

Nature of Merrickville - Spring 2021

By Andrea Howard

A wee guide to exploring the trails with children

Thanks to the Merrickville and District Trails Society, we are blessed with a growing selection of wonder-filled and user-friendly places to explore in the great outdoors. Hiking with children can be so much fun, especially when they are curious, engaged and full of questions. But if we don't have all the answers, it can feel a tad embarrassing and conversations can grind to a halt. Here is a strategy for directing attention and guiding the adventure.

Wherever you walk, there are signs of animal life, even if a creature doesn't jump out and say "Hi!" Start small. Find a fallen tree or limb. Enjoy the strange fungi, multicoloured lichens and lush mosses growing on it. How many shades of green can you count? Imagine being very small, like a mouse or a mole -- what an interesting and gentle little world this would be to live in. Even in death, the tree supports new life. How soon will this tree become soil again? Inside and under any log, there is a world of creatures that seek out dark, damp places - snails, salamanders, millipedes and ants ... there are ants everywhere! What are they all doing? Be sure to put the log back as you found it!

See all the squiggles in the bare wood? Those were made by beetle larvae when the tree was alive, as they chewed the tender new wood under the bark. Each species of bark beetle has its own signature. See how many different ones you can find. Tiny holes in the bark of standing trees were likely made by an adult beetle heading out to find a mate. Bigger holes were made by insect-eating birds pecking at the bark to find those beetles. (The bark of Ash trees under attack by the Emerald Ash Borer has been stripped off by birds and squirrels to get at the bugs -- a sure sign that the poor tree is doomed.) Piles of rounded bark chips at the base of a tree could be signs of porcupine.

Woodpeckers are the first birds to make holes in trees, but it's not just to find food. They peck to establish territory and to communicate with one another, so those deep rectangular holes in Eastern White Cedar trees are evidence of their healthy presence over time. Some of the holes are for eating from, others are for nesting or hiding in. Which could this one be? Eventually a woodpecker hole might get big enough for a small owl or another animal to nest in. Cavities formed from unhealed wounds in otherwise healthy big old trees will welcome owls, raccoons, squirrels and porcupines. Standing dead trees, called *snags* are virtual condos for wildlife. How many doorways do you see?

Holes in the ground around tree roots could be an entrance for a chipmunk, a snake or a skunk; If you are on a waterfront trail, an underground shoreline den might harbour a muskrat or a mink. Look for Beaver sign: young trees now only knee-high, chewed to a point like a pencil sharpened by a knife. You might be lucky and find *scat* - that's animal poop. You can guess who made it by its size and contents – grains, bones, hair, feathers... Notice who is feeding on the scat! Probably flies and maybe beetles. But waitaminute, don't beetles eat trees?!

Different kinds of beetles eat all kinds of different things. Because they occupy so many *niches* in an ecosystem, there are more species of beetles in the world than there are of all other insects combined!! Of course when it comes to sheer numbers of individual insects – *biomass* – ants are the winners, hands down.

Cool facts like that are what this column is usually about. This month, I hope I have inspired you to just observe, question and imagine. A bird calls. Who knows what it is? Maybe today it doesn't matter, but did another one answer? How far apart are they? What could they be saying? Look at the butterfly on the path. What is it doing there? Hey that dragon fly is so small and its wings don't stick out when it stops! I wonder if it's a different kind of Dragon Fly? Does it eat mosquitoes too? There are bugs flying around your head. Are they really after you or did you just walk into their space? All discoveries and good science begin with good questions. Answers can be researched later. Encourage observation, model curiosity; guess, wonder aloud, hypothesize. And remember the important old adage: take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints. Mostly, enjoy!!

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