

Fun with Fauna: Hunting for Animal Signs

Grade K-6

Supplies

- Hand lenses
- Binoculars
- Magnifying bug boxes
- Animal track ID sheets
- Field Guides

Background information

While botanists can walk right up to the plants they need to study, zoologists have to look for signs of animals and be very quiet to get a glimpse of the animal in the wild. They may also use camera traps – motion sensitive cameras that take a picture of an animal when it walks by. A good naturalist is very much aware of the signs left by animals when he or she is in the backcountry. You can become a great naturalist if you keep your eyes open when you're hiking and look all around you for evidence of animals.

Some important signs to look for are:

- Plant damage
- Feathers
- Bones
- Tracks
- Hairs on fences
- Nests
- Shed skins
- Holes and burrows
- Scat
- Owl pellets

Take a Hike

Train yourself to use all of your senses in order to become more aware of your surroundings. When you find signs of wild animals, stop and try to figure out which animal left each sign. Scat with hair and seeds might, for example, be from a coyote. Owls regurgitate indigestible parts of their food (fur and bones) as owl pellets. If you find owl pellets around the base of a tree trunk, look up, and you might see an owl's nest above you. Reptiles shed their skin, leaving evidence of their presence in the area. Male deer shed antlers annually - if you are lucky you might find some. Different types of birds make very different kinds of nests. Orioles, for example, weave 'basket-type' nests from hairs and plant fibers, while bushtits make 'rag sock' type nests from lichens, hairs gathered from plants, and other soft materials. Hummingbirds make tiny nests lined with spider silk. If you study nests, you will learn a great deal about the birds that live in our area. Insects leave signs when they eat plants – often the insect can be identified by the pattern of holes it leaves when it feeds.

At the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden

There are plenty of animals that call the Garden their home and leave evidence of their presence. Check out the creek and search for tracks in the mud, look under rotten wood, explore the leaf litter box in the Arroyo Section of the Garden.