

Second Nature

Winter Detectives

Story and photos courtesy of Kristina Weeks, Bonnyvale Environmental Education Center

Winter is nature's mystery season! Across the snow-covered land animals are leaving clues, and with a little curiosity your family can uncover wild stories. Find your guide to tracks and signs and grab your warm detective hats because it's time to enter the world of winter! When snow falls, it's like a blank canvas, just waiting for critters to leave their prints behind.

Let's figure out who's been sneaking around:

Place: Where are you? Where is the animal going and what is it doing along the way? Tracks in an open field might belong to deer or turkeys. Tracks going between trees may belong to a squirrel busy gathering snacks.

Pattern: How is the animal moving? Look at how the tracks are spaced. Follow the tracks for a while and see how the animal typically moves as there are four main patterns. Hopping tracks often belong to rabbits or squir-

rels. Straight, orderly ones might be from a deer, fox or bobcat. A wide waddle could be a raccoon or porcupine. A two by two bound may be a long bodied weasel, and if the bound is interspersed with belly slides and you're near a river it is likely an otter.

Print: Examine the details. How many toes? Is there a claw mark? A wide print of two big pointed toes may belong to a deer, while a print that is a cluster of little ovals might be a fox on a sunrise stroll.

Other detective-worthy signs to investigate:

Feeding:

Chewed sticks and nibbled twigs could be the work of a hungry rabbit or deer. Fur, feathers or bone could be the sign of a predator's meal.

Shelter: Places where an animal bedded down under some brush or a fallen log, holes in trees, or entrances to burrows.

Scat: Yes, even their poop is a clue — it tells you who was there and what they ate for lunch. Take a look, but don't touch!

Winter Stories

Turn your winter walks into a detective adventure.

Pick a Place: Head to a snowy forest, a park, or even your backyard.

Look for Patterns: Follow the tracks and signs left behind.

Sketch the Prints: Draw what you see or take pictures to compare at home.

Write the Story: Ask, "What do you think this animal was doing?" Encourage kids to let their imaginations run wild. Was it a squirrel dance party or a fox chasing invisible snowflakes?

Hide & Seek: When it snows during the night and there's a clean canvas, create your own prints and patterns through the place. One can write the story in the snow, for the other to follow and tell the story when they find them.



Second Nature is submitted by the naturalists at Bonnyvale Environmental Education Center (BEEC) in West Brattleboro. Want to dive deeper into the world of winter tracking? Bundle up and bring your curiosity. BEEC invites you to join us this month at Nature Explorers Winter Camp for children in first through fourth grade, and at free Hike & Seek family adventures on select Saturdays. To learn more and to register, visit www.BEEC.org or call 802-257-5785.