

NATURE DETECTIVES

Winter 2011



Tails Talk

A tail twitching, wagging, slapping, rattling or flipping is tail “talk.” Any animal’s moving tail can say a lot to another animal -- if the other animal understands the same tail language.

House cats and mountain lions both twitch their tails when they are ready to pounce on prey. We humans aren’t quite sure what a twitching tail says. A straight-up cat tail seems to say, “I’m walking along happily.”

People certainly know what dogs are saying when they wag their tails back and forth in eager greeting. A dog’s tail tucked under its body says, “You are bigger, please don’t hurt me.” Dogs say much more with their tails, but only another dog can completely understand the whole conversation. Wild dogs such as wolves and coyotes have similar tail talk.

Watch Out!

Some tail talk is clearly meant to be a warning for others. The rattlesnake’s rapid buzz sends an unmistakable signal to back off...or else.

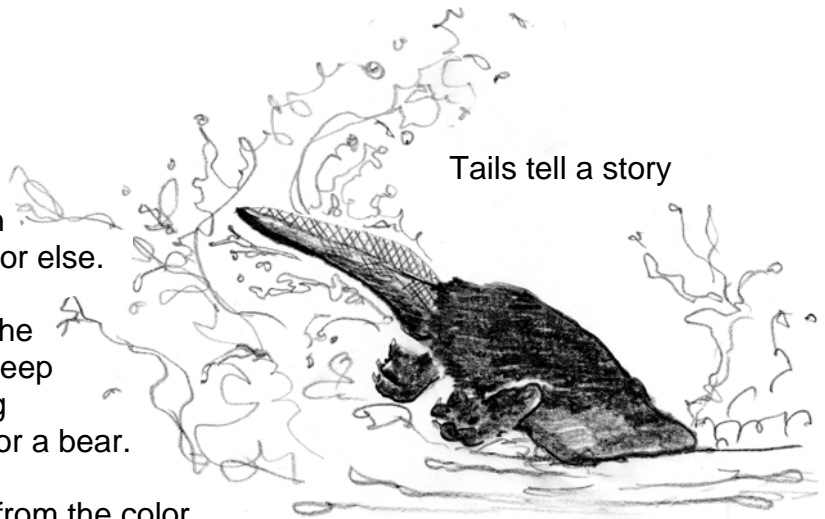
A beaver will slap her flat tail on the water to warn her family to dive deep because she has seen something scary. Maybe she saw a coyote or a bear.

White-tailed deer get their name from the color of the underside of their tails. They flip up their tails to show the white side when they are alarmed. The deer around them see this white “flag” as a sign to take off. It might also be a signal to the predator that says, “I see you -- so don’t bother trying a surprise attack.”

Body Language

People don’t have tails, but we certainly have body language. Nod yes and you have just given an example of body language. So is waving hello or good-bye. If humans had tails, think of the things we could say.

Pull Out and Save



Tails tell a story

Tails as Tools for Balance and Steering

Just as your arm can do much more than wave, tails can help animals do lots of different things. One thing tails do is help animals balance. Do you notice how sometimes you throw your arms wide to catch your balance? Animals do the same thing, only they use their tails. Mountain lions, foxes and coyotes swing their tails to the side to counter-balance their bodies as they tear around a sharp turn. The swinging tail helps them steer without falling over as they change direction. Mice use their tails like a tightrope walker uses a balance pole.



Squirrels swing their tails around to help steer them to a landing spot as they jump from limb to limb. Eagles and other birds use their tail feathers to help them turn and brake. River otters and beavers use their tails to steer underwater.

More Tail Tools

Squirrels also use their tails almost like a parachute as they jump from high places. In the rain, a squirrel holds its tail overhead as an umbrella.

Similar to how we use our hands, opossums can hold on to things with their tails. Baby opossums hold onto their mother's fur with their tails as she carries them along on her back.

Beavers are propped up on their wide tails as they stand on their hind legs to chew through a tree trunk. Woodpeckers prop their tail feathers the same way to give them extra support as they cling to the side of a tree and hammer away with their beaks.



Hang on harvest mouse.

Squirrels, foxes and some other animals sleep with their fluffy tails curled up over their noses like a warm winter blanket. Mice can pump extra blood into their waving, furless tails to help cool off on hot days. Pocket gophers use their tails to feel their way as they scamper backwards inside their dark underground tunnels.

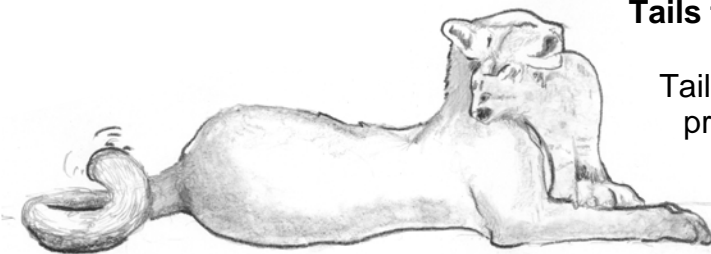
Tails as Weapons

The porcupine may be the best example of an animal with a tail that can hurt. Underneath the porky's long hairs are thousands of quills. Many a curious or hungry animal has gotten a face full of quills from the porky's quick, swinging tail action.

Tails for Defense

During the winter, weasels turn white for better hiding in snowy landscapes. The tips of their tails stay black. Wildlife biologists think the end is black to fool the weasels' predators. If a great-horned owl sees and grabs for the tail tip, the camouflaged weasel just may escape unharmed.

Lizards, especially skinks, are famous for having tails that simply break off when a predator attacks the tail. Even better, nerves in the broken-off tail piece keep it wiggling to get the attacker's attention long enough for the lizard to make its escape. In time, the lizard will grow a new tail.



Tails for Training Toys or Beauty Charms

Tails are even used for playtime hunting practice. Mountain lion kittens get a lesson on pouncing as they earnestly attack their mom's flicking tail.

Tails can be useful to show off to potential mates. Think of the tom turkeys that spread their beautiful tail feathers in hopes of attracting a hen turkey's attention.



The Reason for Tails

Tails come in all shapes and sizes. Some are furry and fluffy, others are scaly and flat, some are smooth and skinny, and there are many other styles, too. Animals use their tails in various ways, but all tails somehow aid survival for the animal species that have them. Otherwise, no critters would have tails.

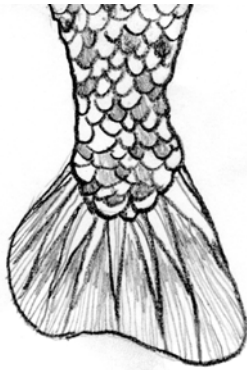
What About Short Tails or No Tails?

Some animals have really short tails. Think of bobcats. Some animals, such as pika, have no tails at all. Biologists know that different kinds of tails are quite useful for survival to a variety of animal species, but the bobcat and pika have survived well with a just a stubby tail or none. So here is something for you to ponder: what could be the benefit of NOT having a long tail for tail-less or short-tailed animals?



Little pika live high in the mountains. Why do you suppose pika have no tails?





Riddle Rhyme -- Who am I?

My tail is very helpful upon a summer day. It swishes and swooshes all around to keep the flies away. _____

My tail gives you warning. When you see me raise it tall, walk away really fast, before I spray you all. Pee-yew! _____

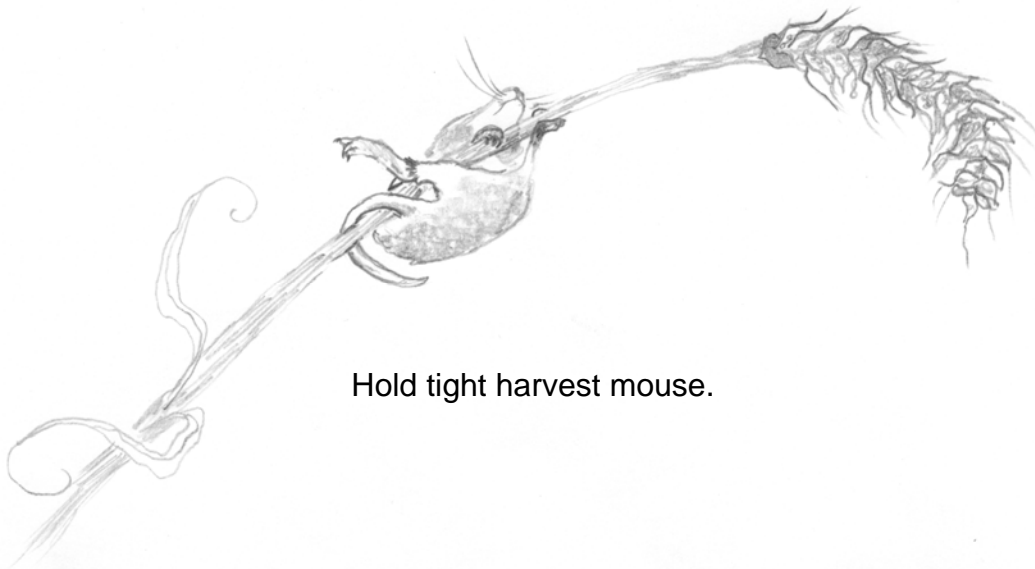
My tail feathers spread wide when a female I do spy. I hope she notices that I am a really good-looking guy. _____

My tail can rattle when I am full of fear. I'll strike, if you ignore my warning, and you will not like that, my dear. _____

Always under water, my tail waves from side to side. Whether rapidly or lazily, I can either zip away or slowly glide. _____

Tails on Trails

If you are hiking a trail or just out enjoying nature, whenever you chance to see wildlife, watch the tail. Most animals have them. See if you can tell how the tail benefits that animal. Was it using its tail to communicate or to move somehow? Was the tail being used as a weapon or as defense for the animal? Write your observations in a journal with the day's date if you like.



Hold tight harvest mouse.

Beaver tail



Answers to Riddle Rhyme:
(Other answers may also be correct.)

Horse or cow, skunk, turkey (male), rattlesnake, trout or other fish