tracks. Compare the two tracks pictured below from two different groups of animals. Consider the following questions:
- What do you notice about the two tracks?
  - What is similar between the two tracks?
  - What is different between the two tracks?
  - What further questions do you have?



6. The track on the left, is representative of canids, such as domestic dogs, coyotes, and foxes. The track on the right, is representative of felids, such as domestic cats, bobcats, and cougars. Key differences between these two types of tracks are:

Canids	Felids
May have claw marks above toe pads	Typically, no claw marks above toe pads
Front or top of heel pad has one lobe	Front or top of heel pad has two lobes
Back of heel pad has two lobes	Back of heel pad has three lobes

7. Knowing these two types of tracks can be helpful when looking at tracks in your neighborhood. While you may be most likely to see tracks from pets, knowing what to look for can help you start to figure out what you are seeing. You may wish to look up tracks for other animals in your area or take pictures of tracks that you see to try and identify at a later point. When taking a photo of a track, it is helpful to include something such as coin for scale, like you see in the photo above.
8. Wildlife tracking is a way to learn more about animals by finding and exploring their tracks and sign. By practicing using your senses to look for signs of animal presence, you can deepen your understanding of the natural world. The details of track identification can be complex, but you do not need to have an extensive knowledge to get started. Begin by getting out and getting curious!

## WILDLIFE SIGNS NATURE WALK

*Take a walk through your neighborhood and search for signs of nature.*

**What you need:** No supplies required; *Optional – nature journal and writing utensil*

**Time:** 45 minutes

1. Think back to the previous activity “Who has been here?”. What are some potential clues that you might find on your walk that would suggest an animal has been there?
2. Where might you look to find tracks or signs? Remember to keep your eyes open! Simple marks on a tree trunk could be the indentations from an animal’s claws.
3. Take a walk outdoors and search for evidence of wildlife.
4. A couple of notes as you begin:
  - Take your time and keep your eyes open. Evidence of animal presence may not be obvious at first, but keep looking, it is all around us.
  - Be respectful. Look and observe, but don’t disturb.
  - Try and think like an animal. A fallen pinecone may seem unexciting, but a closer look may reveal that it was a tasty snack for a squirrel.
5. As you go, you may wish to record what you observe with notes and sketches.



[Chewing pest damage #oc](#) by [Brian Edgar](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#).

### Consider This!

Try making your own tracks in a variety of substrates. Go outside and look for some dry dirt, sand, mud, grass, etc. Try and recreate some of the tracks that you learned about in the first activity, or even make your own print using your hand. Which substrate holds the track best? How might this knowledge help you when you go on a walk or a hike looking for evidence of wildlife?

## **MAKE YOUR OWN TRACK**

*Make your own animal track stamps!*

**What you need:** Paper or nature journal, paint, sponges, scissors, marker, pencil

**Time:** 15-20 minutes

1. Choose one of the animal tracks you learned about above or research the track of your favorite animal.
2. Identify the major characteristics of your animal track. Ask yourself the following questions:
  - How many toes does your animal have?
  - Would claws or talons be visible on your animal track?
  - What shape is your animal track?
  - What other defining characteristics do you notice?
3. After identifying these characteristics, carefully sketch your track on a piece of paper or in your nature journal.
4. After completing your sketch. Use a marker to sketch the track on your sponge.
5. Cut your sponge out.
6. Dip your new stamp in paint and stamp in your nature journal or on a piece of paper.
7. How does it look? Would you be able to identify your track? Do you need to make any changes?
8. Readjust and redesign as needed.
9. You can do this with as many species as time, resources and interest allow.

## **TRACK PHOTO CREDITS**

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