



# Go Play Outside!

## "ANIMAL PRINTS"



When you are out with your kids, chances are wild animals aren't appearing for observation all too often. Besides the fact that us humans tend to be noisy, we're also usually rushing from one thing to the next, often paying very little attention to the world around us. While I can't promise you spontaneous wildlife appearances, I will say that if you're willing to slow down and look around, you will likely see signs of animals all around you.

### Tracks

While you might not see the animals themselves, they often leave their tracks behind. Snow-covered and muddy conditions are especially good for this. Tracks can help you and your kids identify what kind of critter has been around. Whether or not you can determine the track-maker, however, the tracks can tell you a lot about that animal. How was it moving? Were the tracks close together or far apart? The farther apart they are, the faster the animal was probably going. Here are a few fun facts that you can use to impress your kids while you're out searching for animal tracks:

- People often follow the tracks of bounding animals, like squirrels or rabbits, the wrong way. If you have not looked closely at rabbit or squirrel tracks before, you will see a pair of small prints, the front feet, and a pair of larger prints, the back feet, clustered together. When an animal like this is bounding, its back feet actually swing ahead of its front feet.
- Many of the animal tracks you find near your house could be domestic animals, like dogs and cats. These are still great to inspect! In fact, they can give you plenty of practice for identifying wild animal tracks. If the ground is soft enough, you should be able to tell dog and cat tracks apart. Cats have retractable claws that are not exposed when walking or running. Dogs, on the other hand, cannot retract their claws, so they are visible as a dot or point in front of each toe pad print. This holds true for all dogs and cats, wild or domestic. (You know there is always an exception, though. There is a species in the cat family that cannot retract its claws. Hmm...why would extended claws be helpful to one particular cat? A big cat...a spotted cat...known for speed...)
- Deer often leave what is called a "direct register," where their hind foot falls directly on top of the print left by their front foot. Other times they will leave a "double register," when one print seems to almost shadow the second.
- Have you ever seen tracks that have a line running in between the left and right prints? You might see this with river otter or turtle tracks. Give up? It's their tail dragging behind them!
- Birds often leave their tracks behind, especially on the beach. The shape of a bird's footprint can often tell you about how the bird moves around. Most perching birds have 3 toes forward and 1 back. Birds that spend a lot of time swimming have webbed feet. Some woodpeckers, that have to grip tree trunks, have 2 toes forward and 2 toes back.

## Scat

Excuse me? Scat...it's a fancy word for animal poop. For some reason, all kids love to learn other names for poop. I know, it sounds gross, but scat is something that animals leave behind, and it can tell us what's been in the neighborhood. No, you don't have to touch it, but take a close look. Is there fur in it? Then it came from a carnivore or omnivore. Is it a small round ball that looks kind of like a cocoa puff? You have rabbits! You'll get used to the idea soon.



## Food Evidence

If you found any scat, you know that these animals must be doing something else...eating! Often times you can find what animals leave behind after they have found their food. Have you ever found pine cones with the outsides all chewed off? Squirrels tear cones apart to get to the seeds inside. Have you found empty nut shells? Look closely and you might be able to see tiny bite marks. Both rabbits and deer will browse, or eat the ends off of, twigs. You can actually tell the difference between twigs that have been browsed by deer versus by rabbits. Rabbits have sharp upper and lower incisors (the front teeth that you would use to bite into an apple). They clip twigs at a clean, 45-degree angle. Deer do not have upper incisors, so when they browse, they end up mashing and tearing the end of the twig.

## Nests

Winter is a great time to look for nests in deciduous trees, because they are easy to see with all of the leaves missing. I am always surprised to find how many bird nests there are in the trees around my house that had been hidden in the spring and summer. You can also see squirrel nests, which will look like big leafy masses 12 to 19 inches across.

## Projects

Sometimes, especially when the weather has been dry and the ground is hard, it can be difficult to find animal tracks. You can set up a track box to help you. It's simple...just put out some sand and smooth it flat with a wooden board. You can put something tasty in the middle of it if you want. Check it every few days to see if you've lured in any track-makers. Once you find a track, you can use Plaster of Paris (available at most hardware stores) to make a cast and preserve it forever!

Above are just some examples of the evidence of animal activity you will find around you if you take a little time and pay close attention. You might be surprised by what you find!

# Have fun playing outside!

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