Learning from Nature: Looking for Signs of Wildlife
By Janet McVittie

As you explore a natural area, consider it a *learning landscape*, full of *learning affordances*. In this activity, I invite you to read the land, as you would a book, but, I am anticipating that you are just learning to read the land. So, look carefully for the signs that animals have been here on this piece of land.

Sounds: You might not see a particular bird, or mammal, but you might hear it? How good are you at identifying *bird calls and songs*? Download the Merlin app onto your phone, or carry a good bird book. The Merlin app has a sound recording system, which will "listen" (not as well as you – often you will hear a bird that the app can't hear, but still …) and name the bird for you. Some birds, however, mimic others, and occasionally the mimic is good enough to trick the app, so, for these birds, it is helpful to see the bird as well. The Merlin app will help you identify the bird by sight as well. The bird book will describe the sound and the call for the bird, and have a drawing of the bird, with arrows indicating distinguishing features. However, although birds chitter and sing a lot, you might hear other animals as well, such as *coyotes singing* in the late evening or early morning. You might hear *frogs chirping* in the spring or summer. You will hear the buzzing of different insects.

Sheds: Other signs that birds or mammals have visited a place are, perhaps, *feathers* on the ground or *fur* in the bushes. Hmm. How many feathers? Did a bird die here? If so, how do you think it might have died? Or, did it moult its feathers? What might be the evidence that one hypothesis is better than another? What other evidence can you find? Can you make a story of the scenario? (For example: I can see fox footprints, so I think that a fox hunted this bird …) Or is there *fur* on the ground or in a bush? What is the consistency of the fur – is it fluffy, or is it more hair-like? What colour is it? What layers of colour can you detect? What time of year is it? Might a mammal be shedding its hair, or is this evidence that a mammal died here? Can you write a narrative, with other evidence, of how this fur got here? Or, is there a snake skin on the ground? As snakes grow, they will shed their skins, almost entirely intact. Over time, the skin will break apart, so you will find pieces of it. What kind of snake might have shed that particular skin? The ecozone will suggest particular kinds of snakes. Around

Saskatoon, there are no poisonous snakes, so it won't be a rattle snake skin. Another common shed to find in nature is antlers from deer, elk, or moose. These large mammals grow new antlers every year. However, are the antlers attached to the skull, leading to a different story?

You might find *tracks* of animals. Birds? Amphibians? Reptiles? Mammals? Examine the shape and size. How soft is the ground where you find the tracks, and can this give you an indication of the weight of the animal. What was the animal doing, where was it going? Was it fleeing for safety, grazing, or hunting, or … But, look closely. Can you see beetle tracks, or find tiny holes in the ground that might be entrances for homes for ground nesting bees, or a home or trap for some kind of insect larva, etc.?

You can find the *droppings* of different animals. Rocks in the river might be covered with "guano" – bird poop. Or, you might see a ring of guano around the base of a tree. Stand back and then look up, because you don't want the baby birds in the nest to poop on you! Rabbits drop a clump of raisin sized poops, and deer also drop a clump of poops, but they are closer in size to chocolate covered almonds. There are field guides to animal scat and tracks that you can get.

You can find signs that animals have been *feeding*. Broken mussel shells, crayfish shells, grazed areas on tree branches, trees cut down, bones of other animals …

In each case, try to figure out who left those signs, and what the story might have been for those other species who share our city with us. Draw on the surrounding environment, and other observations to make your story more reliable.

Consider: how can we make our city into a place that welcomes different species? How will we live in compromise with them? We might not want coyotes near us, but coyotes will eat mice, ground squirrels, hares, and without coyotes to control these species, our gardens will be raided. Coyotes are likely the most controversial of all the wild animals that live in our city. Perhaps you want to debate whether we should encourage or discourage coyotes in our city. Prepare the "pro" side carefully, because the "anti" side will be very fearful and this will motivate them to win!

Check out the library to see if you can sign out a birding backpack. While at the library, look for field guides you can sign out. There are field guides for all sorts of different animals, and for tracks, and even for “scat” – animal droppings.

Useful websites: Visit the Nature City Adventure on Urban Wildlife, which focuses on mammals that share our city with us. https://wildaboutsaskatoon.org/urban-wildlife/ This site has links to the City of Saskatoon site, describing the different mammals that worry some people, and gives advice on how to live with them.