

NATURE DETECTIVES

Spring 2007



What is a Nature Detective?

Detectives of every kind are very observant. They notice little things most people don't see or hear or smell or feel. These easily overlooked clues tell what happened, where it happened and why. Criminal detectives search for clues so they can solve crimes.

Nature detectives don't solve crimes like police detectives, but they learn about nature by discovering clues left by animals, plants, insects, rocks, weather and anything else that makes up our natural world.

Like criminal detectives, nature detectives of all ages are patient. Being in too much of a hurry often means missing clues that only become apparent with hushed stillness. Practice sitting quietly in a safe, comfortable place, listening and watching the world around you for a while. Critters that scurry into hiding when they hear footsteps sometimes reward a motionless observer by going about their work in plain sight.

Nature detectives are curious. They use all their senses, and they wonder why they see, hear or smell certain things in the outdoors. They often record their observations so they can compare clues from one time with what they experience another time.

Keeping a Nature Journal

A nature journal is a notebook where you record your observations by writing, drawing or adding photos. Don't forget to put in the date each time you make an entry in your journal. It is fun to compare what you see this year with what you see next year or even the next time you are in the same place.

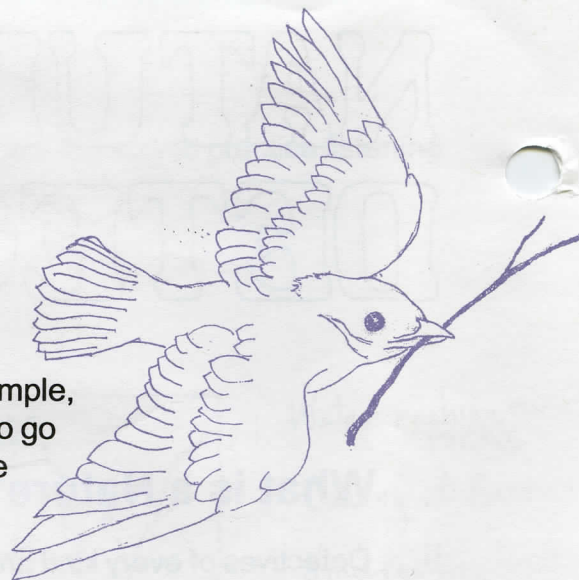
Nature detectives may read magazines and books, look on the Internet and talk to experts to learn more about things they observe.

Are you a nature detective? Now is the perfect time to become one.



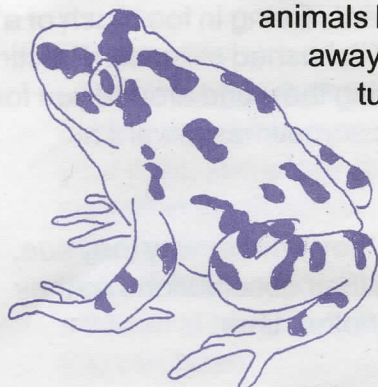
Being a Nature Detective in the Spring

Spring is a great time to practice detection skills in your own yard or neighborhood. Pick something you can watch several times in a day or over several days, such as a bird building a nest, or a tree leafing out, or a flower bud opening. If you are watching wildlife, it is important not to disturb the critters you watch. For example, don't be so close to a nest-building bird that she decides to go away and nest in another place. Try to be as sneaky as the wild animals. They are often watching us without us knowing they are near.



Detecting Spring with Good Sense(s)

Listen for frogs in spring. Peeping frogs suddenly stop when they detect you, long before you see them. By the end of April, the whirring sound, made by the broad-tailed hummingbird's wing tips, announces him long before we see him flash by. What spring sounds do you hear?



Seeing wildlife is exciting but nature detectives discover that seeing where animals have been is interesting too. Footprints around a mud puddle give away who has traveled that route. After the snow melts, you can find raised tunnels on the ground that show the wintertime travels of pocket gophers. A book on tracks and a ruler to measure the prints are good tools to have with you if you are looking for tracks.

Scat (animal poop) may clue you into what an animal had for dinner. Coyote scat may contain rabbit fur or berry seeds, for example. (Never touch scat; instead, use a stick if you want to look inside it.)

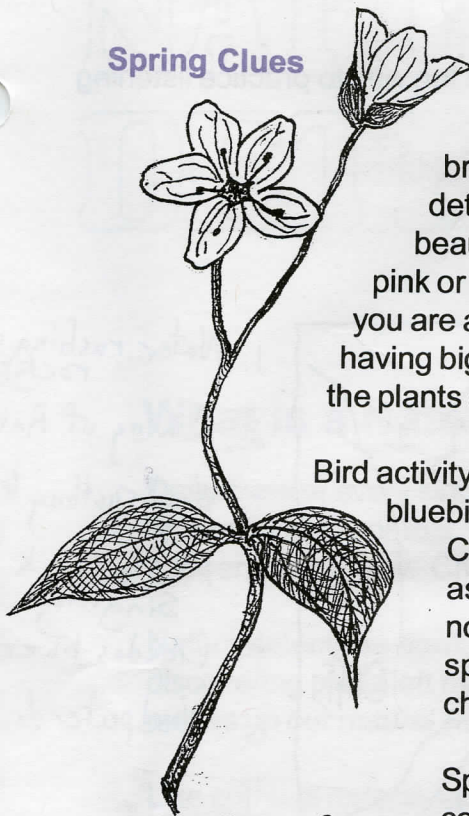
What signs of animal activity can you find?

Sniff out wildlife. If you see a hole in a rock pile, take a whiff. Maybe you'll smell the strong odor that gives you a hint that a skunk sleeps in a den at the other end of that hole. Brush against a low pale-green bush, and the pungent smell tells you it is sagebrush. Enjoy the luscious butterscotch smell of a ponderosa pine warmed by the spring sun. What spring smells does your nose detect?

Touch with caution. Plant identification is sometimes helped by feel. Fir trees are called "friendly" because their needles feel soft. Pine trees have stiff needles that prick your skin. Is the feel of anything a surprise?

Taste? What about tastes in the wild? Never! It is too dangerous to taste things without knowing what might be poisonous.

Spring Clues



SPRING
BEAUTY

We enjoy more hours of daylight in spring. Increased sunlight brings on new plant growth and renewed animal activity. Nature detectives will find the fairy-sized flowers of the plant called spring beauty in early spring. The white or pink flowers have five petals with pink or purple lines or veins and are tiny enough to be overlooked unless you are a nature detective. Spring beauty might have a reason for not having big, attention grabbing flowers; deer, elk, and bighorn sheep feast on the plants and mice like to nibble the part of the plant that grows underground.

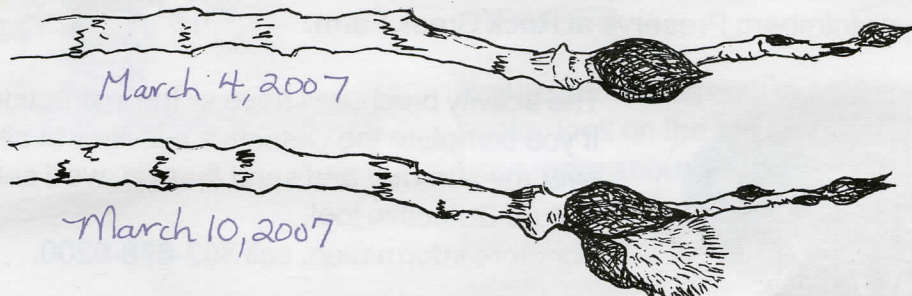
Bird activity peaks in the spring. In the sky, a flash of blue is a clue the bluebirds have returned from their winter homes farther south of Colorado. Chickadees are here year-round, but they are never as noisy or busy as in the spring. It is easy to hear the male chickadee whistle his two note "fee-bee" so loud it can wake you from sound sleep on an early spring day. He is telling the other male chickadees that he has chosen the territory where he will raise a new family.

Spring means babies. A red fox with pups back at the den is more concerned about hunting than hiding in the spring and may trot boldly across farm fields or parks in broad daylight. As animals struggle to find enough food to feed their new families, many spend more time out in the open where a nature detective could spot them.

Warm and cold air slamming into each other in the spring can cause dramatic snow or rainstorms. The wildest weather of the year often occurs in spring, and keeping weather records can be an interesting nature detective activity. When was the latest snowstorm of the season, and how much fell? How big were the biggest hailstones you've measured?

Nature Detection Your Way

Nature Detectives often like to share what they learn or record in their journals. Some nature detectives are inspired to write stories or poems about the things they see. You can become a nature detective right where you live, or venture out to a Boulder County Park to find a whole new variety of nature clues.





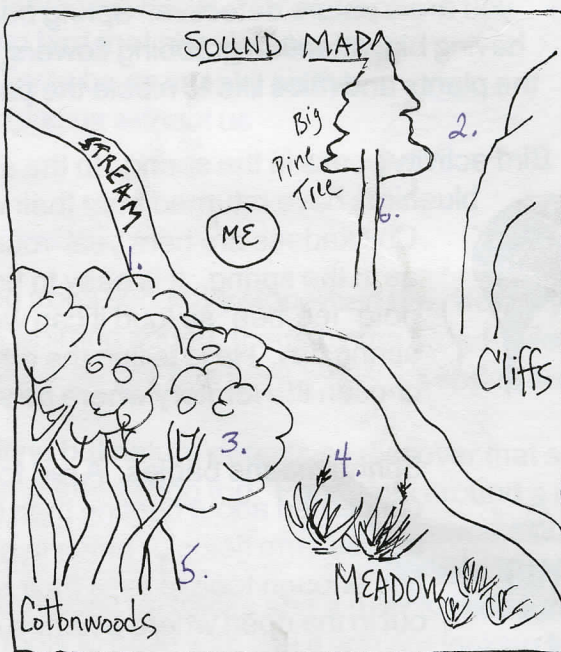
Sound in the Round

Making a "Sound Map" is a fun way to practice listening like a Nature Detective.
Find a quiet place to sit.

Bring a piece of paper and a pencil or pen.

In the middle of the paper, put an "X" or some other symbol for yourself. Sit very quietly for a few minutes, and try to hear as many things as you can. As you hear them, draw them in on your map.

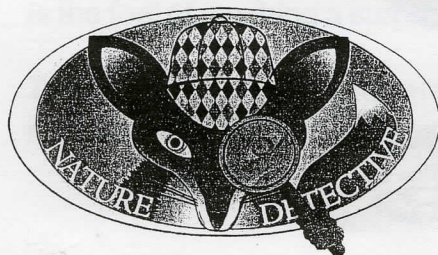
For example, you might hear wind blowing in the trees behind you, a bee buzz by on your right, and a bird singing way off in the distance. Once you start listening and drawing like a detective, you'll be amazed at how many things you can hear!



1. Water rushing over rocks
2. Cawing of Ravens
3. Wind rustling leaves
4. Meadow Lark Singing
5. Cicadas buzzing
6. Woodpecker drumming
- 7.
- 8.

Join the Nature Detectives Club

Boulder County Parks and Open Space invites you to join our Nature Detectives club this summer. Beginning May 15, 2007, look for special Nature Detectives activity brochures at three of our BCPOS properties: Betasso Preserve, Caribou Ranch, and Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm.



The activity brochures have all the instructions for what to do. If you complete the Detective activities at all three properties over the summer and send them in, we'll send you a special Nature Detective tool.

For more information, call 303-678-6200.