

By that time I was really tired and thought I could sleep through almost anything. Wrong! I don't think anyone could have slept through what happened next. First, there was a lot of growling, hissing, and barking. Then there was a scream that lasted for at least 30 seconds. We were all scared out of our wits! I decided right then that I was going to get to the bottom of this. As soon as it was daylight, I was going to find out who or what the night prowler had been.

Solving the Mystery

We woke at dawn and ate a light breakfast. Then I began looking for clues. The rain had left the ground muddy. Any animals that were around during the night should have left tracks. Sure enough, I found lots of tracks by the stream. Some looked like the handprints of tiny humans. Some were large—about 5 to 7 centimeters (2 to 3 in.) long, and others were smaller—only about 2 centimeters (1 in.) long. There were also pieces of crayfish near the stream.

I found animal tracks.



■ I showed the tracks to Mom and Dad and asked, “Could there be elves or fairies in these woods?” They laughed at the idea, but they did not know what animal might have made the humanlike tracks. Mom gave me a field guide that she had brought with her and suggested that I might find an answer in there. I looked through the guide, which had pictures of the tracks that each animal makes. I found what I was looking for—the tracks were definitely made by raccoons!

■ I was able to fit all of the pieces of the puzzle together. A mother raccoon and her babies had been catching crayfish in the stream. When we shone the flashlight on them, their eyes shone because they have a lining inside their eyes that reflects light. The chirping and chattering we heard was the mother warning her babies to escape to the safety of the trees.

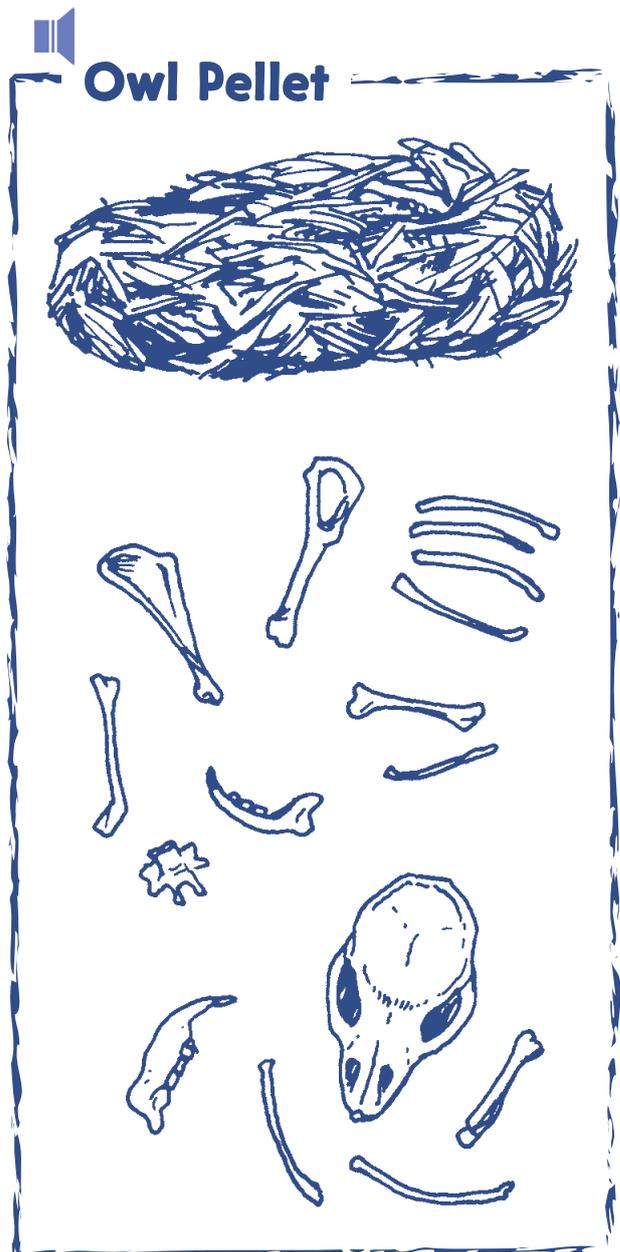
■ It seemed obvious, now that it was daylight, that the two shining eyes in the tree had probably belonged to an owl. From the information in the field guide, I figured out that it was a Great Horned Owl that we heard. They have a call that sounds like “whooo-whooo-whoooo.”

■ The Great Horned Owl rests in tree hollows during the day. I looked around the area and found a dead tree. At the base of the tree I found owl pellets. Owls swallow their food whole, but they can’t digest fur, feathers, and bones. These waste materials are pressed into neat bundles by the owl’s

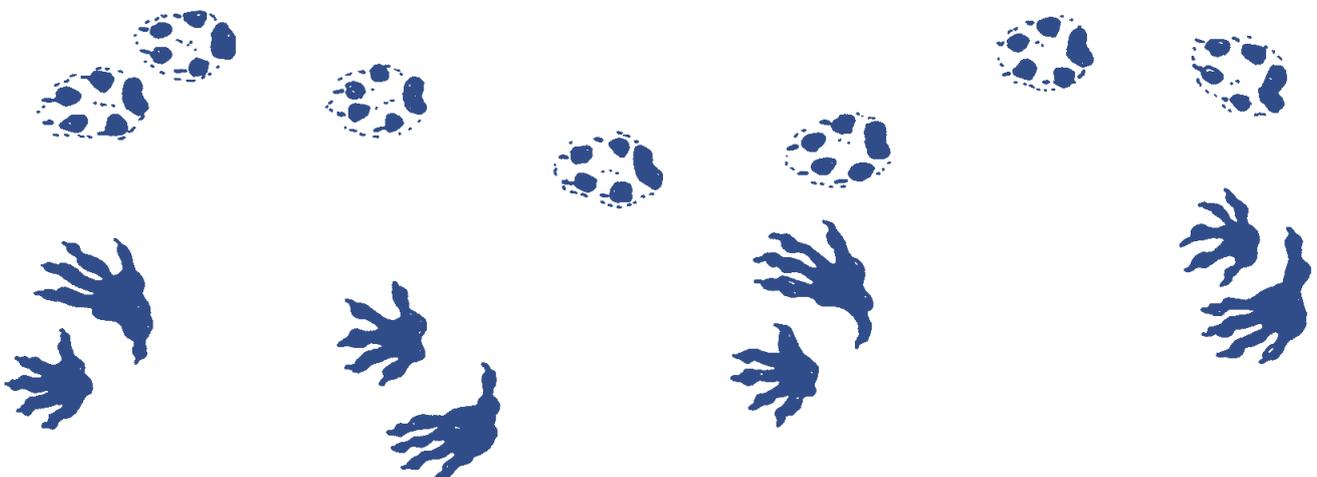
strong stomach muscles. Later the owl spits them out. If you take apart owl pellets, you can find out what the owl has been eating. Inside this pellet were plenty of bones—ribs, legs, vertebrae, and some tiny skulls.

Who Screamed?

I felt satisfied with my solution to this part of the mystery. But what had made the terrible scream during the night? I looked around the area where I thought the scream had come from and found the tracks of two different animals.



These are fox tracks and opossum tracks.



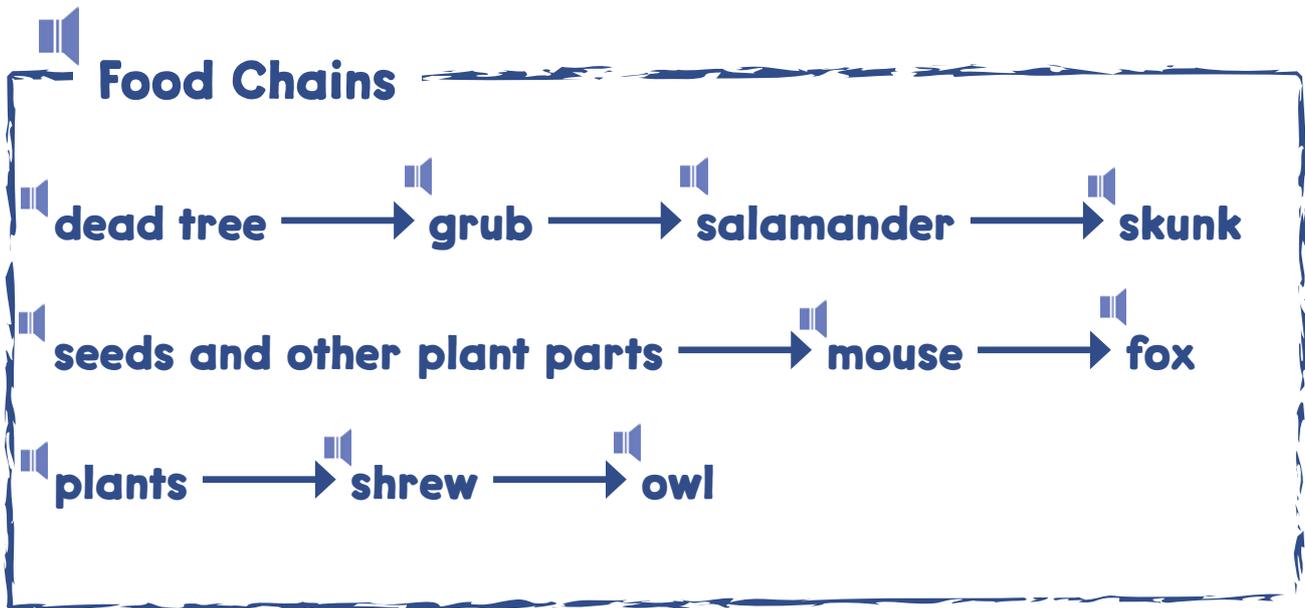
■ The field guide showed that they were the tracks of an opossum and a fox. Fox tracks are dainty and make almost a straight line. Opossum tracks are star-shaped because their toes are spread far apart.

■ We had heard an encounter between a fox and an opossum. The fox had probably tried to attack the opossum. Foxes usually eat mice, and they are also fond of berries, fruits, and nuts. However, they sometimes attack larger animals, such as opossums. Usually an opossum will roll over and play dead when attacked, but sometimes it fights back. From the growling and hissing we heard, this opossum must have decided to fight. An opossum has very sharp teeth, and the fox must have gotten more than it bargained for and screamed. I knew that foxes barked, but I read that when a fox is hurt, it will also scream.

■ I was beginning to realize that these woods, which seemed to be so empty at first, were actually the habitat of many creatures. Some are not easily visible because they are so well camouflaged. Others sense us before we sense them and stay very still, or hide so that they cannot be seen. Nocturnal animals hunt for food after dark. That's when the woods around our campsite came alive with noises.

■ I began to think about how the living things in the Smokies depend on one another to survive. I made some sketches in my notebook. A good detective always carries a notebook. I wanted to record all of the interactions

between animals that I had observed, so I decided to draw some food chains. I had learned in school that each food chain starts with a producer (a plant).

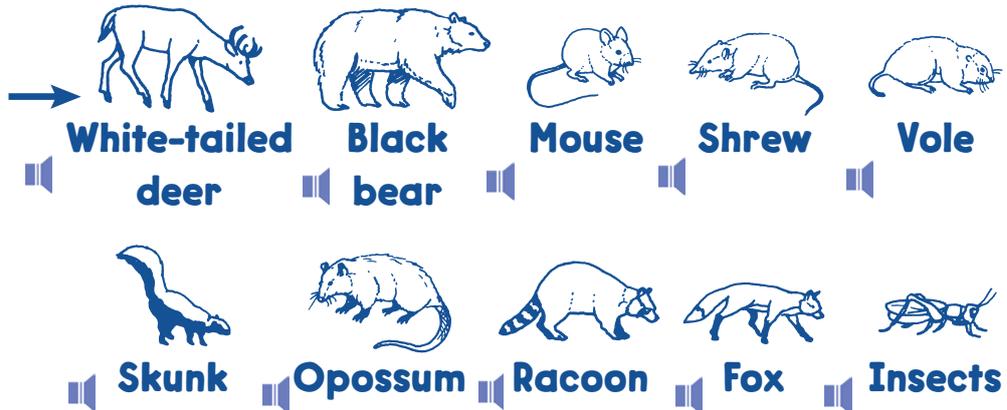


Of course, the real picture of how food energy moves through the Smoky Mountain community is more complicated than simple food chains. Most animals do not eat just one type of plant or one kind of animal. Food chains connect to form food webs. I drew a food web on the next page for the animals I observed in the Smokies.

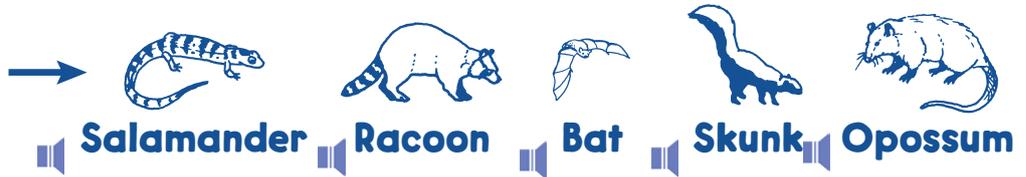
My trip to the Smokies let me see for myself the community of animals and plants that live in there. My adventure was certainly much livelier than just reading about it would have been! It also gave me a start in my new career—Sandra Brown, Nature Detective. Look me up if you ever need help in solving a nature mystery!

Food web for animals in the Smokies

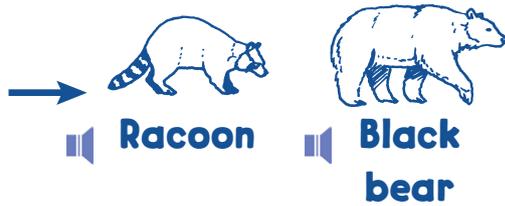
PLANT



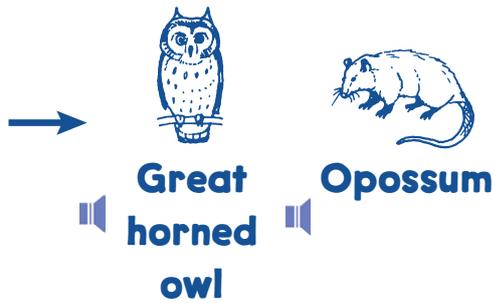
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