

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

Noticing Signs of Nature Game

You don't always need to spot an animal to know it's been around. Wildlife often leaves clues behind.

Can You Be a Nature Detective?

Look out for things like:

- Nests
 - Droppings (poo!)
 - Feathers
 - Fur or hair
 - Footprints and tracks
 - Pellets
 - Signs of animals feeding
-

Nature Is All Around You

You can find clues about wildlife:

- In gardens
 - In parks
 - On farms
 - In woods
 - Even on streets and pavements
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Start Looking!

Once you start looking closely, you'll be amazed at how much wildlife you can discover wherever you are.

The Game:

There are pictures of 8 animals - Can you match the animal to the signs it has left?





TVERC Noticing Signs of Nature Game

There are pictures of 8 animals - Can you match the animal to the picture of a sign / signs it has left?

The 8 animals are:

Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

Grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*)

Grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Harvest mouse (*Micromys minutus*)

Water vole (*Arvicola amphibius*)

Badger (*Meles meles*)

Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*)



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Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

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Footprints

Shape

Fox tracks typically have an oval or diamond shape, measuring about 1.5 inches wide and 2 inches long.

Toe Structure

They have four digital toe pads and a large heel pad, with claws sometimes visible.

Stride: Foxes usually walk in a straight line, with each foot leaving a distinct print, making their tracks appear more purposeful compared to other animals.

Identification Tips

Look for the spacing between the toe pads; a fox's central pad is about the same size as its other toe pads, and the spacing is more elongated.

Fox prints are like dog prints.



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Badger (*Meles meles*)

Footprints

Badger footprints are characterized by their five toes and long claws. They typically leave a kidney-shaped pad on the ground, with the toes pointing straight up. Badgers often walk with a distinctive gait, leaving front and back prints very close together, which helps in identification. Their footprints can vary in appearance depending on the surface, showing either a prominent central pad or a heel print, especially in soft ground like mud or snow.



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Grey squirrel
(*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Feeding signs

Squirrels, much like birds, often split nuts open at the top, leaving jagged edges and irregular pieces. They will also nibble on cones, which may have been stripped of their scales.

Feeding Sites

Look for tree stumps or exposed branches that have remnants of food sources, such as acorns, hazelnuts, or pinecones.



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Harvest mouse (*Micromys minutus*)

Nest

The harvest mouse is tiny - an adult can weigh as little as a 2p piece! It prefers habitats with long grass, but you are most likely to spot its round, woven-grass nests.

The tiny harvest mouse lives in long tussocky grassland, reedbeds, hedgerows, farmland and around woodland edges. It is mainly vegetarian, eating seeds and fruits, but will also eat invertebrates. Harvest mice build a spherical nest of tightly woven grass, high-up in the tall grasses, in which the female will give birth to around six young.





Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*)

Footprints

Hedgehog footprints are small but distinctive. The **front feet have four toes** and the **hind feet have five**, often looking a bit like **tiny human hands**.

Appearance and size

- Footprints are usually **2–3 cm wide** and **2–4 cm long**
- **Front feet** are shorter and wider
- **Hind feet** are longer and narrower
- Each toe has a **small claw**, which may show up as fine marks in mud, sand, or soft soil
- Tracks often appear as **clusters of tiny dots or dashes**, rather than clear single prints

Toe arrangement and pads

- **Front feet:** 4 closely spaced toes, used for digging and foraging
- **Hind feet:** 5 toes, more splayed for grip
- **Soft pads** cushion each step, creating a recognisable pattern when combined with toes and claws

Stride and track pattern

Hedgehogs have a **short stride**, so their footprints are closely spaced. Tracks are most often found in **mud, soft soil, sand, or snow**, and near places they feed or shelter. **Footprint tunnels** are especially helpful for recording hedgehog activity.

Tips for identification

- Look for **groups of small prints**, not single marks
- Compare **front and hind feet** – this helps tell hedgehogs apart from other small mammals
- Tracks are often found with **droppings**, which are dark, cylindrical, and sometimes pointed at one end

Droppings

Hedgehog droppings are dark, sausage-shaped (2–6 cm long) and often shiny due to insect remains. They are usually found singly rather than in piles and commonly contain beetle wing cases and other insect parts.



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Water vole
(*Arvicola amphibius*)

Feeding & droppings

-Nipped Vegetation

Water voles often feed on plants by cutting stems at a 45° angle, leaving behind a clean, angled end. This is one of the most distinctive signs of their presence and can be seen on grasses, reeds, and woody plants such as willow or sallow, with branches up to 1 inch in diameter being gnawed.

-Droppings and Latrines

Feeding signs are often associated with latrines, where water voles deposit droppings in piles to mark territory. Fresh droppings are green and putty-like, drying to brown or olive, and are usually found near feeding areas or burrow entrances.



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Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

Signs in pictures: Spraint with crayfish remains & footprint

As otters are most active at night, dawn and dusk are good times to look out for them.

Tracks

Look for otter tracks in mud and sand close to the water. Around 40-80mm across, they have five toes (though may only show four). Their claw marks can't usually be seen, but you might be able to see the webbing.

Spraint

Otter droppings, known as spraints, are a greenish, black-grey colour and full of evidence of their diet: bones, shells, feathers and fur. They smell sweet and musky, like jasmine tea or laurel flowers. Left on rocks and logs close to the water, they are a method of communication with other otters.



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Grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*)

Footprints in wet mud on water edge.

- **Large, three-toed prints** with long claw marks
- **No webbing** between toes
- Usually **16–17 cm long** and **11–12 cm wide**
- Toes form a **slender, tripod shape**
- Prints are often **widely spaced** due to long legs

Distinguishing Features

No webbing between the toes, unlike ducks or other waterfowl

Footprints are often spaced widely apart due to their height and leg length, producing a distinctive walking pattern.

Heron leave narrow and elongated prints, contrasting with chunkier footprints of larger mammals or other birds.

Locations

Riverbanks, ponds, lakeshores

Wet mud or shallow water edges where tracks can hold their shape