I ILLINOIS
Carl R. Woese Institute
for Genomic Biology

Critter Camouflage: Wildlife Cam II, aka Light and Shade

Overview:

This is a revisit of an earlier posted activity. We loved looking at these nature cam images so much that we're back for another round! The premise is the same, but these animals may be even tougher to spot, as they blend into nighttime darkness or daytime shadows.

Even when animals are not actively hiding from potential predators or prey, they can be tricky to spot. That makes it more difficult to learn about the diversity of animal behaviors and life histories. Projects to remotely observe animals can help us learn more about their behaviors in the absence of the influencing presence of human beings, but picking them out from their surroundings can sometimes be tricky. Can you find and identify the critters going about their days in images from this wildlife cam in Chicago?

These images were taken from the motion-triggered cameras of the Chicago Wildlife Watch. Please visit their website to learn more and to contribute to their citizen science effort to study urban wildlife: https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/zooniverse/chicago-wildlife-watch.

Learning Objectives:

- Practice using observations skills to pick out animals from their surrounding environments
- Consider how different methods of animal observation can yield insight into their behaviors

Background:

Squirrels, chipmunks, sparrows, and even deer are a common sight in urban and suburban environments. We so frequently share our outdoor spaces with these and other animals that we may not even consider what aspects of their daily lives may be hidden from us. Biologist who study animal behavior and evolution are very interested in these hidden lives of urban animals. How have they adapted their lifestyles to survive and even thrive in the presence of human communities? How large are their populations, and how are they changing over time? What are they doing when we aren't looking?

To help answer this questions, a number of research groups have set up nature cameras: cameras that are set up to take a photograph or record video when movement is detected within view. The camera is not noticeable to most animals, and can capture the activities of creatures that are active during twilight, nighttime, and early morning. Researchers can review images and videos later and find ways to quantify population levels and behaviors. The first step toward this is to identify the animal(s) in view in each image and observe what behaviors they might be engaged in.

Procedure:

Look closely at each image. Can you spot the animal? What kind of animal do you think it is? What are some different hypotheses for what it might be doing? Our best guesses for ID can be found at the end of this document.

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Here are our guesses for animal IDs:

1. Squirrel

2. Rabbit

3. Opossum

4. Squirrel

5. Squirrel

6. Deer

7. Robin

8. Squirrel

9. Robin

10. Raccoon

11. Melanistic gray squirrel

12. Deer

13. Rabbit

14. Two raccoons

15. Opossum

If you are interested in helping out with a citizen science effort and enjoyed this activity, please check out
https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/zooniverse/chicago-wildlife-watch

During/Follow-up Questions:

- Which animals were the easiest and the hardest to find? Why do you think that is?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to form hypotheses about what the animals might be doing? How might you test these hypotheses if you could design any experiment you wanted?