

ELF NOTES

Environmental Learning for the Future - Vermont Institute of Natural Science
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Tooth Tales

Look for telltale signs of wild animals' feeding activities.

Little piles of emptied nutshells or stripped pinecones are signs of squirrels. Slender branch tips and winter buds bitten off cleanly are the work of browsing rabbits. A more ragged cut higher off the ground and long narrow teeth scrapes in bark are signs of a deer.

The size of teeth marks on gnawed saplings will tell if it is evidence of rabbits, mice, or porcupines.

Bare wood around the trunk of a large tree is a porcupine's doing. Beavers are the only wild animals that can gnaw through and fell trees.

ADAPTATIONS TEETH AND SKULLS

A mammal's teeth and the shape of its skull relate closely to the kinds of food it eats. The teeth of plant-eating mammals (herbivores) are different from those of meat-eating mammals (carnivores). Humans and other mammals have different types of teeth arranged in their mouths to cut, tear, shred and grind the food they eat.

Incisors are teeth in the front of the mouth shaped for holding and cutting; *canines*, next to incisors, are used for tearing and shredding. *Molars*, in the back of the mouth, are used for grinding.

Arrangement of teeth, skull shape and eye position are so distinctive that they are clear keys to identification of specific mammals.

Mammals have a variety of food preferences, ranging from a bat's specific diet of flying insects, to a raccoon's willingness to eat just about anything.

ELF NEWS

