

# Take a Winter Hike

Although it's cold outside, winter is a wonderful time to explore nature. Here are a few things to discover on our trails or in your own backyard during the winter.

## Tracks & Scat

You can look for animal tracks in the snow or mud. Many animals are active throughout the winter. By looking carefully at animal tracks you can learn more about what they are doing. *How many different kinds of tracks can you find?* Here's a checklist of different types to discover.

- Four toes—front and back:** means you are looking at a track from the dog or cat family (fox, coyote, Fido next door, bobcat, neighborhood cat). 
- Four toes on front, five toes on back:** means it's a rodent (mice, voles, chipmunks, squirrels, woodchucks, muskrats, porcupines). 
- Five toes—front and back:** means it's from a raccoon, beaver, opossum, or member of the weasel family (weasel, badger, mink, skunk, otter). 
- Two toes:** probably a deer. Moose and elk also make two-toe tracks, but don't live in southern Michigan. 
- Hopper tracks:** probably a squirrel or rabbit. As squirrels bound along, their larger hind feet land ahead of their smaller front feet, which appear side by side. A rabbit's hind feet also land ahead of their front feet, but the front feet are not side by side. 

Another sign to watch for is animal poop, or scat. Scat is easier to spot on bright white snow. You can sometimes find scat where animals have been eating or at the entrance of their homes. *Can you find these four kinds of scat?*

- deer 
- raccoon 
- fox 
- rabbit 

## Animal Homes & Activities

Many animals stay active in the winter and leave clues about their activities. *Can you find these signs of animal homes and activities?*

- A squirrel's nest of leaves.** Look up into trees for a big leaf pile at the fork of a branch, a sign that squirrels lived there last summer. 
- A tree or plant gall.** Look on the stems of oaks and goldenrods for this round bulb created by wasps, flies, beetles, or moths. 
- A hole in a tree.** Animals sometimes use holes in trees to escape the cold weather.
- A tunnel in the snow.** Moles, mice and voles tunnel under the snow to stay hidden from predators and stay warm. With its many pockets of air, snow insulates the ground underneath.
- A twig browsed by a rabbit or deer.** A rabbit's sharp upper and lower teeth leave a smooth cut, while a deer without upper incisors leaves the twig partly ragged. 

## Leaves, Cones, Buds & Bark

In winter when the days are cold and short, many trees are dormant, or resting. Deciduous trees lose their leaves while a conifer's needle-like leaves withstand the winter winds. Winter is a great time to learn more about trees. You can see the shape and form of the tree, see how buds form, and notice different bark textures.

- Can you find brown leaves still hanging from a tree? What kind of tree do you think it is?* 
- Can you find a tree with pinecones? What kind of tree makes cones with seeds inside?* 
- Compare buds on different trees. *How big are they?* As winter goes on you'll see these buds swell – a sure sign that spring is near and leaves will soon appear.
- Can you find a leaf scar on a twig?* Usually right below the bud you can find the leaf scar. It is where last season's leaf was attached to the twig. 
- Feel the bark of different trees. *Can you find some very rough bark? Can you find a tree with smooth bark? Do you notice any markings or signs of peeling or browsing by animals?*