

Genre Play

Essential Questions

How is nature sometimes hidden? Where can you find nature in your everyday life?

THE Mystery OF Washington Park

by Jorge Almazan
illustrated by Soud

SETTING

An urban neighborhood in Center City, a mid-sized city in the Northwest. The neighborhood includes homes, businesses, schools, a library, and Washington Park, a large park with a wooded area, trails, a playground, and a skate park.

TIME

Spring vacation

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

MARIAH STEWART

A nine-year-old girl

LUCAS STEWART

An eleven-year-old boy and Mariah's brother

MATEO GOMEZ

An eleven-year-old boy

ELENA BLAKE

An eleven-year-old girl

MS. ROBINSON

Librarian

MR. STEWART

Lucas and Mariah's father



SCENE 1 City Sidewalk

NARRATOR: It is spring vacation in Center City. Lucas, Mateo, and Elena are on the way to the neighborhood skate park. Lucas's younger sister, Mariah, is skipping ahead of them, singing to herself.

MARIAH: (*Singing to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."*)
Skip, skip, skip your feet . . .
Quickly to the park . . .

MATEO: (*In a low voice*) Do we really need to have your little sister tagging along with us all day? The kid never stops talking, or singing, or making some kind of noise. It gets annoying.

LUCAS: (*Sighs*) Yes, Mateo, we DO have to keep her with us. Mom has to work today, and she says Mariah can't stay home by herself all day.

ELENA: Give Mariah a break, Mateo. For a little sister, she's not that bad.

MARIAH: (*Looks back*) Hey, you know I can hear you guys, right? Anyway, thanks, Elena. I think you're pretty okay too, at least for someone who likes to hang around with Lucas and Mateo.
(*Laughs*)

MATEO: Come on, guys, we're almost to the park. Let's get on our boards before it gets too crowded. I have a fantastic shortcut I want to show you.

LUCAS: Mariah, make sure you stay close to the skate park. I don't want to have to go searching the woods for you.

MARIAH: (*Mumbles*) At least there ARE woods near the stupid skate park. Someplace where I can find something interesting to look at.



SCENE 2 Washington Park

NARRATOR: While Lucas, Elena, and Mateo are skateboarding, Mariah heads off to a nearby stand of trees and shrubs. But soon...
(*MARIAH shrieks loudly; then she walks out of the woods, looking embarrassed.*)

LUCAS: (*Jumps off skateboard and heads for MARIAH with ELENA and MATEO close behind him.*) Mariah! What's wrong? What happened?

MARIAH: (*Smiles sheepishly*) Sorry, I didn't mean to scream like a huge baby. I was just startled because a snake slithered over my sneaker.

ELENA: Snakes, ugh. I am NOT a fan of snakes, or of any reptiles for that matter.

MARIAH: Oh, Elena, snakes are actually pretty fascinating. And this one was just a northwestern garter snake so it was perfectly harmless. As I said, I was just startled. I shouldn't have been because I know there are many species of snakes living in these woods.

LUCAS: And just how do you know all this, Smarty?

MARIAH: Duh. At home, we have a guidebook about plants and animals of the Northwest. If you looked at it sometime, you would know that the northwestern garter snake is dark on top with red or orange stripes. And that it lives in city parks and is perfectly harmless. Anyway, I am going back in the woods to see if I can spot it again.

LUCAS: (*Sighs*) Fine, but this time we're coming with you so you don't scare us half to death again.

NARRATOR: Lucas, Mateo, and Elena follow Mariah into the woods, walking single file.

SCENE 3 In the Woods

MARIAH: Darn, I don't see the snake, so it must have a den here. It probably went back in when I screamed.

MATEO: A den? Like a bear's cave?

MARIAH: Not exactly. It could be an old rabbit hole, or under a log, or anywhere else sheltered.

MATEO: Well, there aren't any snakes here now, so can we go back to skateboarding?

MARIAH: *(Squats down and points to the ground.)* Look at this! I have NEVER seen tracks like these before!

LUCAS: It was probably just a dog, Mariah. Maybe it was tracking the snake.

MARIAH: *(Impatiently)* No, these are NOT dog tracks. There is space between the toes in a dog's tracks so it looks like individual toes. These tracks look almost like little handprints.



MATEO: Maybe a dog was walking on its hands? *(Laughs)*

MARIAH: Funny, Mateo. But there is something else that tells me these are not dog tracks. Look at this. *(Points to the tracks again)*

ELENA: You mean that wiggly line? Maybe your snake slithered over these tracks after the mysterious animal was here.

MARIAH: No, it's not wide enough. I think a skinny tail made that mark.

LUCAS: Rats have skinny tails; maybe that's what made these tracks.

ELENA: Rats? Ugh. I hate rats!

MARIAH: I know that rats can be a problem, Elena, and can spread disease. But they are also kind of cool and interesting.

ELENA: And gross.

MARIAH: If it's a rat, it's probably a brown rat since that is the most common species here. Did you know that those rats aren't native to North America? They were stowaways on ships from Europe.

MATEO: Here she goes, off on a lecture about rats.

MARIAH: No, I won't waste your time with that—although you might want to know that rats will eat just about anything that we do. Anyway, now that I think about it, these tracks are too big to have been made by a rat.



- MATEO:** Maybe it was a huge, fierce, mutant rat! (*Growls*)
- LUCAS:** Cut it out, Mateo. I have to admit that I am getting kind of curious about what animal is hiding out here.
- ELENA:** Me, too. Mariah, you're our science expert. Do you think we can solve the mystery of the creature of Washington Park?
- MARIAH:** I am sure we can, and I know exactly where to go to start looking for more clues: the library.
- MATEO:** The library! It's spring break, guys, and I want to stay as far away from school-related stuff as possible. I'll have to spend enough time with books when we get back and have to start our science reports. And I don't even know what to write about yet.
- LUCAS:** Too bad, Mateo, because once Mariah decides to research something, she's not going to stop until she does. Besides, you are outnumbered since Elena and I want to solve this mystery, too.
- NARRATOR:** So the kids pick up their skateboards and head out of the park for the library a few blocks away.



SCENE 4 Neighborhood Library

MS. ROBINSON: Well, hello there, Mariah. I was wondering if I would see you this week or if you had gone away for spring break.

MARIAH: No, we stayed home. But we have a mystery to solve, and I figured you could help.

MS. ROBINSON: Hmm, a mystery, you say. What kind of a mystery?

LUCAS: Mariah found some distinctive animals tracks in the woods at the park.

ELENA: And we are all curious about what animal might have made them.

MATEO: *(Under his breath)* Well, maybe not all of us . . .

MS. ROBINSON: Okay, let's get you guys set up at a computer and see what you can find out. What clues do you have about the identity of this creature?

MARIAH: Well, it has clawed feet like a dog or cat, but there are almost no spaces between the toes. And they don't really look anything like a dog or cat's anyway, so it is definitely not in the canine or feline family.

MS. ROBINSON: Well, that means your mystery animal isn't a coyote.

MATEO: Coyote? In the city? You must be kidding.

MARIAH: No, she's not. Coyotes live just about everywhere, including in cities.

LUCAS: She's right about that. In fact, Dad saw one run across the road recently when he was driving home just as it was getting dark.

MS. ROBINSON: Yes, coyotes are one of most adaptable animals around. You may not see them much, but they are definitely living in the city. Still, from what you described, I think we can eliminate the possibility that it is a coyote. Mariah, how did you plan to start your research?

MARIAH: First I thought I would check out urban fauna.

MATEO: Urban what?

LUCAS: Come on, Mateo, you must remember something we learned in science. Fauna means wild animals that live in a certain environment, right, Mariah? *(MARIAH nods.)*



MATEO: I already know what kinds of wild animals live in the city: pigeons, rats, crows, bugs, and alley cats.

MARIAH: More than that, Mateo. The park is a whole ecosystem all by itself. I can guarantee that there are hundreds of different species of animals living there. Probably thousands if you count all the birds and insects. Maybe even millions!

ELENA: Can we narrow it down a bit, Mariah?

MARIAH: Okay, I'll search for animals of the Northwest since that is where we live.

MATEO: Great, so we can eliminate alligators, crocodiles, and kangaroos. Hey, what do you call a crocodile detective? An investigator! (*ALL roll eyes.*)

MS. ROBINSON: Well, I think Mariah has the right idea about where to start, so I'll leave you kids to it. First find out what kinds of animals live in urban areas. Decide which ones are possibilities and then check to see what their tracks look like. And do let me know when you solve your mystery.

MARIAH: Thanks! We will.



NARRATOR: While Mariah pulls up a website, the other kids lean over her shoulder to check it out.

LUCAS: Wow, you were right, Mariah. There are tons of wild animals that live in wooded areas in cities. Insects, snakes, turtles, chipmunks, porcupines, muskrats, coyotes, deer, raccoons, rats, moles, shrews, mice . . .

ELENA: What do you think, Mariah? Any candidates?

MARIAH: Well, we know a deer didn't make those tracks. But I am pretty sure it was a mammal, so let's decide which mammals are the most likely. We'll print out examples of the tracks made by those animals and try to match one set to our mystery animal.

NARRATOR: The kids spend the next hour looking at animal tracks and printing them out. Then they head home.



SCENE 5 The Woods in Washington Park

NARRATOR: The next day, the kids return to the wooded area of Washington Park. Mariah is carrying a print-out of tracks.

MARIAH: Okay, we have narrowed it down to raccoon, porcupine, opossum, or muskrat. Let's see if we can find fresh tracks and figure out which animal is living here.

MATEO: An opossum? Is that the same as a possum? I've heard of them.

MARIAH: *(Nods)* Yep.

NARRATOR: The kids spread out and search the ground for tracks.

LUCAS: Over here, guys! Here are some tracks.


MARIAH: *(Holds the print-out near some tracks on the ground.)*
I don't think so. These tracks are a little like the ones we saw yesterday, but they are smaller. And there is no sign of a long tail dragging along either. It was probably a squirrel.


MATEO: *(Crouches down and points to the ground.)*
I found something!

MARIAH: *(Joins MATEO)* Good eye, Mateo. Those look like the tracks we saw yesterday. And they are headed right to a hole under that big log. That must be our mystery animal's den.

ELENA: Let's check the pictures of tracks you brought, Mariah, and see if we can figure this out. *(ELENA and LUCAS crouch beside MATEO and MARIAH.)*

LUCAS: What do you think, Mariah?

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- MARIAH:** I think we've found our mystery animal! The opossum tracks look just like these ones. It has to be an opossum.
- MATEO:** Okay, the tracks match, but I still don't buy it. I have seen squirrels and rabbits and chipmunks around here, but I've never seen an opossum.
- MARIAH:** But we know they live in this part of the world. I haven't seen one either, but that is because they are nocturnal and hide out in their dens most of the day.
- LUCAS:** Okay, Mariah, be honest. Did you already figure out it was an opossum? I saw you studying the guidebook last night, and you had a big grin on your face. So you probably have a lot of facts to share, right?
- MARIAH:** *(Smiles)* Right—like the fact that the opossum is the only native marsupial that lives in North America.



MATEO: Mar- what?

ELENA: I know the answer to that question, Mateo. A marsupial is a mammal with a pouch, like a kangaroo.

MARIAH: Yes, and a marsupial's babies are really tiny and stay in the mother's pouch until they are big enough to come out. I found out that twenty newborn opossums can fit in a teaspoon!

MATEO: Great, we solved the mystery, but now I wish we could actually see an opossum.

LUCAS: Hmm . . . I wonder . . . Mariah, you said they are nocturnal, right?

MARIAH: (*Nods*) Yes, they come out when it starts to get dark to go hunting for food like nuts, berries, bugs, and even small snakes and birds. They are omnivorous—they eat just about anything!

LUCAS: Well, this time of year dusk is still pretty early. I bet our folks would let us stay at the park a little longer than usual and see if we can spot our opossum.

ELENA: We can bring flashlights so we don't get lost.

MATEO: And snacks so we don't get hungry. (*The other three KIDS laugh.*)

SCENE 6 In the Woods at Dusk

NARRATOR: At dusk, the kids settle down near the spot where they had seen the tracks. Mr. Stewart has joined them.

MARIAH: Now remember, we have to be quiet or the opossum will never come out of its den. (*ALL settle in for twenty minutes.*)

MR. STEWART: (*Quietly*) You know, a watched pot never boils.

MATEO: (*Whispers*) This is boring! How much longer are we going to sit here?

ELENA: Shhh! Something just moved! I think it's coming out!

NARRATOR: As the kids watch, a small snout pokes out from under the log. It is followed by a furry white face and a dark body. The kids stare at the animal in amazement until...

MATEO: (*Whispers*) Cool! I want to get closer. (*As MATEO gets to his feet, he trips over a log.*)

LUCAS: Mateo! You scared the opossum!



ELENA: Worse than that—I think you killed it! It fell over!
This is terrible!

MATEO: I didn't mean to! Honest! I just tripped!

MARIAH: (*Laughs*) Don't worry, guys. There's a fact I didn't tell you yet. The opossum has an unusual way to defend itself. If it becomes alarmed, it plays dead. Most predators don't want anything to do with dead animals, and they leave it alone.

MATEO: So that's what they mean when they say someone is "playing possum!"

ELENA: Are you sure it's okay? I would feel awful if it wasn't.

MARIAH: I'm sure. If we leave now, it will get up and start looking for its dinner.

MR. STEWART: We should do the same thing. I promised your mother we would be home before it was too dark.

ELENA: Anyway, we solved the mystery of the creature of Washington Park. And, thanks to Mariah, we learned a lot about opossums.

MATEO: And I know what the topic of my science report is going to be. Thanks for the idea, and for the research, Mariah. I guess Elena was right—as far as little sisters go, you ARE okay!



Essential Question

What kinds of lives do animals lead?

A Bird Came Down the Walk

by Emily Dickinson



A bird came down the walk:
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

And then he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
To let a beetle pass.

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all abroad,—
They looked like frightened beads, I thought;
He stirred his velvet head

Like one in danger; cautious,
I offered him a crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home

Than oars divide the ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or butterflies, off banks of noon
Leap, plashless, as they swim.

You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

Did You Know?

Opossum tails are prehensile, which means they can grasp objects. Opossums have been seen hanging by their tails from tree branches, and some will even use their tails to carry food while they walk.

Text Connections

1. Which character is Mariah's big brother? Why does Mariah have to stay with him?
2. Mariah finds a mysterious set of tracks. What does she say they look like? How does she know?
3. In "A Bird Came Down the Walk," the speaker is watching a bird. To what does the speaker compare the bird's eyes? How does this comparison help you picture the eyes?
4. After the children go to the library, they narrow the tracks down to those of four creatures. What are they? What animal actually made the tracks?
5. What are some nocturnal animals that live in your area? Which unique features would help you identify them?



Write

Write about signs that show an animal lives in or has traveled through an area. Other than tracks, what clues might you find?

Look Closer

Keys to Comprehension

1. What is the theme of the play? Use details from the text to support your answer.
2. How are Mariah and Mateo different at the beginning of the play? Do they have more in common at the end of the play? Use details from the text to support your answer.

Writer's Craft

3. How does the setting change throughout the play? How are the changes in setting established by changing scenes?
4. How does the narrator of the play keep the audience informed? What details in the drama would be missing if the narrator was removed? Is the narrator necessary?

Concept Development

5. How do the illustrations add important information to the play?



Read this Science Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

Text Feature

Italic text is used to emphasize an important word.

What's for Dinner?

You just read about a group of children identifying opossum tracks in the woods. Opossums play an interesting role in an ecosystem because they will eat almost anything. They have been known to eat fruits, vegetables, and nuts, but they will also hunt insects, worms, snakes, and other small animals. They are not only omnivorous, eating plants and animals, but also scavengers.

As scavengers, opossums are *not* picky. They eat from garbage cans and dumpsters. They even eat carrion, or dead animals, such as road kill. Scavenging helps opossums adapt to and thrive in their environment. They have an easier time finding food than creatures with more restricted diets.

An opossum's scavenging in garbage cans and dumpsters will often bring it near humans. It is here that it is more likely to be alarmed by you. When it feels threatened by humans or other animals, the opossum will flop to the ground, even extending its tongue to give the illusion that it is dead. Never fear! It is just waiting for the opportunity to make its escape. When it feels safe again, it will quickly animate and return to scavenging.

As human settlements expand, scavengers like opossums are granted more and more opportunities for scavenging from human food waste. From the opossum's perspective, this may seem great. However, this new link in the food web can be problematic. Opossums do not always play dead when confronted. When they are threatened, they will sometimes fight to defend themselves. People taking out the trash during the night may find themselves on the wrong end of an angry opossum.

Scavengers play a very important role in food webs. Opossums, vultures, and other scavengers clean up their ecosystems by eating rotting animals. It is a dirty job, but someone has to do it!



1. How does scavenging help some animals survive?
2. How do scavengers benefit an ecosystem?
3. After you have completed the Go Digital research, use it and the Science Connection to create a food web that illustrates the opossum's role in an ecosystem.



Go Digital

Search for examples of animals that eat opossums. What are their natural enemies in the wild?