

HOW-TO-DO ACTIVITY- WILDLIFE SIGN WALK

WILDLIFE SIGN BASICS

Before conducting the *Wildlife Sign Walk* activity go to habitat area and look for wildlife sign. You are more likely to find sign when you can concentrate and explore alone, rather than with a large group. The following are tips and suggested areas to look for wildlife sign in Seattle urban areas. Refer to the images: 'Wildlife Sign' for this activity while reading the following. There are also many tracking books and online resources available for more information.

TRACKING ETIQUETTE AND LAWS

Wildlife need to have areas that are safe for them!

Keep large groups of children and dogs out of thickets and other prime habitat. Wildlife are far more frightened of dogs and cats than humans, so keep pets at home.

It is illegal to chase or harass native wildlife. Climbing trees to nests or digging up tunnels to locate wildlife dens is harmful to wildlife and usually illegal at local, state and federal levels.

Never disturb nesting or den sites, especially if you have seen sign that indicates there are young present. Instead, protect them from intrusion (such as by creating woody debris barriers) and observe tracks and other sign to monitor growth of young.

Take a photograph instead of an actual object; leave scat, nests, eggs, scratch marks and most feeding sign. However, feathers, hair, bones and some feeding sign are fun to collect to create tracking exhibits and use for identification. Make track molds with plaster of Paris.

Use good judgment and discuss ethics at all times.

TIMES OF YEAR FOR TRACKING

Winter is the best time of year to see a wide variety of wildlife sign such as feeding sign, trails and abandoned nests. During winter, foliage, which otherwise obstructs sightings and access, is reduced in habitat areas.

Fall and spring are excellent for sightings and to hear wildlife, observe nest building and food gathering behavior. In fall, animals are often in family groups while they feed and begin establishing winter homes.

Summer can be a quiet time while wildlife secretly raise their young and thick vegetation covers many signs.

Look for scat and feeding sign, and take care not to disturb nesting or den sites.

BEST PLACES TO LOOK FOR TRACKS

Mud puddles are great places to find tracks. Look in the water and around the edges. **Edges of water** such as ponds and streams provide prime opportunity to observe tracks of animals coming to water. Look for sandy beaches and exposed earth. **Sandy areas** such as beaches, sandbars, eroded hills, or artificially placed sand (as tracking stations) are excellent for observing tracks, even after rainfall. **Wet or frosty grass** can offer evidence of tracks, though not distinct. Look for patterns of depressed grass indicating walking or running. Measurements between tracks and track patterns can indicate the species. **Snow** is a rare treat in urban Seattle so make sure to take time to look, especially if it lasts for a few days. Snow holds tracks well, and is easily photographed.

WEATHER

Rainfall creates soft ground and puddles that are excellent for finding tracks. It also washes away tracks and sign so go out two or three days after a good rainfall for best opportunity to see tracks or other signs.

Sunny and pleasant weather brings out wildlife, just as it does people. This is a good time to sit quietly and listen and observe wildlife.

Snow and frost can be excellent for observing wildlife tracks. Go out in the morning before melting.

Morning dew can show a record of tracks in meadows.

SCAT (ALSO CALLED POOP)

With large groups of children it is unlikely to have visual sightings of most animals. Therefore, scat is often the first sign you will see of wildlife in urban habitat areas.

Scat contents, shape and size are indicators of the species of animals that left it. For example domestic dog scat is mealy, made up of primarily corn or rice grain while that of wild canines (fox, coyote) will be made up of hair or fruit seed. Location can also indicate species; foxes tend to leave scat at trail crossings, raccoons at the base of a tree, muskrats on rocks or logs, meadow voles in 'latrines' along tiny trails.

Do not handle or collect scat without further research.

FEEDING SIGN

Feeding sign is another indicator of the presence of wildlife, and is readily found in habitat areas. Look for **chewed grass, stems and leaves, and piles of seed shells** such as maple seed, fir cones and hazelnuts.

The way in which vegetation is browsed can indicate species. A **sharp angled browse** sign can indicate rabbit, mountain beaver, vole or other rodent, while a **shredded cut** can indicate deer or elk feeding sign. Look closely and compare to other sign present to help discover species.

PLACES TO FIND CLAW MARKS

Snags and tall trees are favorite haunts of many animals. Look for rough or chipped bark patterns and then look closer for claw marks and hair. Hair can help identify the animal species. You may be surprised how often you will find this evidence of climbing wildlife.

Low overhanging boughs provide an observation, feeding and sleeping area for animals. Look for disturbed bark and moss, worn areas and hair or feathers.

Forest debris such as logs and branches along trails can show evidence of wildlife passing over or along them. Look for worn spots, claw marks and hair on edges and tops of overhanging branches and logs across the trail.