



Winter Wildlife Hunt



| BY SHARON KATZ COOPER |

In the cold of winter, it may seem like there is very little wildlife activity going on outside your window. Sometimes the world seems still, quiet and of course, frozen. But there is actually a lot going on – you might just have to work a little harder to find it.

Going on a winter wildlife hunt can be a lot like being a detective. Clues may be hard to find, although some are easy. They may require close examination. Pick a snowy day a couple of days past the most recent snowstorm and accompany your child on a wildlife search. Before you head out, challenge your child to predict what animals and what kinds of animal signs he or she may find. In a journal or notebook, record predictions. You can come back to them later and see how they compare to what you found. Bring your journal with you on your investigation. Record everything you see or hear.

Snow Tracks

Start out by looking for tracks. Snow gives us a natural record of what animals have been scampering around lately. To begin, look under and around trees. Bring a magnifying glass, if you have one. Walk all the way around a tree and keep your eyes on the snow. If you find a track, what does it look like? How big is it? How many toes? What direction was the animal going? What kind of pattern do the tracks make? Was it an animal that was walking, hopping, jumping? How many feet does it have? Can you identify what animal made this track?

Common animal tracks you may find include squirrels, rabbits, birds, deer, raccoons, skunks, and cats. For help identifying your animals, look in a wildlife field guide, or check out one of these websites:

<http://www.lifedraw.com/tracks/tracksport.html>
<http://www.bear-tracker.com/guide.html>

<http://www.princeton.edu/~oa/nature/trackcard.shtml>

Homes

Where do animals live in the winter? A lot of them like warm, cozy holes in the ground or in trees. Look closely for holes around your home or nearby park. Look for low holes around the bases of trees. Also look up and see if you can find holes in upper branches. By examining a hole closely, you may be able to guess what kind of animal uses it. (Remember to use caution about getting too close. An animal may actually be inside.) Sometimes just watching a hole for a while, or looking for signs around the hole will give you some ideas.

What about nests? Sometimes they are easier to spot in the winter because the leaves are gone. Look way up in tree branches. If you check back every few minutes over an hour or so, you may be able to tell if a nest is actually being used. Is it a bird's nest? A squirrel's? Can you see any animals around it? Can you hear anything?

Things left behind

Aside from tracks, animals often leave other traces that tell you they've been there. Look for animal droppings, bits of fur stuck to tree bark or fences, or feathers on the snow. Deer often leave small, cylindrical droppings with one pointy end. They are common in this area in the winter. Also look for branches that seem as if they have been chewed. Can you tell what kind of animal was eating here?

Sounds

Challenge your child to remain quiet for 4-5 minutes. Together find a relatively quiet spot and listen together for any sounds of wildlife. You may hear birdcalls, scampering, squirrels "arguing" or even a howl coming from far away. Describe these sounds in your journal.

Returning home

When you finish your wildlife hunt and return to your cozy home, think about what you observed. Look at your list. What evidence of animal life did you find? How does your list compare to what you predicted? Spend some time looking at field guides or on web sites to identify the various animals whose signs you found. Encourage your child to draw or write about her wildlife detective work in her journal.

This Helps Develop...

Going on a wildlife hunt builds important lifelong inquiry skills, such as prediction, observation, and description. By encouraging your child to predict what she or he will find, your child will practice her critical thinking and hypothesis-building skills. Comparing how the hypothesis fared in the end will allow children to make educated guesses about why things turned out the way they did, and improve their predictions the next time. Spending time outside doing careful and multi-sensory observation builds observation skills that will be useful in nearly everything a child does. ❖

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