

The Old Naturalist- Animal Homes

Recently, I was hiking in the Rocky Mountains and found several holes that were 10 + inches in size with dirt piled up on the outside of the hole. There were no bones scattered around the hole which might give me some clue of who lived there. However, there were a number of holes scattered about, where it appeared that an animal had dug out a pocket gopher. I became very excited because I convinced myself that I was seeing badger holes. I had read about badgers listening for gophers beneath the surface and then digging them out when they were eating in their tunnels. I went back to the area three times in two days looking for the badgers, but never saw a sign of them.

Have you ever walked in the woods, found an animal hole and wondered whose home it was? Getting to know different types of animal homes helps a naturalist understand what types of animals live in his/her neighborhood. I remember leading "animal homes field trips" with groups of 8-12 year olds and it was like a magic door opened up and the students realized that there could be numerous species of animals living in their neighborhood.

Mice/shrew holes can be very common around bird feeders. Mouse tunnels and nests are most commonly seen after the winter snow melts. Mice are active all winter long beneath the snow. They create grass nests and form tunnels beneath the snow.

Chipmunk holes are commonly found around stumps and logs. The winter burrow may be as deep as 3 feet and hold up to 10 quarts of nuts, seeds, and fruit.

During the mating season, **skunk and mink** holes often have a skunky-type odor around them. Mink dens are usually near water.

A **fox** will usually enlarge a groundhog burrow that is on a slope. The burrow may run 20 feet underground to the actual den. Usually there will be a second entrance to the den. Generally, fox dens are only used to raise young kits.

A **chickadee** nest may be a hole in a dead tree, within 10 feet of the ground. A squirrel will take over a woodpecker hole and enlarge it. Often you will see tooth marks on the outside of the hole.

Raccoon tree holes are often formed when a branch falls, creating a large opening. Look for raccoon poop at the base of the tree. I have often seen raccoons sleeping at the tree opening in the fall and spring.

Hornet nests are made of paper (chewed up bark and leaves) and can be up to a foot in diameter. Hornet nests must never be disturbed in the summer and early fall. If a rock is thrown at a nest, angry hornets can be a dangerous proposition.

In the following activity, young naturalists will look for different types of animal homes in trees and in the ground. As you would guess the size of the hole is dependent upon the size of the animal. For instance, a mouse would not be living in a large hole, since predators would go into the hole and eat them.

Please note that there is a lot of variation between the actual size of an animal's home and the one given for the activity. For instance a woodpecker (depending upon the size of the woodpecker), might have a 3-4 inch hole rather than 1 inch hole. Also, this activity should not be used to study animal populations. If you found 20 five inch holes (the size of a skunk hole), you should not assume that 20 skunks live there, but rather that there is a possibility that skunks are in the neighborhood. The purpose of this activity is to develop awareness of different types of holes, so that when you walk in the woods and find a hole, you can infer what might be living in it.

Animal Homes Study

What to Do: Take a nature hike in your neighborhood/park and see how many animal homes you can find (Do not assume that all holes you find are active homes for animals.) Make a tally by each home that you see.

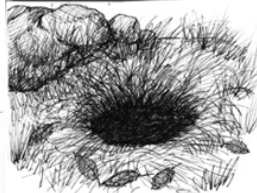
Holes in the ground



One inch hole
Mouse



1 ½ inch hole
chipmunk



3-5 inch hole
skunk



5-7 inch hole
Woodchuck
Dirt pushed outside of hole



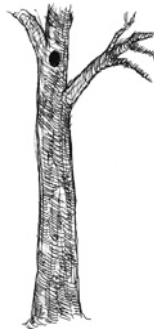
9-12 inch hole
fox

Tree Nests – Hollows in trees

Most holes are made by woodpeckers, and are later taken over by other animals. Larger holes develop if a branch breaks off a tree.



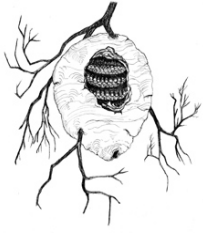
Woodpecker/Chickadee
1-2 inch hole
If outside of hole is chewed to
enlarge hole – red squirrel



Squirrel
3 inch hole
Small owls and pileated
woodpeckers too.



Raccoon
6 inches or greater
In Fall or Spring may be
seen sleeping in the hollow
opening.



Hornet Nest
Do not disturb

1. Give yourself a point
for taking a nature
hike.
2. Give yourself a point
for each different type
of home you find.
Total possible 11
Total for you _____



Squirrel Dray
Made of leaves and
sticks.