

Who left that there?

Tracks, holes and bite marks tell us who's been by



By Katharine Fletcher

Whether you're in the deepest woods like Jack Pine or La Blanche Forest, or strolling through a city park such as the Rokeries or Arboretum, wildlife leaves tracks, bite marks and scrapings.

Who's been by?

Here are some tips to get you and your family looking for clues... and how to decipher them.

Porcupines

Porcupines are rodents that dine on tree bark and pine needles in winter. Being rodents, they have buck teeth – think of a beaver or a rabbit and you'll understand what I mean.

In the woods, look for teeth marks on tree trunks and branches. They particularly like the bark of such trees as poplar, but I've also found their toothy marks on sumac and birch.

Tip: porcupines don't have very large mouths. Look for marks that are not very far apart as they don't open their mouths very wide.

Red squirrels

Red squirrels scamper about in the trees but also dig surprising networks of tunnels underneath the snow. Look for perhaps 4 cm diameter holes in the snow beneath your bird feeder and you'll likely have discovered their getaway hole.

As you walk through a wood, look for dried fungi (mushrooms) in the branches. This is a tell-tale mark of a squirrel (could be a black or a gray squirrel, too) that is leaving food above the snow line, for easy winter eating.

Bears

Black bears sleep in their dens during winter – for the most part. However, sometimes they wander outside and if so, and if you are very fortunate, you may spy a pawprint that resembles a human, bare foot.

But bears also leave a characteristic and permanent mark behind after an annual autumn – harvest habit: clawmarks on the smooth, grey bark of American Beech trees. The bruins climb these trees, sit in the canopy, and eat the beechnuts. Then they clamber down.

Look for a five-clawed impression of their pawprints as they dig into the bark for leverage while climbing.

Tip: Do not be afraid: Since 1974 I've been exploring Gatineau Park and this area of the country. I have never come across a bear while hiking in the park; I have never seen a bear up an American Beech tree. Remember: these bears are wild and will do all they can not to be discovered. Look for their clawprints in the trees, and admire them when you find them.]

Woodpeckers

Pileated woodpeckers leave large holes in tree trunks, left from their pecking action as they access insects. Holes can be as big as your fist, your head, or even as long as your arm. Look for big woodchips on the surface of the snow: this is from a pileated, the biggest woodpecker in North America, which has a large red crest. Its cackling laughter resembles a raucous flicker – but since flickers migrate in winter, if you hear winter laughter in the woods, it's the pileated.

Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are a type of woodpecker that make amazingly even, horizontal lines of small holes in tree trunks. No other species does this.

Deer

Deer eat twigs in winter, so look for chewed ends of saplings. Also, they lie down in sheltered, protected spots to sleep. Therefore, watch for depressions in the

ground and deposits of small lumps of scat – a tell-tale sign you’ve found where deer were resting.

Insects

Insects can fool you into thinking a tree has been chewed by a porcupine. However, if you see a network of bored holes plus what appears to be a chiseled or routed network of depressions, you’re probably looking at a woodboring insect of some sort. These are more readily seen on branches or tree trunks of snags (dead standing trees) that have lost all or part of their bark.

Tracks and signs

Tracks are pawprints left by a mammal, or wingprints of a bird such as a jay that has swooped down and picked up a sunflower seed from the snow’s surface.

Signs are the tell-tale impressions left by a creature such as male bears territorially scratching a tree trunk to warn other males off their “land.” Signs also include the red squirrel’s food pantry that will be dotted about its territory – such as the mushroom tucked into a hemlock tree’s leaflets.

Wherever you and your family are, start looking for signs and tracks – it’s a great way to learn more about the wildlife with which we share our natural world. Have fun searching for clues!

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