

Nature Detectives



Fancy getting out into the great outdoors, rather than sitting in watching endless telly? This might be your big chance! Why not look into it today?

Spotting animals outdoors is not always easy – except for the garden birds, of course. But did you know that there are more mammals in Britain than there are birds – we just don't see them! So, what to look for?

Footprints: Look in mud, soil and sand, and in any winter snow, of course. You might be lucky enough to see one of these prints. Any guesses as to what this is?

Yep, it's a badger. You can tell by the big back pad. You might be a bit lucky to see it. As badgers walk, they put the back foot into the place where the front foot was, so the prints can be blurred.

You might want to take a cast of a print you find. It's not hard.



- Buy a bag of plaster of Paris. (You can get it from a pharmacy.)
- Take a large margarine tub for mixing the plaster.
- Take a tub of water and a stick.
- You'll need a strip of card, 10cm wide and 50cm long.
- You'll also need paperclips.
- First find a footprint and gently clear away any twigs or leaves that have blown over it.
- Then make a circle with the card. Clip it together and push it into the ground around the footprint.
- Then mix 5 large tablespoons of plaster powder into the margarine tub and mix it with water until it is like smooth cream.
- Pour the plaster carefully into the card ring until it is around 3cm deep.
- Wait until the plaster is set. It takes about 10 minutes.
- Carefully dig out the cast, collar and print.
- Then carefully label it and put it into a bag.



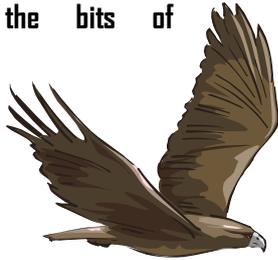
Droppings: Mammals often leave very distinctive droppings. Some animals, such as foxes and otters leave them somewhere prominent, so that others can see and smell them. This helps them mark their territories. You can soon learn to identify them and record what you find.

Badgers leave droppings in dung pits like this one. In the winter, they'll be near to the sett. In the warmer weather, they'll be around the edge of the territory, to say 'Keep Out!' to other badgers.



You'll be amazed at what you can find in a badger dung pit – even a wasps' nest!

Pellets: Birds of prey and seabirds leave pellets of undigested food around their roosting places. These are the bits of bone, hair and feathers that their stomachs just can't break down. Look for them below wherever you think these birds are roosting. You can learn to take see what the birds have been



stomachs just can't break down branches, ledges, or might be nesting or these pellets apart to eating. It's great fun!

Feathers: Birds moult their feathers naturally, as they become old and tatty. They are easy to find in the countryside, but identifying them can be difficult. If you find a lot of feathers in one place, it probably means that their owner became a meal! If you find bones and feathers near to a large hole, it's probable that a fox is living there. You might even be able to smell fox, if you bend down near to the hole.

Hairs: Look for mammal hairs on bark, entrances to burrows and on barbed wire. Look carefully at the colour, size and texture to try to identify them. You'll know if you've found badger hair. Firstly, it's not grey! It's actually banded in black, white and brown. The next thing to notice is that badger hair is flat, like a knife blade, rather than cylindrical like most mammal hair. Try to roll it in your fingers. It's not easy. You can feel it clicking over in your fingers. If you see the Durham Badger Group stall at a summer fair, come and feel the coat on our stuffed badger. (Look out for the daft badger that turns up to our events! He's called Bertie, and he'll happily chat to you. He dances too! How embarrassing!)



So, keep your eyes open for wildlife around you. You just never know what you might spot. Keep the camera handy too!

Please remember to wear plastic gloves to handle animal remains. Wash your hands thoroughly afterwards too!



See you out there!