

# Learning Landscape:

## December

2017

*Shed Light*



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# The December Landscape

After the first snow of the season, December is blank – the blank white canvas the perfect backdrop upon which to begin to notice the particulars of nature. The early winter landscape is devoid of the brilliant color that marks all other seasons, and for once, the absence of all of nature's magnificent detail is a treat! Suddenly, tracks abound, meal waste litters the ground, and scat is cast with abandon.

Without the richness of what the natural world usually has to offer, early winter draws attention to the things that otherwise blend in. The tracks of chickadee feet and blue jay wings; the apples smashed by deer hooves and pinecones decimated by chipmunks; fox, coyote, and a mysterious other – none far from the dooryard.

These small discoveries feel new in a snowy landscape; but is it possible they're always there? Learn the landscape this December by shedding light on that which surrounds you.

## Artifacts for Learning

A December walk in the north woods reveals many of the same treasures, with variations occurring naturally in accordance with the type of forest explored. December is a perfect time of year for exploring all of these parts of nature as they stand out amongst the snow-blanketed landscape. Additionally, the cold weather has eliminated some of the natural camouflage and possible “ick” factor of some of these objects as well. Not sure where to start? Safely free-walk the woods; you'll see much more once you've left a human path.

The items listed below can all be easily sought out within the not-to-deep and very-very-deep woods of New England and the greater northeast. Not all should be collected or even touched; all can serve as entry points into the mastery of naturalist skills in all seasons.

### *Lichen*

Found in abundance alongside healthy air, this fungus-bacteria hybrid is one of the only known living things on earth that can survive in outer space unassisted! Tiny tardigrades (moss pigs, water bears, etc.) have a symbiotic relationship with lichen, and have also survived in outer space, and lived eggs that lived to tell the tale. Lichen falls into three major categories: foliose (leafy/bushy), crustose (flat, crusty), and fruticose (in between).

- LOOK on tree bark, especially on the branches of fallen branches and trees.
- COLLECT only small, already-detached amounts and return to nature after you study it – you can always get more, and it doesn't store well.

## *Bark*

Found, well, on trees! Bark is tree skin, and is just as complex. Every tree has not only a bark pattern that is specific to its species, but one that is specific to the exact location in which it lives and the exact conditions that it has endured; bark is autobiographical. Depending on what kind of details you notice, bark can be a useful entry point for basic tree identification; it's the type of skill you'll need to be certain you're tapping sugar maples in March!

- LOOK all around you in the woods!
- COLLECT bark via sticks, fallen branches, and fallen trees. Label bark once you've identified it and start your own tree ID library.

## *Mushrooms*

While you'll not find an abundance of mushrooms in winter, there will be plenty of season-or-two-old shelf mushrooms to take note of. Troves of nose-like protuberances become evident in leafless clusters of deciduous forest, where they invade the trunks of dead or soon-to-die trees. Similarly, turkeytail mushrooms – a tiny shelf mushroom cousin – become much more prominent in the winter landscape. Generally some shade of light brown or tan, these mushrooms can actually be found in almost every shade from pink and purple to nearly-black velvet!

- LOOK in deciduous or mixed forests. Hardy shelf mushrooms favor downed trees but can also be found on standing trunks.
- COLLECT only if there are many (10+) and never take more than you need in order to study and share. Do not consume.

## *Tracks*

They're everywhere, and easiest to decipher after a fresh snow. Walk softly and slowly, and pay close attention to the ground. Think about what creatures eat or where they might be emerging from the snow after exiting their home; this is easiest done in a familiar landscape. Use a children's guide to learn the basics, no matter how old you are.

- LOOK where seeds or berries once grew for birds; underneath bushes for mice; between trees for squirrels and chipmunks; in a field or in woody undergrowth for rabbits; underneath apple trees for deer.
- COLLECT through photography; tracks are lousy souvenirs!

### *Scat*

Once the color of the ground no longer matches the color of what's left behind, what was once nobody's business is suddenly everybody's business. Scat is around if you know where to look, and it's okay to collect it for further study as long as you know what you're doing. It is easiest to find scat of mammals who leave it indiscriminately, like deer, mice, rabbits, and birds. Many other mammals are too particular to leave it in especially obvious spots.

- LOOK in the places you've found notorious scat leavers' tracks!
- COLLECT **without touching** only if you have proper materials. A ziploc bag is essential, and rubber gloves are helpful. Dry wrapped loosely in newspaper in a sheltered outdoor space until quite dry; store in closed container.

### *Meal Sites*

Animal compost piles are much easier to see when their contents are no longer left amongst a collection of leaf litter made from the exact same materials! Look under evergreen trees for cones stripped bare by squirrels and chipmunks, listen for the sound of woodpeckers digging for food; check underneath oak trees for shells left by deer, mice, and squirrels. Even if you can't identify who ate what, it's worth noticing what's been eaten.

- LOOK in places you've found other evidence of animals, especially underneath trees, around fallen logs, and on rocks that protrude from the snow.
- COLLECT as many leftovers as you can! It's rare that an animal will leave behind a large amount of necessary food, so feel free to gather a collection of not only the scraps (covered in identifiable bite marks!) but the actual food itself (similarly covered!).



Above: Shelf mushrooms in early winter found on deciduous tree trunks. Below, left: Deer tracks in slushy snow mark their path through the woods. Below, right: The chunky, striped bark characteristic of sugar maple trees.



## December Library to Shed Light

The collection of titles listed below can be used to spark, support, or continue studies related to the suggested entry points for learning the December landscape.

### *Young Children*

Tracks in the Snow by Wong Herbert Yee

How to be a Nature Detective by Millicent Ellis Selsam

Big Tracks, Little Tracks: Following Animal Prints by Millicent Selsam

Crinkleroot's Guide to Animal Tracking by Jim Arnosky

### *Middle Childhood*

Prize in the Snow by Bill Easterling and Mary Beth Owens

Take-Along Guide: Tracks, Scats, and Signs by Leslie Dendy

Take-Along Guide: Trees, Leaves, and Bark by Diane Burns

Who Pooped in the Northwoods: Scat and Tracks for Kids by Gary D. Robson

Katya's Book of Mushrooms by Katya Arnold

### *Older Children, Teens and Adults*

Bark by Michael Wojtech

Lichens of North America by Irwin Brodo, Sylvia Duran Sharnoff, and Stephen Sharnoff

Tracking & the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Sign by Paul Rezendes

Scats and Tracks of North America: A Field Guide to the Signs of Nearly 150 Wildlife Species by James

Halfpenny and Todd Telander