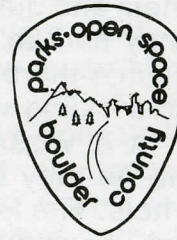


Spring/Summer
1990



Nature Detectives

Who's been here? What were they doing and why were they doing it? When did it happen? Nature detectives try to answer questions like these by looking for clues and evidence of the activities of creatures in the outdoors.

Have you ever wondered about teeth marks on the trunk of a tree, or strange footprints in the snow or mud? If you have, then you are already a nature detective.

THEME:

WILD NEIGHBORS!

All animals need food, water, shelter from danger, and a place to raise their families. Some animals, like grizzly bears, need vast wild lands to provide these needs. They could never live in or near to cities. But other animals adapt to life within our cities.

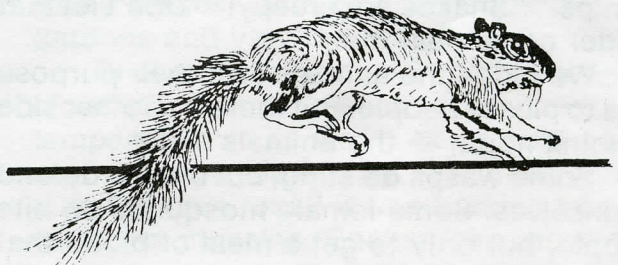
Many birds set up their homes in backyards, parks, and schoolyards. Look for nests in traditional places like trees and bushes. Look for special city-nests, too, in traffic lights and shop signs, under bridges, and on the ledges of tall buildings. Birds migrate along riverbanks, ditches, and other areas with sheltering undergrowth.

Mammals use these travel routes as well. Some mammals even use our sewer pipes as subways and our rooftops as runways. Squirrels, raccoons, rats, and many other animals use our leftovers as food supply.

Insects don't need large living spaces. A single tree can be home to hundreds of them. Some insects even share our great indoors!

As long as their needs for food, water, shelter, and home sites are met, all these beastly neighbors seem quite at home in the city.

Want to meet some of your wild neighbors? Read on!



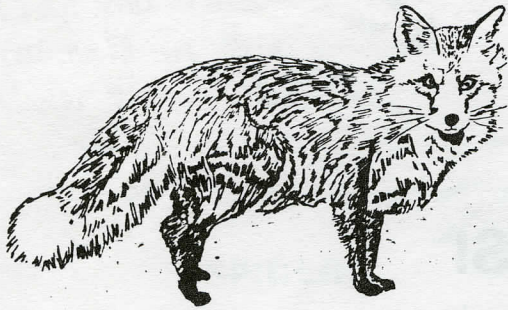
NIGHT LIFE

At night the city is crawling with animals! While you sleep, there may be a pair of red foxes quietly criss-crossing the alley behind your house, hunting for food. When two mice creep out of a woodpile near the garage, the foxes smell them and quickly pounce on their prey! Then they find an overturned garbage can and rummage there for tasty scraps.

In a ditch trickling with water, the foxes catch frogs. In a vacant lot they follow a rabbit's scent. As they approach, the rabbit zips down a hole. The foxes dig and dig, but come up empty-pawed this time.

As dawn approaches, the red foxes retrace their steps back to the edge of town. As they cross the highway they find a dead rabbit that was hit by a car. The foxes carry it to their daytime hide-out — a hole dug into the bank of a reservoir. Waiting for them are four baby foxes (kits). The kits hungrily eat the rabbit, then fall asleep with full bellies.

And as the foxes rest after a hard night's hunting, you are probably just waking up.



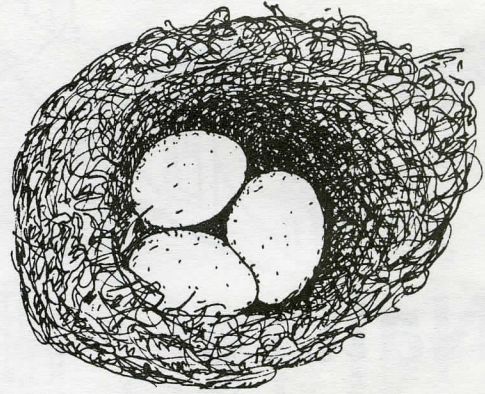
WHAT A PEST!

Many people label animals "pests" if they appear to be a nuisance. You may have heard your friends say, "Wasps are pests, they sting!" "Mosquitos bite and make itchy bumps!" "Snakes are creepy!" "Don't let that spider come near me!"

We judge the animals as if their purpose was to please people. But there's another side to think about — the animals' side!

Some wasps **do** sting, but only to defend themselves. Some female mosquitos **do** bite people, but only to get a meal of blood that they need to be able to lay their eggs. Snakes may seem creepy as they slither along in the grass. But if they were not around to eat rats and mice, we would be overrun with rodents. Without spiders, we would be "pestered" by a lot more flies.

So don't say, "What a pest!" Figure out the animal's side of the story.



HOME SWEET HOME

This spring my new neighbors moved in **right on my front door!** An old wreath of dried herbs and flowers hung on the door, and a little brown bird came and placed a twig there. While I watched, the bird flew off for another twig, then another, and another. Next she brought grass, and more grass. Then she collected dog hair from the lawn where I had combed my dog earlier that morning. A house finch was building a nest on my front door!

Now and then her mate sang from a nearby tree. His head, breast, and rump were a beautiful red. Why are you letting her build on my front door? I thought. How can you raise a family so close to people and noise?

The next day I noticed the finch sitting on her nest. Immediately I taped up a sign: **Out of order! Please use back door!**

Cheep. Cheep. Cheep. About two weeks later four tiny babies hatched. Both the mother and father brought food to them. Word spread, and soon all my neighbors came by to see our front door family!

Take a look around your yard. Do you have any new neighbors?



SEA GULL SAFARI

Can sea gulls survive away from the ocean? Yes, and they can live in some funny places. Have you ever seen sea gulls flying around Crossroads Mall? What are they doing there? What are they finding there that helps them to survive — food, water, or shelter?

Next time you are at Crossroads, see if you can find any sea gulls. Be a nature detective and try to figure out what they are doing.

DOG TOWN LIFE

Prairie dogs live in their own dog towns. They are social animals, using their voices and their body language to communicate with each other. A red-tailed hawk circling overhead or a person hiking with a dog means danger to the prairie dogs. They yap their warnings, and the next minute they vanish into their holes.

Prairie dogs that live in towns within people-cities are less wary. They adapt to traffic noise and people. Perhaps they are bold because they rarely see hawks. They're slow to yap a warning and disappear, so they are easy to study. Watch them touch noses to say hello. Notice how they groom each other. What are they finding to eat? Can you tell which are this year's babies?



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

If you hear a squawking crowd of crows or magpies fussing around a tree, check it out! They might be mobbing a hawk, trying to get the hawk to move on. Hawks mean danger to them.

Sharp-shinned hawks are the smallest accipiters in Colorado. Accipiters are forest-dwelling birds of prey (raptors) with short, rounded wings and long tails. Their long tails help them steer through the trees in pursuit of their prey.

Nearly all their food is small birds. The hawks can catch birds mid-air, or they can swoop on birds that are feeding at bird feeders.

Sharp-shinned hawks naturally live in forested canyons and river groves, but they adapt to life in the parks and gardens on the edge of cities, too. Watch for their soaring and gliding flight, which looks quite bouncy.

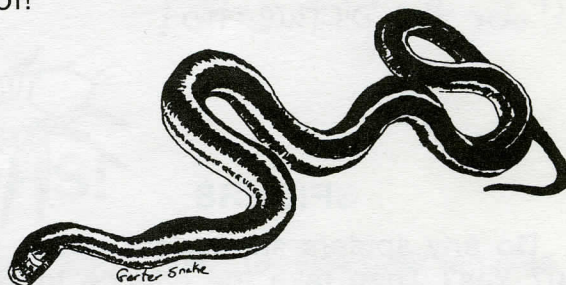
CENSUS TIME

Cities are for people, right? Check out your block and see if this is true. Answer these questions. You don't have to be exact!

- How many humans live on your block?
- How many pet animals do they own?
- How many birds come to your yard?
- Suppose each yard on the block has this many birds, how many birds would there be altogether?
- How many **wild** animals come to your yard? (Deer? Raccoons? Skunks? Squirrels? Mice? Garter snakes?)
- Suppose each yard in the block had this many animals, how many would there be altogether?
- How many insects live in your yard? (Ants? Grasshoppers? Beetles? Butterflies? Phew! You could never count **that** many!)
- What about the insects in all the yards on the block?

Are cities just for people? What did your census show?

Remember your wildlife manners as you count! If you move rocks or logs, put them back as you found them. They're someone's roof!



SNAKES

Do any snakes live near you? Snakes can live in a variety of habitats, including open rocky places, forests, grasslands, and even gardens and yards in the city.

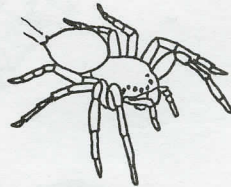
Snakes are reptiles. They are cold-blooded, which means that their body temperature is as warm or as cold as their environment. Have you ever seen a snake sunning on a rock? It was soaking up sun to warm its muscles. Snakes can move faster when they are warm. Scales underneath their bodies grip the ground as they move along.

Snakes can eat animals wider than their mouths, and they swallow their prey whole. How can they do it? Their jaws come apart to let their mouths open really wide.

Mice, rats, insects, frogs, and turtle eggs might all become snake food.



Can you find the nine animals in this picture?
Color the picture too!



SPIDERS

Do any spiders share your house with you? Yes? Then take the chance to study them. How many legs do they have? Can you see two body parts, the thorax and the abdomen? At the end of the abdomen are the spinnerets, which the spider uses to spin silk.

Some house spiders spin webs that look like untidy, tangled masses. Insects get caught in the silken strands and soon become spider food.

Look for the webs of house spiders in garages, sheds, and in the corners of rooms. Spiders are helpful because they catch and eat insects.

LADYBUGS

Have you ever seen a ladybug walking upside down? They can do this because they have two sharp claws at the tip of each leg, which help them hold on to branches or leaves. Behind the claws, on the bottom of each foot, is a little sticky pad, which helps the ladybug walk almost anywhere.



NATURE DETECTIVES: True or false — wildlife can only be found in wild places? FALSE!
Wildlife can be at home in the city, too! Come on a city scavenger hunt to see who your wild neighbors are!

See "Discover Nature Calendar" for details.