

TIPS ON OBSERVING NATURE by Roger Urbaniak

My outdoor enjoyment always seems to be enhanced during those outings where I am fortunate enough to witness wild creatures in their natural surroundings. Since most species are genetically programmed to avoid human interaction, learning how, when and where you might see them helps the possibility that you will be able to add to your enjoyment with their sightings. I have learned that there is an art to this skill when I ask hikers that I encounter what animals they have identified on their outing and compare their results to mine following the same route. Here are a few of the things that I have learned to do in an effort to see better

BE AWARE OF MOVEMENT: Birds and animals are usually naturally camouflaged to blend into their surroundings. Our eyes and brain are programmed to notice even slight motion if we begin to seek this information. Sometimes just the motion of a deer flicking its ear will give away its location to you and let your eyes see the whole animal once you wonder about the motion that attracted your eye. Standing still and letting your gaze look for this motion at various distances also helps with training your vision.

ODD SHAPES AND COLORS: There is a shape and color to nature that an artist will notice better than most. Trees and grasses grow vertically seeking sunlight. Seeing objects that are horizontal in this scene often discloses some creature. Seeing some shade of color that is slightly different from its surroundings gives you a clue to focus your gaze for possible wildlife. Once your gaze picks out a few creatures using this method, study the scene as you would a trick painting that deliberately hides things for you to discover. It is possible to improve on what you see.

FOCUS ON NOISE: When we walk through the woods, the sound of our footsteps alerts the creatures around us and they will either flee or hide by remaining motionless. If we are quiet enough to be in close proximity to an animal before it knows of our presence, we might hear some noise that it makes and use it to focus our search. Snapping of twigs, bird or animal calls, and rustling of leaves or grasses are the same clues animals use to locate us.

SIGNS OF ANIMAL'S PRESENCE: Animal droppings, leftovers from feeding, fur or feathers, plus actual tracks help us know certain creatures are present and allow us to tell our brain what we are looking for.

TRACKING: Tracks in the snow are the easiest to see and help identify the animals you can expect to find in the area. Once you start visiting places during the winter that you frequent other times of year, the diversity of wildlife we miss when foliage usually obscures will be amazing. Once you start observing tracks in snow, it becomes easier to look for tracks at other times of year. Mud, sand, stream crossings or actual animal trails are all assists.

FEEDING TIME: Some animals feed during the day, others, especially in urban areas, are nocturnal. Looking for nocturnal animals is usually more fruitful at dawn or dusk when they may still be feeding. Storm fronts, especially in the fall and spring, often get animals to extend their feeding hours in an effort to pack in food before snow might cover it up. Driving through areas where you see an occasional animal during these times often reveal numerous creatures feeding in plain sight even during daylight hours. There are also sites to visit where animals are regularly fed during times of snow or you may

observe carnivores by observing where road kill animals are disposed of, or just visiting some garbage dumps as local bears look for leftovers.

REGULAR VIEWING AREAS: Most animals become creatures of habit and continue to look for food and shelter in the same areas each year, changing feeding routine as different edibles become available with changing seasons. Once you find an animal you enjoy viewing, remember the time and location you saw it and return to it.

PRACTICE LOOKING: I have specific drives or hikes that I take through areas known to hold a lot of game animals. Each time I visit these areas I try to sharpen my skills by studying the terrain for sightings. Carrying along binoculars has helped me on numerous occasions.

JOURNAL YOUR SIGHTINGS: Once you discover that spotting creatures gives you pleasure, jot down notes in journal form to help you recall, where and when the sighting occurred. It helps remember when and where you might want to look next time. If you do this often enough, you will realize that you have a new hobby, learning to see and enjoy nature's wild creatures.