

Middle Lake Trail

Welcome to the Middle Lake Interpretive Trail in Kananaskis Country. Be a nature sleuth as you walk this easy, 2.5 km trail. Use this guide to help you detect what animals live in this wilderness neighbourhood.

Stop #1 — Wilderness Neighbourhood

Welcome to the neighbourhood. Some of our residents may be familiar to you. A few may be unexpected... and some may even seem strange.

Have you ever visited a new part of a city and not been able to find your way around? Have you felt confused and unsure of yourself because you did not see any familiar landmarks or friendly faces?

Many people feel disoriented when they come out to the wilderness where little is familiar to them. But, like learning to recognize the streets in a new city and getting to know the neighbourhood, walking this trail will help you to understand the area better.

Stop #2 — Home Sweet Home

The town or city in which we live provides us with the things we need in order to stay alive: food, water and shelter. This grassland and forest provides the animals that live here with the things they need in order to survive: food, water and shelter.

The home area that provides an animal with its needs is called the animal's habitat. Look out over this grassy meadow. The small mounds of dirt are evidence that a burrowing animal lives here.

This meadow is the habitat of several small bundles of fur that can each dig 60 to 90 metres of tunnels every day. These animals are only about 15cm (6") long and weigh only 140g (6 oz.). They feed on the roots and tubers of the plants under which they tunnel. At night they venture out of their tunnels to feed on grasses and other plants. They stuff fur-lined sacks attached to the outside of their cheeks with some of the plants they find. They take these plants back to their tunnels so that they can feed on them without fear of being captured by coyotes, owls and other predators.

These little tunnel diggers help their habitat by loosening the soil and by turning over an astounding amount of soil —bringing minerals and other nutrients to the surface which plants then use. If you worked as hard as this animal does at moving soil, it would be like you moving nine tonnes of earth every single day!

Do you know what this animal is called? You'll find the answer at the next trail stop.

Stop #3 — What You See is What You Get

Looking at an animal's habitat is easy; actually seeing the animal is the hard part. At the last trail stop you saw evidence of an animal's existence — small mounds of dirt. These mounds of dirt in a meadow habitat tell us that we were looking at evidence of Northern pocket gophers. As you walked to this trail stop, you may have noticed evidence of other animals.

For thousands of years, native people passed information from one generation to another about how to identify and hunt animals through signs that the animals leave and the environment in which the signs are found. Your parents and friends have passed along information about your habitat (neighbourhood or city) to you in much the same way. The big difference is that the native people lived in a wilderness and the information they passed along could mean the difference between life and death.

As you walk to the next trail stop, look for some of these animal signs: bark rubbed off trees, piles of evergreen cones, pathways through the forest, scat (animal excrement) along the trail, claw marks on the trees, holes in tree trunks and nests in the branches of the trees.

Stop #4 — Predators and Prey

This spruce forest is the habitat of an animal that many of us have seen at one time or another: the snowshoe or varying hare. During the day, snowshoe hare spend most of their time in the dense cover provided by the forest. At night, they leave the forest and search for grasses and other small plants in forest openings and meadows. See if you can find signs of these animals.

At twilight, predators such as great homed owls, coyotes and lynx, search for snowshoe hare. Hare are usually plentiful, making them a favourite prey for a variety of predators. Lynx can eat up to 200 snowshoe hare in a single year.

As you walk to the next trail stop, look for signs of snowshoe hare.

Stop #5 — Pathways and Signs

Pathways through the forest, such as those near this trail stop, are game trails used by a variety of animals. Game trails make travel easier for large and small animals using this habitat. If you search closely, you may find some very narrow trails only a few centimetres wide running through the grass. These small game trails are made by mice, squirrels and even snowshoe hare. Larger trails indicate that animals such as elk and white-tailed deer call this area home.

Other signs to look for are trees with scraped bark and shrubs that have the ends of their branches snipped off. Both of these signs indicate that elk have been in the area, thrashing antlers against trees and browsing on the shrubs.

As you walk to the next stop, look for piles of evergreen cone scales. You may hear the chatter of the animal responsible for these piles of cone scales, the red squirrel. Look up into the trees for the red squirrel's home — a nest of grasses and twigs.

Stop #6 — Edges

You are standing on the edge of two different habitats: a forest and a grassland meadow. These two habitats blend together, and plants and animals from both can be found in this mixing zone or ecozone. In fact, Bow Valley Provincial Park is an ecozone between the prairies and the mountains. Both mountain and prairie plants and animals can be found in the park.

Deer often graze in clearings such as this one. Coyotes come to hunt mice, voles and ground squirrels. Hawks circle overhead scanning the ground for small rodents. Edges or ecozones are usually great places to practice Seton Watching.

Seton Watching, named after Ernest Thompson Seton, is a simple technique to help people spot wildlife. All you have to do is find a comfortable spot, sit down and don't move. After a short while, the animals will come out of hiding and resume their normal activity since you will no longer appear as a threat to them.

The best times to practice Seton Watching are at dusk and dawn when the largest number of animals are most active.

At the next trail stop, you will see one of the park's oldest inhabitants.

Stop #7 — Changing Worlds

This large, old Douglas fir tree was probably over a hundred years old before the first European explorers travelled through the Bow Valley. At the beginning of its life this tree may have provided a hungry deer with a meal of tender spring buds. Mountain bluebirds may have gathered in this tree's branches in an autumn before the Canadian Pacific Railroad's first trip through the mountains. The descendants of those same bluebirds may gather here next fall in anticipation of their winter migration to Mexico. Grouse may spend the night roosting, secure high in the fir's limbs. Great horned owls have perched in this tree, searching for movement of mice and voles.

Some insects spend their entire lifespan on this tree. Downy woodpeckers and other birds search the thick, furrowed bark for those same insects.

Habitats can be large like a forest or meadow, or smaller like this old Douglas fir. When the fir dies and falls to the earth, it

will become an even smaller habitat for ants, other insects, millipedes and spiders. Habitats change over time, and the animals that inhabit them come and go as their survival needs are either met or not met.

Stop #8 — Listen — Look — Learn

If you had your choice of any kind of food right this minute, what would you choose? To get that food you could probably go to a restaurant or store that specializes in your choice.

Wild animals also have favourites and those foods are usually found in only one or two different habitats. So, if you know what an animal eats and where those foods are found, you will have a pretty good chance of finding the animal you are looking for.

Native people passed this kind of information on from generation to generation because it could mean the difference between a full stomach and starvation.

Take a few minutes to listen and look for animals at this trail stop. You will probably see birds flying overhead or moving about in the trees. You may see some insects or spiders if you watch for movement among the grass and rocks. You might even see evidence of the park's most dangerous animal — you'll find out what it is at the next trail stop.

Stop #9 — The Most Dangerous Animal

Humans can be the most dangerous of animals, as their activities can alter entire habitats. Whole communities of plants and animals can disappear. Look around this area for tree stumps that have been cut off evenly. Humans left this sign.

People have used this valley for nearly 10,000 years, ever since the last ice-age glaciers melted back into the mountains. Like the other animals that lived in this valley, early man chose this habitat because it provided food, shelter and water.

Prehistoric tribes hunted mammoth, camels, and bison here. Later, Indians searched for elk and deer, and trapped beaver and other animals for their fur. European explorers, traders, loggers, miners and railway workers moved through the Bow Valley. Some of these people also settled here.

Today, people like you visit the valley for recreation. How could you affect the other residents of this neighbourhood?

Stop #10 — A Busy Family

Birds are one of the most often seen animals in the park. One group of birds, the crow family, are among the most common year-round residents of the valley. Magpies, crows, ravens and Canada jays are all members of the crow family.

These birds will eat almost anything, including carrion

(dead meat), eggs, insects and seeds. Crows and ravens are the noisiest, while Canada jays seem to be the nosiest. Canada jays, or Whiskey Jacks, are also known as “Camp Robbers”, since they often land on your picnic table looking for a scrap of food.

Please remember, do not feed the birds or any other animal in the park. They could become dependant on us for food. When winter comes and visitors go, the animals would have a much more difficult time surviving.

Stop #11 — Wetlands Habitat

You have walked through open meadows and forest habitats. You have seen that a habitat can be as small as a fallen tree. You may have spotted signs of elk, deer, squirrels, pocket gophers and other animals. You probably saw a variety of birds. You have seen that habitat provides animals with food, shelter and water.

This small wetland habitat also provides food, water and shelter to a wide variety of animals. Insect larvae, water beetles and other invertebrates live in the pond. If you are lucky, you might see a pied-billed grebe or a Barrow’s goldeneye in search of an invertebrate dinner. Red-winged blackbirds nest in the shoreline vegetation and squawk their disapproval of your intrusion.

If you would like to discover more about park animals, attend an interpretive event, talk to park staff or visit the displays in the park visitor centre. Walk the trails at different times of the day, especially early in the morning or at dusk, and your chances of spotting wildlife will be much greater.