

Five Things to Find in Your Back Yard

By Stephanie Vozza

As cities and towns grow, people take over what once were natural areas. That means wildlife is all around us ... but have you taken the time to see it?

Take your kids on a wildlife "safari" right in your own back yard by looking for these five things: ants, animal tracks, birds, butterfly eggs and trees.

Ants

Want to introduce your kids to a good role model? Skip the sports arena and consider an ant. Ants survive by looking out for each other, doing what's best for their colony.



Ants communicate by using pheromones, or scents, which tell ants where to find food or warn of danger. Experiment with pheromones by separating some ants from their group with a twig or leaf. How long does it take the ants to find their way around the barricade and back to the trail?

Ants are attracted to sugar. Take a squirt bottle of honey and write your initials on the sidewalk. Return in 30 minutes and you'll probably find your monogram in ants.

Animal Tracks

Animal tracks can be a fun mystery for your kids to solve; you might be surprised how common it is that a coyote or fox has passed through your yard at night.

Look for tracks in mud, garden soil, sand or snow. Or set a "track trap" by using smooth, damp sand with a birdseed or peanut butter snack.



Animals have distinct tracks. Look for the clues: number of toes, claw marks, size and trail pattern. Canine prints will have four toes and claw marks. Feline prints will have four toes but no claw marks. Then check your tracks against the ones at www.bear-tracker.com. You can download a free animal tracks guide.



Birds

A bird is an easy-to-spot creature and you can watch them year-round without ever leaving your house. A fun way to get started is by joining Nest Watch (www.nestwatch.org), part of Cornell's Citizen Scientist program.

The data collected by citizens is very valuable to scientists, who use it to keep track of things such as nest locations and eggs.





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Butterfly eggs

Butterfly eggs are tiny, but surprise your kids by learning how easy they are to find if you know where to look.

Butterflies are most active on warm, sunny afternoons. (If you don't see one in your back yard, attract them with an overripe banana.) Butterflies visit two kinds of plants: a nectar plant, where they eat; and a host plant, where they lay eggs. When you spot a butterfly, watch if it lands on a flower. If it does, it's there to sip nectar. If it lands on a leaf for a short period of time, there's a good chance it's laying eggs.

After the butterfly leaves, take your children to the leaf and look for tiny eggs, which are sphere or oval shaped. Eggs can be white, yellow, green or black. When they hatch, you'll see small caterpillars making a meal out of the leaf they were laid on.

Trees

You could estimate a tree's age by counting its rings ... but you'd have to cut it down first. Luckily, there's an easier way to find out how long your tree has been alive.

First, measure around the circumference of trunk at four and a half feet off the ground. Next, determine the diameter of the trunk by dividing the circumference by pi (approximately 3.14). Now, find the growth rate of your tree from this chart of common tree growth: (If your tree isn't listed here, look in a tree field guide.)

TREE GROWTH RATE CHART

American Elm - 4
Ash - 4
Aspen - 2
Basswood - 3
Cottonwood - 2
Black Walnut - 4.5
Cottonwood - 2
Dogwood - 7
Ironwood - 7
Pin Oak - 3
Red Oak - 4
Redbud - 7
Red Maple - 4.5
Shagbark Hickory - 7.5
River Birch - 3.5
Silver Maple - 3
Sugar Maple - 5
White Oak - 5
White Birch - 5



Finally, multiply the diameter by the growth rate to get an approximate age of your tree. Is it older than your child? Older than you? Older than your child's grandparents? Was it there before your house was built? Encourage your child to imagine all of things the tree experienced during its life in your city.