Wildlife Express

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Raccoon

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IDAHO FISH & GAME

Rascally Raccoon

Sometimes there are things that go bump in in the night. You may hear crashes, clangs, squeaks, squeals or screams outside your bedroom window. The night-time noises you may hear are not from ghosts, specters or goblins. What you may be hearing is the night-time prowling of a raccoon.

Raccoons are known for sometimes getting into trouble. Raccoons are curious, and they have front paws designed for mischief. The toes on a raccoon's paws are long and slender; they work just like the fingers on your hands. If you can grab something with your hand, it's likely a raccoon can do the same. Raccoons have no problem climbing trees, taking the lid off of a trash can, or opening gates and doors. Their paws also have large, soft pads that work like suction cups to help them grab onto things.

Raccoons are animals that have done well living among humans. They are often one of the only larger wild mammals living full-time in a city. The reason raccoons can live in towns and cities is because they are not picky eaters. Raccoons are omnivores; they will eat just about anything. They will eat fruits, nuts, insects, birds, eggs, small mammals, worms, snakes, fish or frogs. Anything they can get their paws on may be a potential meal. Animals that eat just about anything can live just about anywhere.

Have you ever heard that raccoons wash their food? Raccoons do sometimes wet their food before they eat, but they are not really washing it. Wetting the food helps raccoons to feel. Touch is the most important sense for a raccoon. Some people think that by wetting the food, raccoons are more likely to tell what parts of the food are edible. If a raccoon finds a dirty, slimy worm away from water, it will snarf that worm up – dirty or not!

Raccoons are pretty smart animals. It takes quite a bit of brain power to learn how to eat all those different foods. People have studied the smarts of raccoons. Tests show that raccoons are smarter than cats but not as smart as rhesus monkeys. They can even remember solutions to tasks for up to three years!

Raccoons are animals that usually like to be alone. If you see two or more raccoons, you are probably seeing a mother with her young. Raccoons usually have two to five babies, called kits. Kits drink their mother's milk for 10 to 12 weeks but stay with her for about one year.

Raccoons rest and have their young in dens. Hollow trees, rock piles and old animal burrows all make good raccoon dens. Sometimes raccoons make dens in places we do not want them. Building attics and sheds are also seen as good den sites by raccoons.

Raccoons are not huge animals. They are about the size of a large, fat cat. They weigh 12 to 30 pounds and are about three feet long. One feature most people associate with raccoons is the black mask around their eyes. The mask helps to reduce glare and helps with night vision. Grab a flashlight and look for these masked bandits the next time you hear a bump in the night!

Home Sweet Home

An animal's home is called its habitat. A habitat contains four things: food, water, shelter and space. These four things need to also be arranged fairly close together, so the animal can find them easily. If one part is missing, an animal will not survive.

It is easy to see how important food, water and shelter are to an animal. You must eat. A big glass of ice water sure hits the spot on a hot summer day. You wouldn't want to stand outside during a thunderstorm, but the space part of habitat is just as important as food, water or shelter.

Animals need enough space to find the things they need without having to fight for them. When animals have to fight over food, they use important energy. Animals gathered together in small spaces can also make each other sick. Think of a student who has a cough. In the small space of a classroom, that student's germs quickly spread to other students who also get sick.

Next time you see an animal, think about its habitat. What is around that the animal might eat? Is there water nearby? Is there a bush, hole or cave for shelter? Does it seem like many other animals are around? Answering these questions will tell you a lot about the life and habitat of the animal you saw.

What's Your Niche?

Think of the town where you live. People in your community have jobs that make it a nice place to live. There are doctors that keep you healthy. Teachers that help you learn and people that make food for you to eat.

Animals, plants and other organisms also have jobs and roles to play where they live. This role is called a niche (NICH). An animal's niche includes such things as where and how the animal gathers food and its link in a food chain.

Within ecosystems, every living thing has important jobs and roles. If one of these organisms is missing, the ecosystem will be unhealthy. At times, it may be hard to see the special role of an animal. What about skunks? They just seem like stinky animals that cause problems. Even the smelly skunk has a role in nature. Skunks eat more insects than anything else. They really love to eat grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae. Skunks eat insects that like to munch on farmer's crops. Skunks help farmers by eating crop pests. The small bit of soil and plants they dig up looking for food is a small price to pay for all the insects they eat.

Can you think of the raccoon's niche? What's your niche? Do you have an important job or role to play in your family or school?

Getting Ready for WINTER

The harsh, cold days of winter will soon be upon us. Freezing temperatures, blowing wind, rain, and snow not only affect us; they also affect wildlife. Fall is a busy time of year for wild animals. They must get ready for times when food will be more difficult to find. How do animals prepare for the rigors of winter?

Some animals leave. They migrate to warmer climates where food is easier to find. Some animals travel long distances. Birds are the animals you probably think of migrating, but there are other animals that also travel great distances. Can you name an insect that travels to southern California and central Mexico for the winter? It is our state insect, the monarch butterfly!

Other animals sleep through the long, harsh winter. Marmots, bears and bats are just some of the animals that hibernate through the winter. Why do they hibernate? It's not the cold; it's the food. Marmots and bears eat plants. Most trees drop their leaves during the winter. Grass and fruits dry up and turn brown. It can be difficult to find good plants to eat in the winter. It is best for these animals to conserve energy and wait for greener times. Idaho's bats eat insects. They would starve to death looking for insects in the winter. By hibernating and slowing down their body functions, animals are able to survive on their stored fat until food becomes available.

Raccoons often den up for harsh winter weather, but they are not deep hibernators like marmots. They can sleep in their dens for weeks during the winter conserving as much energy as possible. Sometime they will even put their solitary ways to rest and den together to stay warm. During the fall, raccoons eat as much as they can to put on fat. They may use up to 50% of their stored fat to stay alive during the winter.

Some animals cache (CASH) or stockpile food. Many animals try and store enough food to get through the winter. Beavers are animals that store food. Their pond is their pantry. Beavers cut limbs off of trees and stick them in the mud at the bottom of their pond. The bark on the limbs will help them make it through the winter.

Can you think of other ways that animals prepare for winter? Head outside and see if you notice animals busy with winter preparations.

What's THAT?

You're walking along a trail. All of the sudden, you see something grayish-white peeking out of the tall grass. Leaning forward you realize what it is – a skull. Now the mystery really begins. What animal did that skull belong to, and how did it live its life?

This may be a hard question to answer, but the skull will give you some clues. One of the best clues you have are the teeth. Teeth tell you what an animal eats. Animals that eat meat need teeth that will help them cut and tear. Meat eaters, called carnivores, have meat-cutting teeth along their cheeks. These teeth are sharp and pointed. When the top teeth and the bottom teeth come together, the teeth pass each other like scissors. Carnivores have no trouble slicing through the meat they like to eat!

White-tailed deer skull, by KK Yokoyama

Sharp pointed teeth may work well for meat eaters, but they sure wouldn't help plant eaters. Plant eaters are called herbivores. Plants take a lot of chewing to break down. Just think how long you need to chew celery! Herbivores have tall teeth in the back of their mouths with flat tops. Flat teeth let the animals slide their top and bottom teeth against each other to grind plants.

We have teeth in the back of our mouths with low bumpy crowns, so do bears. Teeth with this shape belong to omnivores. Omnivores eat both meat and plants, so they need teeth that help cut and grind.

The location of the eye sockets on the skull can also tell you a lot. Predators, animals that eat other animals, need to be able to tell distances. This comes in handy when reaching out to grab a mouse. Predators have eyes that face forward. Prey animals, animals that are eaten by other animals, have their eyes located more to the sides of their heads. This lets them look out for danger in almost every direction, without ever moving their heads.

Looking at these clues may not tell you what animal the skull came from, but it is a start. It may give you an idea of what the animal eats, and whether it is a predator or prey animal. What do you think raccoon teeth look like?

Raccoon skull Pengo, by Pengo (Peter Halasz)

Fall Colors

Fall can be a beautiful time of year. The green leaves of summer start to turn bright yellow, orange and red. When leaves start to change colors, trees are beginning to prepare for a winter's rest.

Leaves are a tree's food factories. Plants take water from the ground and a gas called carbon dioxide from the air. With sunlight, plants turn water and carbon dioxide into a kind of sugar called glucose. This is the plant's food. The way plants turn water and carbon dioxide into sugar is called photosynthesis (foe-toe-SIN-thuh-sis). A chemical called chlorophyll (KLOR-uh-fil) makes photosynthesis happen. Chlorophyll is what gives plants their green color.

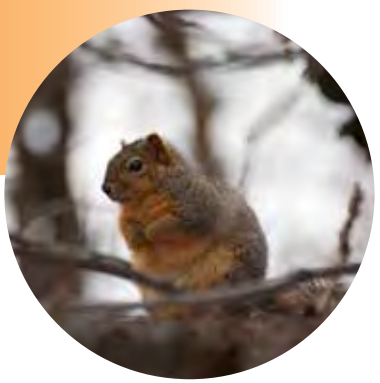
Leaves contain all sorts of colors or pigments. We usually see green colors most of the year, because they are so bright, but two other pigments are also in leaves. One pigment is called carotene (KAR-uh-teen). Think of a carrot; carotene is the pigment that gives carrots their bright orange color. Another pigment in leaves is xanthophyll (ZAN-thuh-fil). This is a yellow pigment. Corn and bananas get their color from xanthophyll.

As fall days get shorter, trees start to make less and less chlorophyll. There is not enough light or water for photosynthesis in the winter. The green color starts to fade from the leaves. The orange carotene and yellow xanthophyll that have always been in the leaves can start to show through. Leaves become a bright rainbow of glowing yellows and oranges. But where do the reds come from?

The bright reds and purples come from anthocyanin (an-thuh-SI-uh-nuhn) pigments. When autumn has lots of warm, sunny days and cool nights, it will be a good year for red colors. During the day, trees can still make lots of sugar, but the cool night temperatures keep the sugar from flowing through the leaf veins and down into the branches and trunk. Trees make anthocyanin to help keep the sugar flowing. The longer the warm days and cool nights last, the redder the leaves will get. The brown color comes from the wastes that are left in the leaves.

The colors of fall leaves sure are a thrill for the eye. They also are a sign of trees getting ready for the cold winter ahead.

Wild in the City



When you think of your community do you think of raccoons or deer or foxes? You probably don't. We think of our towns as places we live, not wildlife. People are often quite surprised to see deer in a local park, raccoon tracks in the snow, or a hawk in the backyard. In fact, many wild animals have made our home, their home too.

Wildlife can live anywhere there is good habitat. Animals can survive as long as they can find food, water, shelter and space. Many of our towns and cities provide good habitat for wildlife. Think about your own community. Do you have a park where you play with your friends? This is an example of habitat for urban, or city, wildlife. How about your backyard? Backyards with a variety of flowers, trees, and shrubs can provide a small habitat for wildlife. Even something as simple as putting up a bird feeder or bird bath can make your yard an attractive habitat. Does your school have an outdoor classroom or garden? That could be wildlife habitat, too!

Some urban wildlife is very familiar. Do you have squirrels in your community? They are urban wildlife. How about birds? Many birds can easily adapt to living in towns. From tiny hummingbirds and small songbirds to great horned owls and Canada geese, birds are all around us. Many kinds of urban wildlife are nocturnal or come out at dawn and dusk. While we sleep, they are busy trying to survive. When morning arrives, they are ready to find shelter and rest. Deer, raccoons, foxes, skunks, and coyotes live among us, but often go unseen. If you are observant, you can find the tracks they leave behind.

While we may see wildlife in town, it is important to remember that urban wildlife is still wild. Enjoy them from a distance, and think about how lucky you are to live in a "wild" community!

BE OUTSIDE

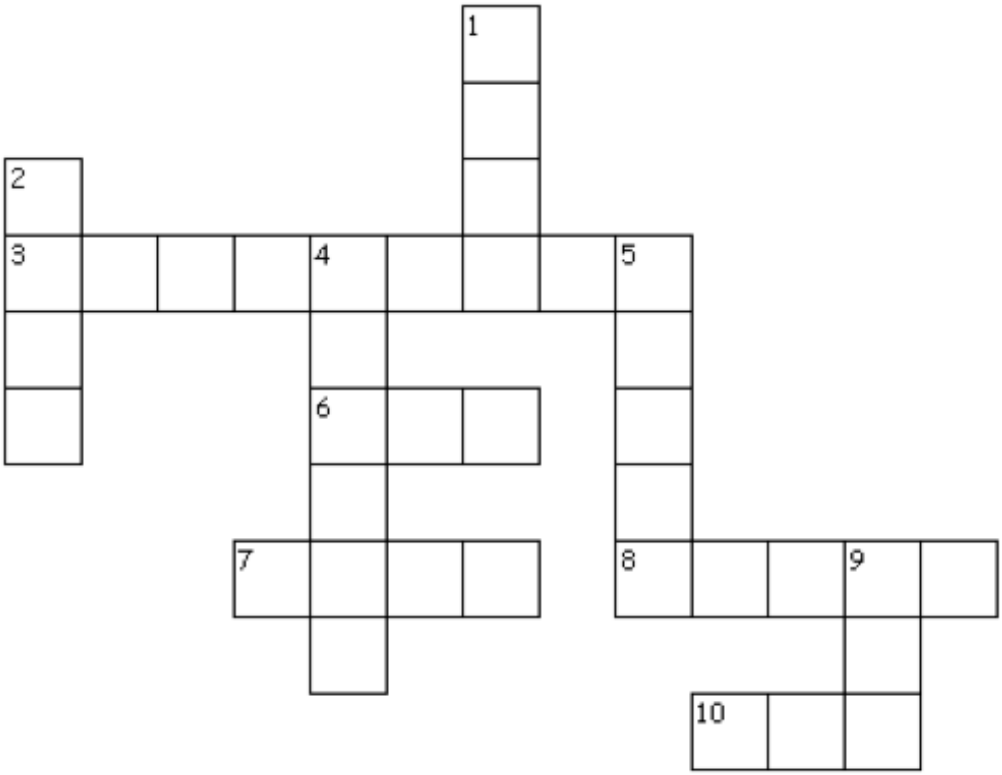
Autumn is such a great time to go outside. There are so many changes happening in nature. The air is crisp and warm colors are popping-up on trees. A nature journal is a great way to keep track of what you feel and the changes that you notice outside. Autumn provides many opportunities to fill some pages in a nature journal.

You can record the changes that you see happening with the trees in your neighborhood. Find a leaf on a tree that has some great colors. Roll the leaf up and rub it on a page in your journal. What do you think will happen? Do you think that the pigments found in leaves will transfer to the page? If they do, will the colors stay true or fade to shades of brown? Try it and record your results and thoughts in your journal. Nature makes some marvelous paints!

Autumn is also a great time to see spiders ballooning. Have you ever seen tiny little spiders floating through the air on long threads of silk? These are newly hatched spiders or spiderlings. After they emerge from the egg sac, they need to leave and find their own home. The easiest way to move is to let the wind carry them. Spiders make a special silk just for ballooning. They will find a spot, point their abdomens up to the sky, and let out a long thread of silk. The silk acts like a sail and carries the spiderlings through the air. Sometimes the spiders only float a few yards, but some float hundreds of miles from their homes. Sailors have reported finding spiderlings in their sails out in the middle of the ocean! You can find a spot outside to record any “flying” spiders you see.

So this month go outside and experience the change of seasons and record your observations. You may be surprised at what can happen in a month or even a week!

Raccoon Criss-Cross



Words

Boar
Cat
Hole
Kit
Omnivores
Smart
Sow
Toes
Touch
Vision

Across

3. Raccoons will eat just about anything. They are _____.

6. The name of a female raccoon.

7. A _____ in a tree is a good den for a raccoon.

8. The most important sense for raccoons.

10. The name of a baby raccoon.

Down

1. The name of a male raccoon.

2. The long, thin _____ on raccoons' paws help raccoons to grab onto things.

4. The mask on a raccoon helps with night _____.

5. For wild animals, raccoon are _____

9. A raccoon is about the size of a large, fat _____.

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Lead Writer: Adare Evans **Layout:** Kelly Kennedy Yokoyama **Contributors:** Vicky Runnoe, Lori Adams
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For more information, call or write:
Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game
PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to:
adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov