



“Signs of Wildlife While Hiking”

Some of the many pleasures of living in the North Georgia Mountains are the numerous scenic hiking trails we have available to us. On several of my nature walks, I have noticed the signs of others who have visited the paths before me. I'm not referring to the obvious signs from the two-legged visitors like plastic water bottles, candy wrappers, and cigarette butts. I am referring to the signs left behind by the four legged visitors.

One such sign I have seen are paw prints. Paw prints from raccoons, squirrels, deer, skunks, and of course my favorite, the black bear. Whether the prints be along the pathway or in the muddy areas alongside, the abundance of wildlife that surrounds us is quite obvious.

Other signs that I look for are droppings from the various critters, also know as scat. Upon visual examination of different scat forms, one can learn to identify the animal associated with the droppings. I learned how to visually identify many different types of scat by searching the internet. Living in the wooded area that I do, I like to know what has been visiting me while I am inside at night so I would take a photo and compare the scat with photos found on the internet.

Scratches on the base of trees, holes chewed or dug out of fallen tree trunks, chewed on Rhododendron, and Mountain Laurel leaves, are also signs I have looked for. The deer especially love chewing up the Rhododendrons and Laurels whereas the bears dig in the ground searching for grubs, honey bees, and fungus. One problem living in the woods is

the underground beehives. Many a time I have been stung when inadvertently stepping on top of the hidden beehive entrance. But, one year after the bees stopped buzzing, I noticed that a bear had dug up the nest and eaten the honey. And he or she had left a perfect claw print in the side of the hole. So when I see a hole that has been dug, I will closely examine it to see if any remnants were left behind.

When a bear scratches on a tree, sometimes hair, or even a claw (like our fingernail) are left behind; it is always a treat to find these!

-By examining footprints, you can also tell if the animal had been running, or walking at a slow pace.

-By examining the droppings you can discover what, or *who*, they had for dinner.

-By examining obviously laid upon brush, you may be

able to discover hair samples, or some other remnant left behind. It has always been a favorite of mine to find deer antlers that have been shed for one reason or another.

One thing to keep in mind! When examining a hole in the ground, make noise prior to reaching into it, or use a flashlight. I had an altercation with a skunk one time; it didn't turn out to be a pleasant adventure. Also, make sure that when examining a tree that you believe a bear has scratched on or climbed up, that you thoroughly examine the branches above you to make sure there isn't a cub up there.

When I was twelve years old, living in the Adirondack Mountains of Upstate New York, I had an experience of a lifetime. I was hiking in the woods behind my best friends' house when we heard rustling in the branches above. We were excited to see a black bear cub. After making a little noise to get the cub to move, we heard a horrific sound in the brush behind us. The sound was coming from what seemed at that time to be a thousand pound mama bear. Not knowing at that age you aren't supposed to run from a black bear, we did! The porch of his house never looked so good, or so far away. As we flew open the back door, big mama was reaching her head out of the woods, about 25 yards behind us. This I believe began my admiration of, and respect for, the black bears, and other wildlife.



“Hang In There Baby”, painting by Scott M. Anna