Wetland Wildlife

Wetlands provide important habitat for many wildlife species. When visiting the Conservation District's wetlands, you may not always see the animals, but you can look for clues they've left behind.

Just like people, animals have their own favorite trails they use to travel in and out of the marshes and swamps.

And mud provides a perfect canvas for wildlife to leave their signatures. Here we can see the tracks of several species which have visited the channel under our footbridge, both birds and mammals.

This deer track show two separate imprints, one for each toe of its split hoof. The shape and depth of the print can tell you something about how the animal was moving. These deer tracks are deep with wide-spread toes. This shows the mud was very soft and the deer couldn't walk easily when it passed through.

This raccoon paw print looks like a tiny hand. This print is from a front paw. A raccoon's back paw print is longer because raccoons will often walk on their heels, just like humans.

These odd prints leading to the water are from a beaver. The beaver's hind feet leave tracks with webbing marks between the toes and deep toe marks from their claws. Beavers use their claws for grooming and for digging while building dams and lodges. The smooth patches of mud between prints are from the beaver's tail.

Here on the mud flat, you can see several sets of tracks. The ones on the left are from people and deer. The others look like they were made by animals traveling in pairs, but if you look closely, you'll see that each pair of tracks came from a single animal, a turtle, dragging the plastron of its shell.

Along the Conservation District trails, you'll also come across tracks from domestic animals. Many people walk dogs or ride horses on our property. When hiking, please remember to watch your step so that you don't walk through horse manure by accident while exploring trail-side habitats.

Other animal droppings are known as scat and can also help you identify what animals have visited an area. This scat was left by a raccoon. You can tell it was eating our birdseed from the sunflower seed shells left behind in its scat.

Sometimes you'll find leftovers from an animal's meal. This shell is from a freshwater muscle or clam. The inside is bright white, but the outside is brown and blends in with the rocks and mud, camouflage! These shells can be tiny, so you'll need to look carefully for them along waterways.

Some leftovers are easier to see. This shell from a robin's egg is far from any tree or other nesting site, most likely carried here by predatory bird, a blue jay or grackle. Robins are also predators. They will run along the ground looking for insect larva, worms, and other creepy-crawly creatures to eat.

Another bird that likes to hunt along the ground is the eastern towhee. Look for them in and around the underbrush of the forest during the spring and summer. These birds nest on the ground and blend in with the shadows. The males have black feathers on their wings, backs, and heads while the females are a more camouflaged brown. The only clue to their presence you may receive is their song.

Another bird that arrives in spring is the red-winged blackbird. Males set up and patrol territories around the wetlands, defending them from other blackbirds and from predators. Their glossy black feathers and red-and-yellow wing patches are easy to spot. Females are brown and striped to blend in with wetland vegetation, and their nests are built from grasses and similar plants.

Hollow trees provide nesting places for other birds and animals. This cavity was large enough for raccoons or owls to use as shelter. Other animals will create their own holes in dead trees. This fallen log shows where a woodpecker began tapping out a cavity before the tree came down. Other birds will also use woodpecker holes for nesting when the woodpeckers move out.

When there aren't enough dead trees and abandoned woodpecker holes, sometimes people will help birds by providing them with nest boxes. These nest boxes need to be cleaned out periodically, usually after the nesting season ends and again before the new nesting season starts. Some birds, such as house sparrows, will fill nest boxes with enough grasses and materials to stop other birds from using the box. The sparrows don't want competition for their chicks. These false nests should be removed to allow other birds to use the box. Species that use our boxes include eastern bluebirds and tree swallows.

Another type of nest box you can find on the District's property is used by wood ducks. Wood ducks typically nest in tree cavities abandoned by pileated woodpeckers, but there are very few of those nesting sites near our wetlands. Male wood ducks are very colorful birds during the breeding season, but afterwards they will molt their feathers and grow eclipse plumage which gives them coloring similar to the females. The female wood duck tends to the nest alone. She will lay between 8 and 15 eggs in the nest and start incubating them once the last egg is laid. When all the eggs have hatched, the mother wood duck will leave the nest and call the ducklings to her from the ground. The ducklings will then climb out of the nest and jump down to their mother. The ducklings are only a few inches long upon hatching and would make an easy, bite-sized snack for many predators. In order to avoid being eaten, the ducklings stick to shallow water and thick vegetation where they can hide.

Disturbance in the water of our wetlands shows an animal hiding beneath the surface. What is it? Is it something that might make a meal of our ducklings?

This plant-covered mass in our frog pond is a snapping turtle. Snapping turtles are the largest turtles in Pennsylvania and are powerful predators. They like to ambush their prey, snatching it with their sharp beaks when it ventures too close. Snapping turtles are well camouflaged to blend in with mud, silt, and murky waters. They have thick tails and webbed feet to help them swim. Snapping turtles also have large claws. The claws on their hind feet are particularly important to female turtles when they venture onto land to dig nests for their eggs.

This medium-sized turtle is a map turtle. Map turtles get their names from the ridges on their shells which reminded people of topographic maps. Her carapace (the top part of her shell) is muddy and camouflaged,

but underneath, her plastron is brightly colored. As reptiles, turtles rely on the environment to help them control their body temperature. This turtle was resting in the shade of our patio after journeying through our sunny yard in search of a nesting spot.

This odd-looking creature is a softshell turtle. Unlike our typical turtles, softshells have a leathery carapace without armor-like scutes which will flex and bend as they move. They also have an elongated snout which acts like a snorkel, allowing them to poke only their heads out of the water when they need to breathe. Softshell turtles prefer slow-moving waters with a smooth bottom and blend in easily with the mud of our wetlands. Their carapace is spotted, enhancing their camouflage. If you venture into the water around our property, keep an eye out for these unique turtles.

There is another creature which often disturbs our waters that is not a turtle. Invasive carp enter our wetlands through the outflow channel when spring rains increase the water level. These carp come to our wetlands to spawn, laying their eggs where they can hatch in relative safety. Larger fish, such as this white crappie, and other predatory animals would love to eat the young fish fry, but our wetlands are too shallow for adult fish to survive. As the waters dry up during the summer, the carp which entered will either need to find their way out again during a summer storm or risk becoming food for herons, raccoons, foxes, ospreys, and eagles. The fish fry will eventually find their way out as they search for food and deeper waters in which to overwinter.

Herons are another common sight around our wetlands. The Great Blue Heron is the most iconic of these birds in Pennsylvania, and if you have patience and stealth, you may get the chance to watch these graceful animals hunt for food. Herons are known for eating fish, but frogs, snakes, crayfish, small mammals, and even ducklings will become a part of their meal. Their long legs help them sneak quietly through the water and their coiled necks give them the speed and power necessary to catch fish with a quick snap.

Of course herons need open space to hunt, and logs like this one can create hiding places for prey where a heron's quick beak cannot reach. Other birds, like the belted kingfisher, may use the upright branches of this log as a perch, waiting for fish to swim far enough from safety for the kingfisher to dive down and catch a meal. Turtles will sun themselves on such logs, but on occasion, other animals will visit. This squirrel wandered down to the creek for a drink and to possibly hunt for shells or bones to add more calcium to its diet. Squirrels, like all rodents, need to chew on things to help wear down their front teeth, which will continue to grow throughout their lives.

While walking along the shore of Raccoon Creek or some of our smaller streams, you may catch a glimpse of damselflies flitting along the water. They're top hunters in their own little food chain, along with dragonflies, and prey on mosquitoes, biting flies, and many other insects. When they first hatch out of their eggs, they live underwater and are called nymphs. During this early stage of their lives, damselflies and dragonflies eat insect larva, tadpoles, and minnows. Damselflies can fly at speeds over 3 miles per hour, but some species of dragonfly have been clocked at speeds up to 35 miles per hour.

Thank you for watching this video on wildlife around the Conservation District's wetlands. We hope you visit soon to discover more of Pennsylvania's wetland residents.