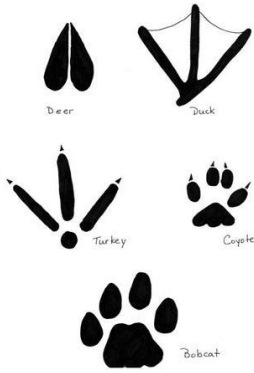


## Searching for Wildlife Clues



Children (and most adults) find animal tracks intriguing. Tracks are great clues to the mysteries about the species of wildlife that live in an area, even when you can't see the animals. Scat (poop) and other signs are also good clues. Help your participants discover these and other signs of wildlife!

We have quite a few track and other wildlife resources at the VN Center at Walden Ponds. These include:

- Rubber track molds of mammals and birds in Boulder County.
- Pictures of tracks mounted on wood blocks, with the photo of the matching animal on the flip side.
- Track and scat scarves, that include pictures of a variety of animal signs—these are great to carry with you in your pocket and pull out when you find something on the trail.
- Rubber scat molds of mammals and birds in Boulder County.
- Bags of feathers.
- Owl pellet samples (pellets regurgitated by owls after they eat—they contain bones of mice and other animals).
- Sample of a log chewed by a beaver.
- A large variety of bird nests.
- Replica bird eggs.
- Elk, moose, and deer antlers
- Rattlesnake and bull snake skins

All of these can be used to illustrate the many ways we can find signs of wildlife anywhere we go.

### Notes about Animal Tracks

When teaching about animal tracks, there are several ways to get kids interested in observing details. Here are a few things to try (in no particular order):

- Have children hold up their hands and look at them. Ask them to think about all the things they do with their hands. Help them come up with ideas (holding things, writing, holding another person's hand, picking up items, touching and feeling, etc.). Ask them if their feet look the same as their hands. What types of things do they do with their feet? Some animals back and front feet look the same, but some animals back feet are very different than their front feet, just like ours. This helps kids start thinking about how animals use their feet in different ways.
- Think about our footprints in the snow or the mud. How do you know people made those tracks? How do animal tracks look different? (for one thing, animals don't wear shoes—we can see their toes!) After a snowstorm or rainstorm is a great time to look for tracks.
- Compare rubber track molds. Notice things like how many toes you can see and if you can see claw marks.

Questions to have children think about:

- Does it look like a paw, or a hoof?
- Can you see claw marks? Canine prints usually always show claw marks. Feline prints usually don't (unless the animal is running) because cats retract their claws until they are needed.
- How big is the track? How does that relate to the size of the animal? Compare tracks of coyotes and foxes, or bobcats and mountain lions.
- For bird tracks, look at the size of the toes. How long are they? Are they webbed? Do you think they use their feet to perch, catch prey, or swim? This tells you something about where that bird might live.

## Notes about Other Wildlife Signs

### Scat

Everyone poops! Break the ice by not acting like this is gross, but be sure children understand they should never pick up real scat. They can look at it closely and poke it with a stick, but they shouldn't handle it.

Scat helps show you what an animal eats. Beaver scat has wood chips in it. Before bears go into hibernation, their scat is full of seeds from berries and other fruit. Canine and feline scat often has hair in it (unlike domestic cats and dogs who are mostly eating canned or bagged food).

Just like the size comparisons with tracks, you can do the same with scat.

### Bird feathers

If you come upon a pile of bird feathers in your yard or on a trail, what do you think happened? Birds shed feathers all the time, but not all at once. A pile of feathers usually indicates a dinner table for some other predator.

Examine feathers—see if they have smooth edges or fluffy edges. Owls feathers are serrated for silent flight, while most flight feathers of birds are smooth and defined—designed for quick take-off.

### Other Signs

Use other examples to show signs of wildlife in the area. For example: Cavities in trees: Who made it? (woodpeckers) Who uses it for nesting? (woodpeckers and many other cavity-nesting birds). If you come across something like antlers, a pile of pine cone scales left by a squirrel, a snake skin, etc., stop and have children examine the clues. Be sure to think about the habitat you're in and include that in your investigation. For instance, we know that Abert's squirrels live in the Ponderosa pine trees found at Heil Valley Ranch, and that fox squirrels like the urban settings of neighborhoods. In most cases you wouldn't expect to see an Abert's squirrel at Pella Crossing or a fox squirrel at Mud Lake. Children often think that the animals they are most familiar with can be found anywhere. Tying in habitat with clues is an important lesson.

## Games with Wildlife Signs

After you've shared information about wildlife signs and explored clues, here are a couple of games you could try:

1. **Matching Signs with Wildlife**—Spread the - animal track- blocks on a table or the ground. Have kids try to identify what the animal is, and then turn over the track to reveal the photo. You can also use rubber track molds with photos of the animals to do a matching game. With older kids, you could break them into teams and do a "game show" format.
2. **Wildlife Sign Scavenger Walk**—Place rubber tracks and scat, and other signs along a trail. Have kids walk slowly with you to discover what you've hidden and when they find it, help them identify the animal that left it, and maybe come up with a story about what happened. You can create your own hints in the process (i.e. leave a pile of cones scales on a stump, a few feathers along the trail, two types of tracks crossing at the same place). Be sure to incorporate any additional "real" signs you find along the way.

You can take any of these ideas much further, depending on the age of the participants and their interest in learning more. These are just some beginning ideas to help children become wildlife detectives!

--Deborah Price, Natural History Program Specialist, April 2020