WILDLIFE DETECTIVE

Have you ever wondered what little critter was rustling around at the back of the garden? At the Mammals in a Sustainable Environment Project (MISE) http://www.miseproject.ie/, we have a number of ideas to help survey mammals. All of the techniques that we use are non-invasive, meaning that we can detect the presence of animals, without ever seeing or disturbing them. We’ve visited over 30 schools to date and have found evidence of mammal activity at almost all of them. You too can start investigating the presence of mammals in your yard or local woodland.

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Hedgehog Footprint Tunnel

Hedgehogs are one of the most easily recognised garden species, but are often difficult to spot in the first instance. In Britain, the hedgehog is thought to be decreasing in numbers. We know very little about our own hedgehog population here in Ireland. One of the innovative ways that hedgehogs can be remotely surveyed involves the use of hedgehog tunnel. This crafty device relies on the hedgehog entering the tunnel, walking on (non-toxic!) black ink or paint to get a food reward (hotdogs or dogfood work well), and walking back out over white paper. The hedgehog leaves evidence of its footprint, a print described as being similar to human handprints. Other small mammals such as wood mouse, bank voles and rats may also visit the tunnel. We’ve even had the neighbourhood cat pay a visit!

The folks at the Mammal Society http://www.mammal.org.uk/ have these devices available to purchase from their website. On the other hand, we decided we could make our own using old election posters. We have all the guidelines on our website http://www.miseproject.ie/. For help identifying your mammal footprints, check out the internet, or contact us.

Tip: If your paint or ink is drying out, mix some olive oil or washing up liquid into it before applying spreading it in the tunnel.
Stoat Tracking Tube

Jeroen Mos, a Dutch mammal researcher is piloting a tracking tube for monitoring stoats and weasels. We only have stoats in Ireland, but this device could be useful for checking out footprints of curious stoats and small mammals. It is difficult to photo or film stoats in the field, due to their elusive/behaviour. It is even more difficult to use trail cameras (triggered by motion), as stoats are just so quick. Therefore it is not easy to observe these creatures without using high speed cameras costing thousands of euros.

This tube isn’t baited and relies on the curiosity of the mammal to enter it, but, similar to the hedgehog tunnel, black ink can be used to record the prints on white paper. Jeroen has described on his website the simple method to make the tubes: http://www.wildlifeweb.nl/

What you need:
• 80 mm PVC pipe
• Soft sponge
• Strong glue
• Charcoal Powder + olive oil (to make ink)
• White paper
• Flat piece of wood
• Elastic Bands

The sponge is glued to the middle of the wood with the paper attached with elastic bands on either side of it. The charcoal and oil mixture is soaked into the sponge so when small mammals pass through they carry the ink onto the white paper.
Tip: Place the tube near a wall or hedgerow as mammals like to run along linear features.
Signs of Feeding

The next time you take a walk in the woods, look a little closer to the ground and see if you can find chewed pine cones or split hazel nut shells. Squirrels and small mammals will both strip pine cones to remove the seeds. Squirrels leave theirs looking a bit untidy, while small mammals will nibble theirs neatly to the core.

Hazel nuts too are a good one to look for as squirrels split their hazel nuts nearly in half to remove the nut. Small mammals gnaw a hole in the side of the nut, while blue tits and other birds knock the nut off a stone to split it in two. Also the knock marks will still be visible if a bird cracked the nut. If you want to investigate further signs of mammals, be sure to check out a wonderfully illustrated book called "the Mammal Detective", by Rob Strachan.

Tip: Look at tree stumps for signs of stripped pine cones; squirrels use them as dinner tables.