

NATURE DETECTIVES

Winter 2001

Tracking Down Wildlife Visitors

Scurry, hop, amble, lope, and bound; animals are moving through your yard. They leave clues such as feathers, fur, and droppings. They leave nibbled or broken branches. They make trails where they walk. You can discover which animals visit by learning how to read their tracks in the mud or snow. A guide such as *SCATS AND TRACKS OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS* by James Halfpenny will help you learn to identify your visitors.

Tracks also tell which direction the animal was going, but reading tracks is tricky. For example, when rabbits hop, their big back paws make prints in front of their small front paws. When animals are moving fast, their footprints are usually farther apart. You can see how your tracks change when you walk or run by stepping in water then making wet prints on your sidewalk. Measure the difference between your running stride and your walking stride. Did the shape of your prints change with speed?

Animals seldom leave perfect prints. Paws slide in mud or snow, especially if the animal starts to run or jump. Sticks or rocks under the snow change the track shape. But don't get discouraged. Try to find more tracks to check your guesses.

These tracks might be found in your yard. Do you know what animal made each track?

Another place to have fun with tracks is the National Wildlife Federation Internet track game. The address is: www.nwf.org/kids/trackMatch.cfm.

Pull Out and Save

Skunk

City Wildlife at Home

Have you ever smelled the pungent order of a skunk passing by? Have you glimpsed a raccoon as car lights catch it hustling down the storm sewer? Have you heard a fox squirrel skittering across your roof?

These animals are examples of wild creatures that have found a home in our neighborhoods. When people move into an area, many animals move out. But some animals find it beneficial to live near humans. They are typically animals that eat a variety of foods found near people, or animals that live close to our houses because there are fewer predators nearby.



Striped skunks may not be welcome visitors because of their offensive perfume, but skunks find life around people to their liking. Compost piles and vegetable gardens provide them with a tasty diet. In our yards, skunks pounce like cats on insects and mice. Spaces under houses can be cozy den sites where skunks snooze through cold weather. Skunks are most active at night so we smell them more than we see them. Even baby skunks can spray the stinky musk.



Raccoons look like the nighttime robbers they are with the mask of black fur around their eyes. They use their intelligence and flexible paws to make a good living around people. They will eat almost anything.

Brazen raccoons will use pet doors, steal pet food, and even open cupboards and refrigerators.

They excel in raiding garbage cans. Bird feeders provide easy snacking and so do vegetable gardens.

More than any other mammal, raccoons take advantage of food found around humans. In winter, like skunks, they wait for nice weather to venture out of their shelter.

RACCOON

Fox Squirrel

Fox squirrels forage for food in our trees, and they are very clever at getting seed from bird feeders. They chew through plastic easily with their sharp, continually growing teeth.

Searching for their food by day, they boldly raid vegetable gardens and are especially fond of corn. When they find more food than they can eat, they bury it. Later, they use their keen sense of smell to locate their buried treasure. On cold snowy days, they stay curled up in hollow trees or in twig and leaf nests, their fluffy tails keeping them warm.



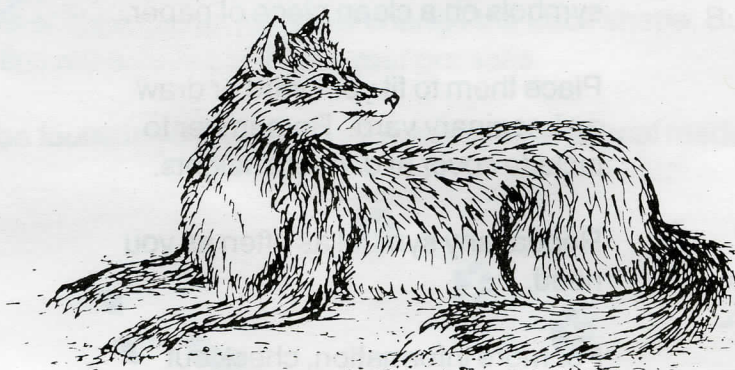
Fox Squirrel



Cottontail

Cottontail rabbits nibble trees, shrubs, and grass in many backyards. They do most of their eating early in the morning or in the evening. Chewing makes their noses twitch. They are always ready to leap into hiding at the first sound, sight, or smell of danger. Evergreen shrubs give them a place to hide or to huddle out of the blustery winter wind. Baby cottontails are ready find their own food and hiding places without their mother in only two to four weeks.

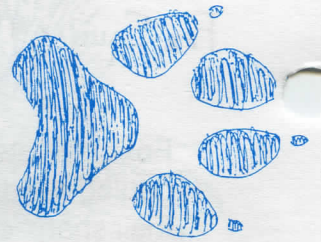
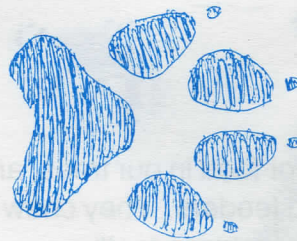
Red foxes might be hunting for an unwary cottontail, but they will pick up a dead bird that collided with a shiny window to take back to their hungry kits. They will eat almost anything they find including insects, eggs, and fruit. Foxes are larger than most city wildlife, and they like not having to compete with bigger predators. Clever foxes might take up residence in a park, or on a golf course. Despite their name, not all red foxes are red. They may even be golden and black or a silvery gray color, but all red foxes have a white-tipped tail.



Red Fox

Remember, no matter how tame some of our urban critters may seem, they are wild animals. You should never approach too close. Do have fun observing them, looking for clues that they leave, and knowing that no matter how busy our towns and cities, wild animals live among us. What other wild animals do you see, hear, or smell near your home?

Red Fox



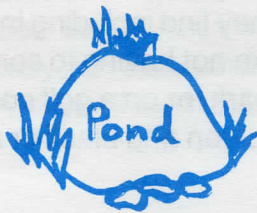
Planning Space for Wildlife

Is your backyard a great place to see wild animals? If not, maybe you need to invite them in. Any yard can become an attractive habitat for wildlife.

A great habitat for wildlife should include **food**, **water**, **cover** (places to hide), and **homes** (places to raise young). A big tree in your yard is already a small habitat. It provides food and homes for insects, birds, and squirrels, and may even be a place for a racoon to hide.

Birds and ground-dwelling animals (like rabbits, toads, and snakes) need food and cover on the ground such as rockpiles or woodpiles, bushes, wildflowers, and native plants.

Adding a little water to your yard can really entice wildlife. A shallow dish or birdbath kept full and clean can be enough to keep many animals near. A small pond with a natural beach edge (for easy climbing in and out) will attract a large variety of insects, amphibians, birds, and other animals.



Design your own wildlife habitat using these symbols. Trace the symbols on a clean piece of paper.

Place them to fit your yard or draw an imaginary yard. Remember to include cover at different heights.

Repeat any symbol as often as you need.

For more information, check out www.nwf.org/habitats.

