Focus Wild Arizona

Key Words

Animal sign: one or more clues that an animal leaves behind

Scat: animal droppings

Tracks: footprints left by an animal

Animals are everywhere! Whether you live in the middle of a city or deep in a forest, wildlife is nearby. Sometimes it may be difficult to see animals. However, many animals leave behind traces of their lives that are quite easy to discover. Have you ever found a feather on the ground or a spider's web stretched between branches? Clues like these hint that animals live close by.

Animal sign not only shows us an animal has been here, but also tells us a little about the animal. Let's take a look at some of the stories told by animal sign.

Tracks:

As animals move about, they leave **tracks**, or footprints. By looking at the size and shape of the tracks, the number of toes and whether claw marks show in the tracks, you can learn many things about the animal that left them.

For example, members of the dog family (which includes coyotes and foxes) have four toes. A dog's tracks often show its pad, toes and claw marks. Because cats also have four toes, a cat's tracks would look similar to a dog's. However, cats can pull their claws in to keep them sharp for hunting, so cats do not leave claw marks in their tracks.

Beavers leave tracks that show their webbed back feet, which help them to swim, and their small hand-like front feet, which they use to grab things.

Nests:

Birds build nests for shelter and to raise their young. The size, shape, material and location tell us much about the bird that made the nest.

For example, hummingbirds build tiny cup-shaped nests, just big enough for two tiny eggs. The nest is made of small sticks and spiders' webs.

Nests built by cliff swallows are made of mud and lined with grass and feathers. These nests have a small side entrance and are found on the sides of bridges, cliffs or buildings.

If you see a football-shaped nest in a tree or cactus, it probably belongs to a cactus wren. Cactus wrens build their nests from dry grasses and annual plants.

Scat:

All animals must eat to survive. After digesting their food, animals rid their bodies of waste by leaving behind droppings, called **scat**. The shape and contents of the scat can tell us about the animal that left it behind.

For example, animals that eat plants leave piles of small, round droppings. Deer leave large piles of these pellets, while rabbits leave smaller piles.

Meat-eating animals leave larger, clumpy scat that may contain hair and fur. A mountain lion's scat may be filled with the fur of the smaller animals it eats.

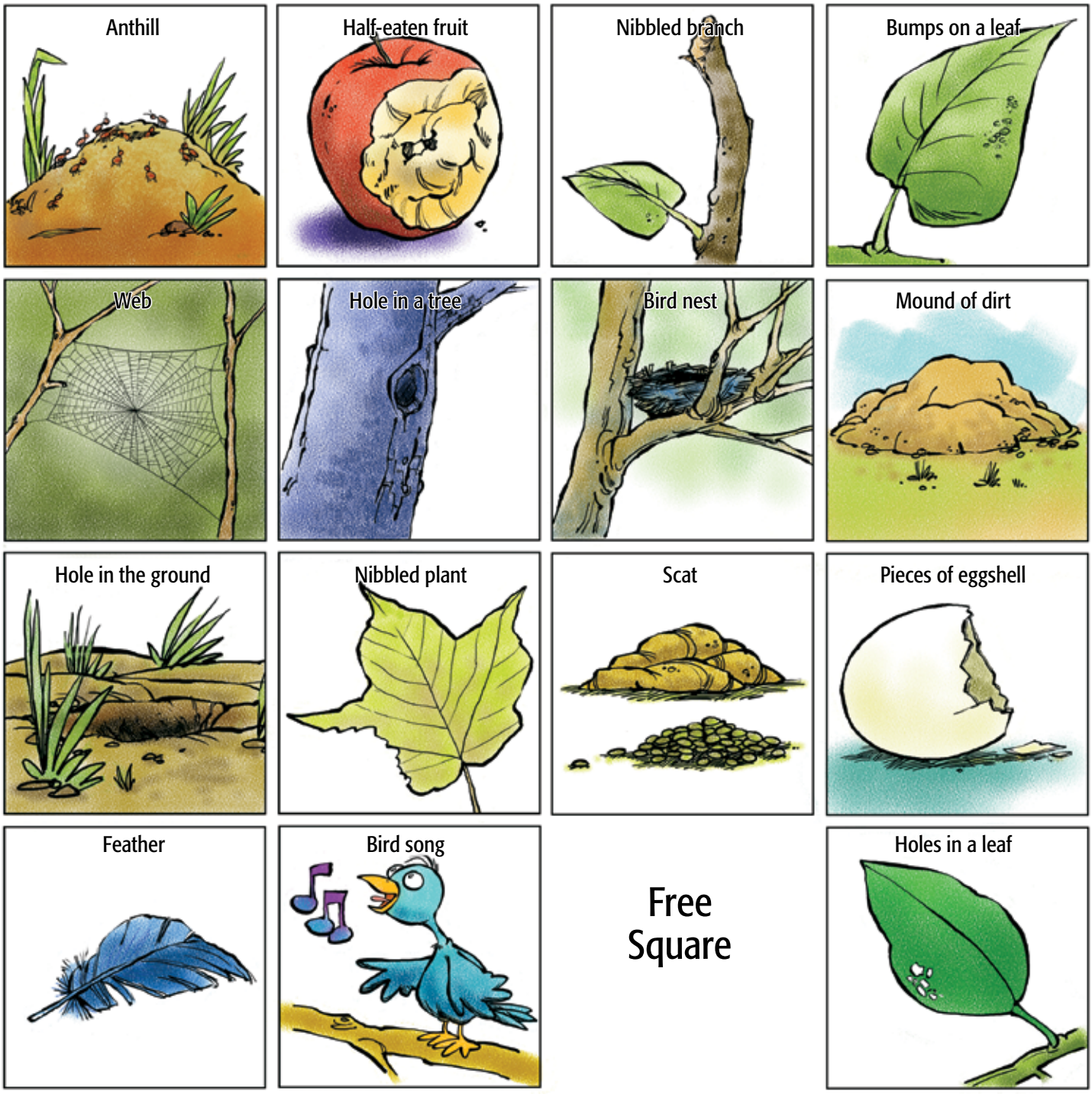
On the other hand, if you find clumped scat with berries in it, it may belong to a bear or coyote.

Just for fun:

Cut out each square in the grid. Glue the squares on a sheet of paper. Glue four squares across and four squares down — just like they are here, but in any order you like. Title your card "Animal Sign Bingo." Using your bingo card, explore your schoolyard, your backyard or a nearby park for animal sign. If you get four across, four down, or all four corners — you've got bingo!

▪ This feature is part of the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Focus Wild Arizona program, a free educational program for teachers, parents, students or anyone interested in learning about wildlife and habitat. Visit our Web site, www.azgfd.gov/focuswild, to find exciting lessons and resources.

Animal Sign Bingo



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