

# GALLERY OF GAME

By JASON ABRAHAM

For some kids, walking in the woods isn't much different from wandering through a park—talking loudly, kicking at sticks, and rolling stones downhill.

Sometimes, it's fun to be loud. But when you're quiet and look closely, you'll notice that lots of animals make their home in the woods. Wild animals leave signs you can learn to read. Like a detective, you can search for these clues and figure out which critters live nearby.

To know what signs to look for, you first need to know a little about animals that are common in Minnesota. Many are game animals that are hunted in the fall. Successful hunters are masters of reading signs of their quarry. For example, a hunter who sees a pile of nutshells on a stump knows that eastern gray squirrels have been there. Green leaves nibbled off in neat clippings are telltale signs that rabbits abound.

Learning about the habits, senses, and behaviors of your quarry can help you succeed in your search. This story offers clues to help you discover some of Minnesota's most popular game animals.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GRAY SQUIRREL BY STEPHEN B. ANTUS JR., MALLARD BY BILL MARCHEL, EASTERN COTTONTAIL BY STEPHEN B. ANTUS JR., RING-NECKED PHEASANT BY BILL MARCHEL, WHITE-TAILED DEER BUCK BY BILL MARCHEL

# WHITE-TAILED DEER

**Home:** Deer live throughout Minnesota, from forests on the Canadian border, to small woods in big cities, to farmlands in the south.

**Food:** Whitetails eat more than 600 kinds of plants. Their favorites are willow, sumac, white pine, jack pine, apples, acorns, clover, alfalfa, corn, and soybeans. Because deer have no upper front teeth, their bites are ragged. Look for leaves and branches with ragged nibble marks.

**Active time:** Deer feed during the day. When people are around, whitetails become nocturnal. They are most active during mating season, known as the rut, in November.

**Sign:** Deer routinely travel the same routes between feeding and bedding areas. A circle of flattened grass or snow shows where deer rest. Well-used trails have their hard, marble-size droppings and heart-shaped tracks. The hoof prints show which way the deer was facing. Tufts of coarse, light brown or gray deer hair sometimes stick to barbed-wire fences and low tree branches.

Long, shiny scars on saplings and bushes show where a buck has rubbed his antlers and scraped away bark.

Bucks shed antlers in winter. Look for sheds in spring after snow melts.

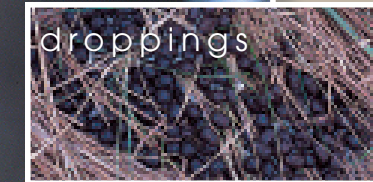
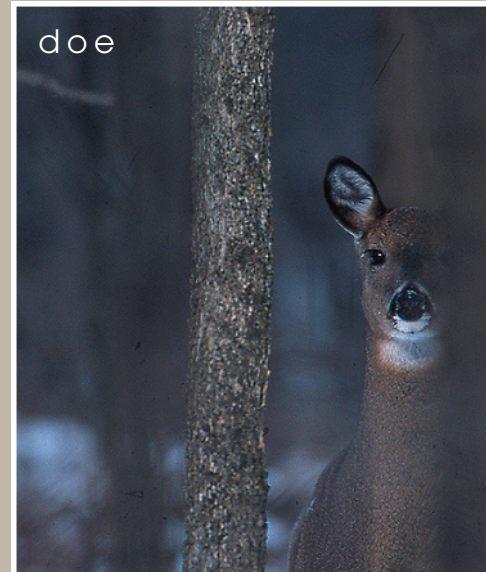
**Danger detector:** A deer's sense of smell is its first defense. Whitetails prefer to face the wind because it carries scents from a distance, just as a river carries leaves downstream. If the breeze is right, a deer can smell human scent a third of a mile away, or about three blocks.

Walk into the wind so deer in front of you have less chance to catch your scent. To fool the deer, some hunters sprinkle their clothes with products that smell like deer or other animals.

A deer also has an acute sense of hearing. Its big ears twitch incessantly, tuning into snapping twigs, squeaky boots, and high-pitched sounds. It also has an extraordinary ability to detect motion. When spooked, a deer lifts its bright white tail and bounds away.

**How to search:** Find a deer trail and sit and wait quietly for deer to pass. Or look as you walk very slowly (100 yards in 30 minutes). Sometimes deer snort or whinny. To attract bucks, some hunters rattle shed antlers to mimic fighting bucks.

**Hunting season:** November to December.



BUCK RUB AND DROPPINGS BY BILL MARCHEL, BUCK SCRAPE AND DOE BY STEPHEN B. ANTUS JR.

## BE WISE

If you want to see but not hunt wildlife, stay away from places where others are hunting so you don't disturb them or risk an accident. State and county parks that don't allow hunting are great places for simply watching wildlife.

Anyone in the woods or countryside during hunting seasons would be wise to wear blaze orange to be visible to hunters.

# EASTERN COTTONTAIL

**Home:** Except in the far north, rabbits abound in Minnesota. Search for them in brush piles, along weedy fences and hedges, and near abandoned buildings.

**Food:** In warm months rabbits eat a variety of plants, including crops such as corn and soybeans. Rabbits have sharp teeth, so look for leaves that have been neatly clipped. Their winter diet includes twigs and bark. Look for trees and shrubs, especially sumac, oaks, and dogwood, with a low ring where rabbits have chewed away bark.

**Active time:** Look for them between late afternoon and dusk, early morning before sunup, and on cloudy days. They stay in their holes when it's cold, wet, or snowy. After bad weather breaks, they start moving around again.

**Sign:** Their droppings are hard, pea-size pellets. Their tracks are easy to see in the snow. Hind feet

leave 4-inch-long oblong prints. Front feet leave small, round prints. Sometimes you can find soft brown or gray fur around a rabbit hole.

**Danger detector:** Keen senses of hearing, sight, and touch help rabbits avoid danger. Cottontails pick up ground vibrations before they hear or see danger.

Rabbits thump a hind foot when they sense danger. A rabbit's first defense is to hide by "freezing" in place; its fur blends into the background. If you keep your distance and stay still, you might see a rabbit "freeze." If a predator gets too close, the rabbit bolts and zigzags, leaping up to 15 feet at speeds up to 20 miles an hour.

**How to search:** Walk grassy cover to scare up a rabbit. Some hunters use beagles or other hounds to sniff out and chase rabbits, which circle back to where they started.

**Hunting season:** September through February.

*Jason Abraham, staff writer for DNR Fish and Wildlife and Ecological Services, enjoys hunting for wildlife.*



BEAGLE BY MIKE BARLOW, WINDIGO IMAGES; BARK DAMAGE BY BILL MARCHEL; EASTERN COTTONTAIL BY STEPHEN B. ANTUS JR.

## MORE MINNESOTA GAME ANIMALS (partial listing)

**Big game:** moose, deer, elk, bear.

**Mammals:** cottontail rabbit, jackrabbit, snowshoe hare, gray and fox squirrels.

**Furbearers (wanted mainly for fur):** raccoon, red and gray fox, badger, opossum, bobcat, pine marten, fisher, mink, muskrat, beaver, otter.

# GRAY SQUIRREL

**Home:** Eastern gray squirrels are most common in central hardwood forests. They favor thick woods where they can easily travel through the treetops. Look for dens in tree cavities or ball-shaped nests of leaves, twigs, and bark high in branches.

**Food:** They eat nuts of hickory, beech, black walnut, and oak trees. They also eat corn and other farm crops. With long, sharp front teeth, they gnaw through nut husks and shells.

**Active time:** Squirrels are busy on and off all day. They stay inside when it's windy, stormy, or extremely cold.

**Sign:** You can easily spot squirrel nests in trees and ragged holes in the earth where they have stashed or dug up nuts.

**Danger detector:** Squirrels have exquisite eyesight and hearing. When frightened, they retreat to nests or dens, or hide by hugging a tree branch.

**How to search:** First scout for a place with lots of empty acorns

or walnut shells. Look high in the trees for leafy nests. Watch for flickers of movement or smooth-looking bulges on trees. Keep your ears open for chattering or clucking, which sounds like two rocks being quickly tapped together.

**Hunting season:** September through February.



DENVER BRYAN, WINDIGO IMAGES



GORDON P. ANDERSSON



BILL MARCHEL

## LEARN TO HUNT

The DNR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Minnesota Waterfowl Association, Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, and other groups sponsor programs to teach kids to hunt. A few examples:

**Firearms Safety Training** teaches basics of safety; 888-646-6367. **Woodie Camp**, Prairie Wetlands Learning Center in Fergus Falls, is a weeklong residential summer camp with lessons in duck biology, calling, shooting, and cooking; 763-553-2977.

**The Young Waterfowlers Program**, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge in Bloomington, gives youth ages 12–16 a chance to learn from and hunt with experts; 952-858-0705.

**Forkhorn Camps**, various locations, are weeklong sessions for youth ages 11–17 to learn about firearms safety, archery hunting, or advanced topics; 800-450-3337.

# MALLARD

**Home:** Minnesota's most common duck lives on shallow lakes, ponds, sloughs, and streams.

**Food:** In summer, these dabbling ducks dine on protein-rich mosquitoes, tadpoles, frogs, and other small aquatic animals. The rest of the year, mallards eat aquatic plants such as bulrush, duckweed, pondweed, and wild celery. They also eat corn, wheat, soybeans, and other crops.

**Active time:** Like many ducks, mallards fly on cloudy and overcast days to lessen the chance of being seen by hunters and other predators. In early fall, mallards sometimes fly on clear nights to feed. As winter sets in and cloudy days prevail, mallards become less wary and fly more during the day.

**Sign:** Look for mallards on calm lakes and ponds. Listen for mallard hens, the most talkative of American ducks. They quack loudly and repeatedly in single syllables, often starting with a loud and long quack followed by shorter ones.

**Danger detector:** All waterfowl can distinguish colors and see well. From 300 feet away, a duck can



BILL MARCHEL

detect slight movements or changes in light, such as the glint of sun on eyeglasses or skin or a gun barrel. Even when hungry or tired, mallards stay alert and quickly flee from hunters, foxes, coyotes, and other dangers.

**How to search:** Look for a recently picked cornfield, where they might feed. If you see ducks fly in, note the direction they flew from and try to trace their route backward to a nearby pond or lake, where they might rest. Some hunters hide in a duck blind, a makeshift wooden frame camouflaged with wetland vegetation.

**Hunting season:** September through November.

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DAVID J. SAMS, WINDIGO IMAGES



## MORE MINNESOTA MIGRATORY GAME BIRDS

**Puddle ducks:** mallard, green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, cinnamon teal, pintail, gadwall, wigeon, shoveler, wood duck, and black duck.

**Diving ducks:** canvasback, redhead, ringneck (also called ringbill), scaup (also called bluebill), goldeneye, bufflehead, and ruddy duck.

**Geese:** Canada, snow, blue, and white-fronted.

**Other:** crow, woodcock, sora, Virginia rail, common snipe, mourning dove.

# RING-NECKED PHEASANT

**Home:** Pheasants live in grasslands and cattail marshes near grain fields in central and southern Minnesota. They do not migrate. They were imported to the United States from China in 1881. Hunters brought them to Minnesota in 1916.

**FOOD:** Pheasants eat insects, seeds, corn, soybeans, and sometimes snakes and mice.

**Active time:** The birds feed heavily in the morning and again in late afternoon, though some may be in fields any time during the day. They rest midday, sometimes sunning themselves away from the wind.

**Sign:** This bird's thin, big (about

3 inches long) three-toed tracks are easy to see in mud or snow. Listen for this wild chicken to cluck and cackle like a farm chicken.

**Danger detector:** Pheasants have keen eyesight and hearing. In danger, they sometimes hold still. However, they have very strong legs and run to escape. Flight is often their last line of defense.

**How to search:** Walk fences, field edges, or grassy hillsides in hopes of scaring up birds. Many hunters use dogs to find and flush pheasants.

**Hunting season:** October through December. 📍

## MORE MINNESOTA NONMIGRATORY GAME BIRDS

Ruffed grouse, spruce grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, gray partridge, greater prairie chicken, wild turkey.



MITCH KEZAR, WINDIGO IMAGES



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## Hunting Small Game

Many of Minnesota's small-game hunting seasons are open from mid-September through February. A small-game license is required for anyone 16 years or older. Habitat stamps are

required to hunt waterfowl and pheasant. To obtain a license to take wild animals with firearms in Minnesota, hunters born on or after Jan. 1, 1980, must have a firearms

safety certificate or equivalent, a previous hunting license, or other evidence of successfully completing a hunter-safety course. Hunters under 14

must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian when hunting small game. Those older than 12 must also have a firearms safety certificate in possession.

For more details, see the small-game section of the 2004 *Minnesota Hunting and Trapping Regulations Handbook*, available free where licenses are sold or online at [www.dnr.state](http://www.dnr.state).

[mn.us/regulations/hunting](http://mn.us/regulations/hunting).

For more information contact the DNR Information Center, listed on page 61.