

MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION



JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026

# Xplor



VULTURE  
CULTURE

WE'LL EAT ALMOST ANYTHING

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*Pull out this poster* and tape it to your wall to make your room look wild.

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Bad hair day: An opossum's ears, toes, and tail are practically hairless. This means cold winter weather can be rough on Missouri's only pouch-packing mammal. Opossums often lose toes and the tips of their ears and tail to frostbite.



# Xplor

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**Xplor with friends.**

**ON THE COVER**  
**Turkey Vulture**

# STRANGE BUT TRUE

Your guide to all the  
**UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,**  
**AND UNBELIEVABLE**  
stuff that goes on in nature

**RAINBOW TROUT**, like all fish, are cold-blooded. The colder it gets, the slower they move. During winter, trout still eat, but they don't chase food far. Instead, they rely on stream currents to bring insects and other snacks to them.



Most of time, snakes avoid each other's company. (And for good reason! Some **SNAKES** eat other snakes.) But during winter, dozens — sometimes hundreds — can be found peacefully sharing burrows, caves, and crevices.



Some **EASTERN CHIPMUNKS** hibernate during winter. Others stay active all winter long. Deep snow doesn't seem to bother the chubby-cheeked acorn fiends. Chipmunks can tunnel through 3 feet of snow to exit their underground burrows.

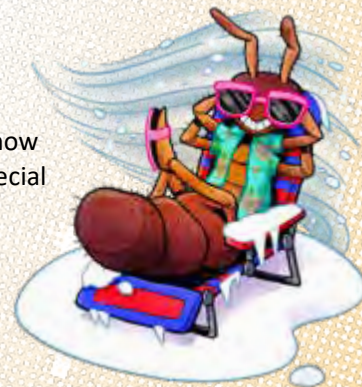


*Hoo's there?* To hide from hawks and fussy songbirds, an **EASTERN SCREECH-OWL** sits up straight, raises its ear tufts, and squints its eyes. In this position, the owl's camouflaged feathers make it look surprisingly like a branch.

Super snoozer: To conserve energy during winter hibernation, a **WOODCHUCK** takes a breath once every four minutes, and its heart beats only four or five times a minute.



**SNOW FLEAS** (which aren't fleas) are often seen dusting snow on sunny winter days. A snow flea's body contains special proteins that work like antifreeze to keep the pepper-flake-sized creature from freezing solid.



**RED-BREASTED MERGANSERS** can rocket across the sky at speeds over 80 miles per hour. With a strong tailwind, the shaggy-headed ducks may fly even faster. Biologists in an airplane once followed a merganser that was moving at 100 miles per hour!



# WHAT IS IT?

DON'T KNOW? Jump to Page 21 to find out.

- 1 My body is covered with hair,
- 2 From my paws to my big derriere.
- 3 In winter, I snooze without care.
- 4 In spring, I emerge from my lair.



## TWO TRUTHS, ONE LIE

Which fascinating fact is actually a fib?

Answer on Page 21



- 1 A stonefly's diet is made up partly of sand. This makes their outer shell extra hard, which is why they're called "stoneflies."
- 2 To get a girlfriend, a stonefly taps his belly on rocks and branches. If a female likes what she hears, she taps back.
- 3 Some stoneflies crawl out of icy streams in winter. Special chemicals in their bodies keep them from freezing.

# HOW TO

## MAKE A VISION BOARD

Want to spend more time in the sticks in 2026? Making a vision board is a great way to remind yourself to get outside.

### HERE'S WHAT YOU DO

If you're like us, sometimes it's hard to figure out what you want to do over the coming year. The next time you're cooped up inside on a cold, blustery day, take a peek through nature magazines like *Xplor*. As you leaf through the pages, ask yourself these questions:

- What kinds of critters would I love to see in real life?
- Which wild places do I want to explore?
- What outdoor activities have I always wanted to try?
- What can I do to help nature?

If you see a picture in the magazine that answers one of those questions, cut it out, glue it to a piece of poster board, and write down a few details to help you remember why the photo is important. When you're done, hang up the vision board in your room to remind yourself of all the fun stuff you plan to do.

# SPRING ☺

Listen for **spring peepers** ringing in spring

- ▶ Peepers begin calling in late February.
- ▶ Woods near ponds and marshes are a good place to find them.



Visit a **GLADE** to see a **collared lizard**

- Taum Sauk Mountain State Park
- Stegall Mountain at Peck Ranch Conservation Area
- Caney Mountain Conservation Area



Coax a family of **eastern bluebirds** to nest in my yard

Plans at [nabluebirdsociety.org](http://nabluebirdsociety.org)



# SUMMER

Make a hotel for the hard-working bees in my backyard

► The May/June 2024 issue of Xplor shows how. (Start saving scrap paper and bean cans.)



Visit a prairie when the **wildflowers** are at peak bloom

- Pawnee Prairie Natural Area
- Paint Brush Prairie Conservation Area
- Prairie State Park

► Go here to find even more prairies to explore: [short.mdc.mo.gov/oos](http://short.mdc.mo.gov/oos)

Pick enough **blackberries** to make a cobbler

Yummy recipe in the July/August 2024 Xplor



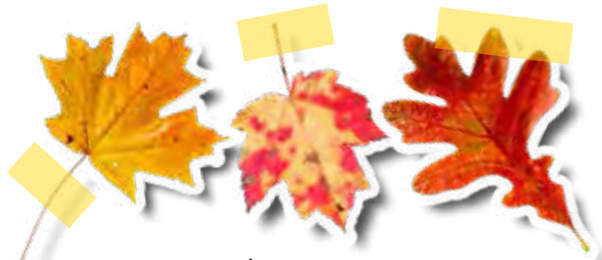
Take a summer **float trip** down a cool Ozark stream

- Niangua River \*\*\*
- Current River \*\*\*
- North Fork of the White \*\*\*\*\*
- Jacks Fork River \*\*\*\*\*
- Eleven Point River \*\*\*\*\*

# FALL



Watch a caterpillar turn into a **monarch butterfly**  
 !! Need to find some milkweed to find monarch caterpillars!



Hike a trail when the leaves are at peak color

► Go to [mdc.mo.gov/atlas](http://mdc.mo.gov/atlas) or [ozarktrail.com](http://ozarktrail.com)



See an American white pelican in the wild (Pelicans pass through Missouri in October and April.)

## Pelican Hotspots

- Loess Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge
- Eagle Bluffs Conservation Area
- Truman Lake



# VULTURE CULTURE

**T**he smell of death hangs in the humid air. A large black bird circles overhead, homing in on the scent. It soon spies the source, a dead opossum swollen in the sun. The bird touches down, hops over to the roadkill, and plunges its beak into the body. In no time, the vulture picks the carcass clean, leaving little for the buzzing flies. Although this seems gross, it's just part of the fascinating culture of vultures.



## Graceful Gliders

With scruffy dark feathers and bald, wrinkly heads, vultures won't win many birdie beauty contests. But let them take flight, and they just might win a talent show. Turkey vultures can soar for hours, holding their 6-foot wings in a shallow "V" as they ride currents of rising warm air called thermals.

Their cousins, black vultures, work harder to stay airborne, flapping their wings often in between short glides. Since thermals don't form until the sun heats the ground, vultures aren't early birds. They rarely leave their roosts before 9 a.m.



**TURKEY  
VULTURE**

**BLACK  
VULTURE**

## Follow the Leader

Turkey vultures have super sniffers that they use to find decaying animals to dine on. Black vultures, like most birds, can't smell squat. To find food, black vultures circle high in large flocks until they see a turkey vulture descend. Then, the black vultures quickly drop and pig pile onto the carcass, using their numbers to bully the turkey vulture off its dinner. When the feeding frenzy ends, the turkey vulture returns to polish off the scraps.



## A Face Only a Mother Could Love

In spring, vulture couples search for a hollow stump, quiet barn, or cave in which to raise a family. The pair doesn't bother building a nest. Instead, the female lays two creamy-white eggs on the bare ground. Both parents take turns sitting on the eggs until they hatch about a month later. The chicks are completely helpless at first but soon grow into bouncy balls of dingy-white fluff.



## Barf Bags

Forget baby food. Vultures feed their babies by throwing up chunks of partially digested meat. While their parents are away, vulture chicks fend for themselves. They hiss, stamp their feet, and rush at intruders to scare them away. If any critter creeps too close, the chicks vomit on them. The vile smell is enough to send would-be predators packing.





## Who's Up for a Sleepover?

Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of vultures spend the night roosting together in large trees. Vultures lack a voice box, so they can't sing or tweet. Instead, they chat with each other through hisses and grunts. Before taking flight the next morning, vultures warm up by spreading their long black wings to soak up sunshine. To cool down, they go to the bathroom on their legs. This habit has an added benefit: Acid in the chalky urine kills any germs clinging to the vulture's legs.

## Nature's Cleanup Crew

Most critters would get a terrible tummy ache — or even die — from eating rotten meat, but not vultures. Bacteria and other microscopic creatures live in a vulture's stomach and help fight off bad germs that the vulture might eat. Vultures also produce antibodies that protect them from food poisoning. By eating spoiled meat, vultures keep diseases from spreading. Without vultures, the world would be much sicker — and stinkier!



# PILEATED WOODPECKER

## HELMET HEAD

A thick, spongy skull absorbs the shock of a woodpecker's persistent pounding. The bird's brain is packed tightly inside so it doesn't slosh around.

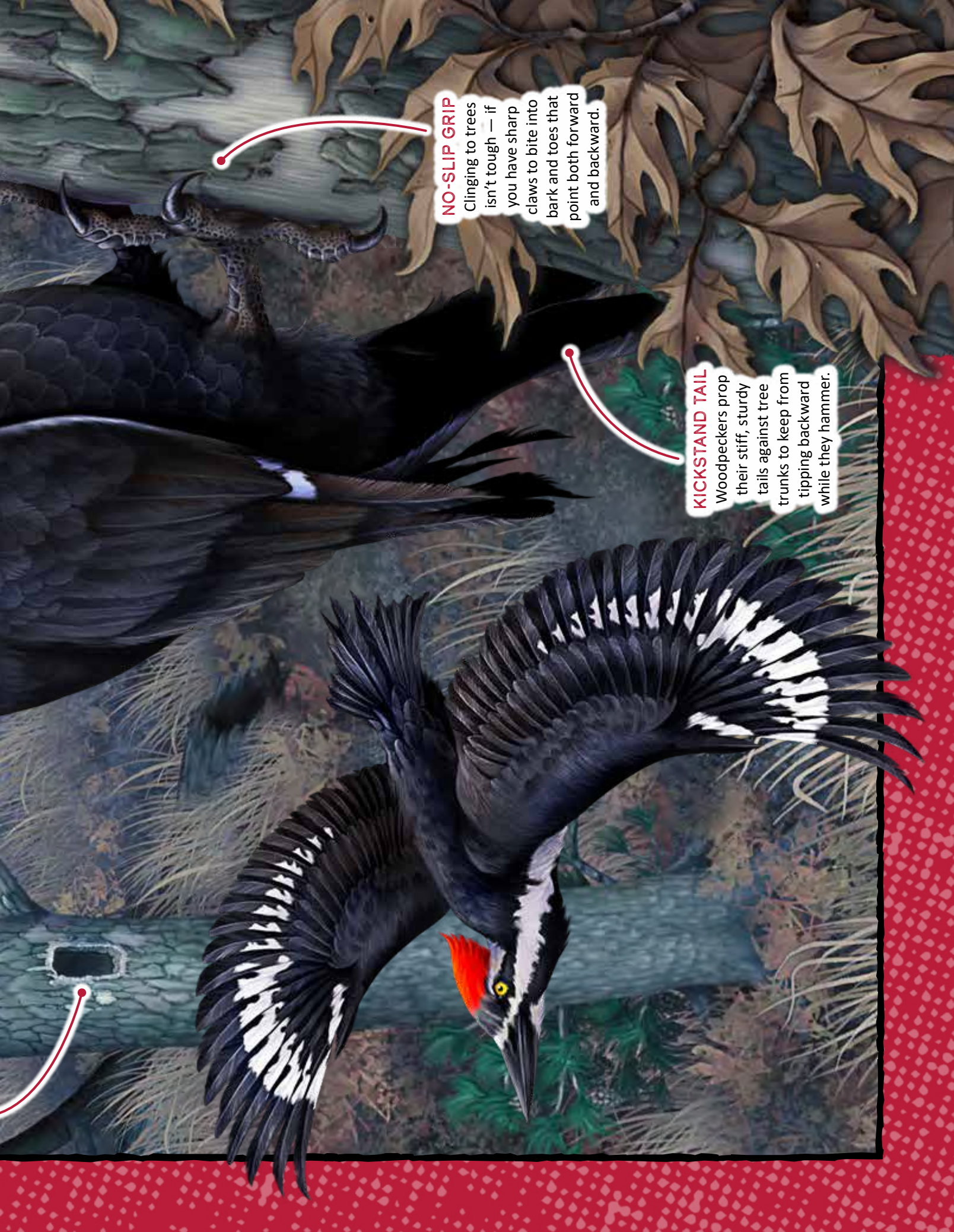
## TWEEZER TONGUE

A sharp, extra-long tongue covered in sticky spit lets a pileated woodpecker pluck insects out of hard-to-reach holes.

## CAVITY CREATURE

Pileated woodpeckers raise their babies in large holes they hammer into trees. When the woodpecker family moves out, other animals — like wood ducks and squirrels — move in.





**NO-SLIP GRIP**

Clinging to trees isn't tough — if you have sharp claws to bite into bark and toes that point both forward and backward.

**KICKSTAND TAIL**

Woodpeckers prop their stiff, sturdy tails against tree trunks to keep from tipping backward while they hammer.



ALL THE

# SKY ISA STAGE

UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT WITH A BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE



Hello, Darrling. Come in. I'm so glad you could join us for a little chat about my favorite subject: Me. As beloved star of stage and screen, winner of four Academy Awards, and a bird who's lived, shall we say, quite a remarkable life, we have a lot to talk about.



## ★ A Star is Hatched

Other birds may be more colorful. Some sing sweeter songs. But, my dear, none steal the scene like a chickadee. We're energetic. Dashing. Bold! Two kinds of chickadees grace Missouri's forests, backyards, and bird feeders. Black-capped, like *moi*, work in the north half of the state. Carolina chickadees work in the south.

The Actor's Union won't permit us to share the stage except in a narrow strip along the Missouri River.



# Birdie and the TRAMP

Like many actors, I fell in love with my leading lady. Though I command attention on-screen, when it comes to raising a family, female chickadees are the ones who give the commands. They choose the knothole to nest in. They line it with moss and fur. They incubate the eggs. I play a supporting role and deliver food to the scene-stealing diva.



## THE HILLS ARE ALIVE...

Forget “Do-Re-Mi,” darling. Chickadees have more range than that! In fact, we belt out at least 16 different calls and songs.

Maybe you’ve heard *fee-bee*, a catchy little number I sing in the spring to claim a patch of woods? Or perhaps the high *zeeee* I scream to warn other birds of approaching predators? It’s quite dramatic! I bet you recognize *chicka-dee-dee-dee*. I sing it often to gather my entourage.

## JURASSIC LARK

The caterpillars in this scene aren't acting. They're truly terrified I'm going to eat them. Birds, you may have heard, are living dinosaurs. And chickadees — especially when we're trying to feed a nest full of hungry babies — can be ravenous. In the summer, insects make up 90 percent of our diet. In winter, we add seeds to the menu.

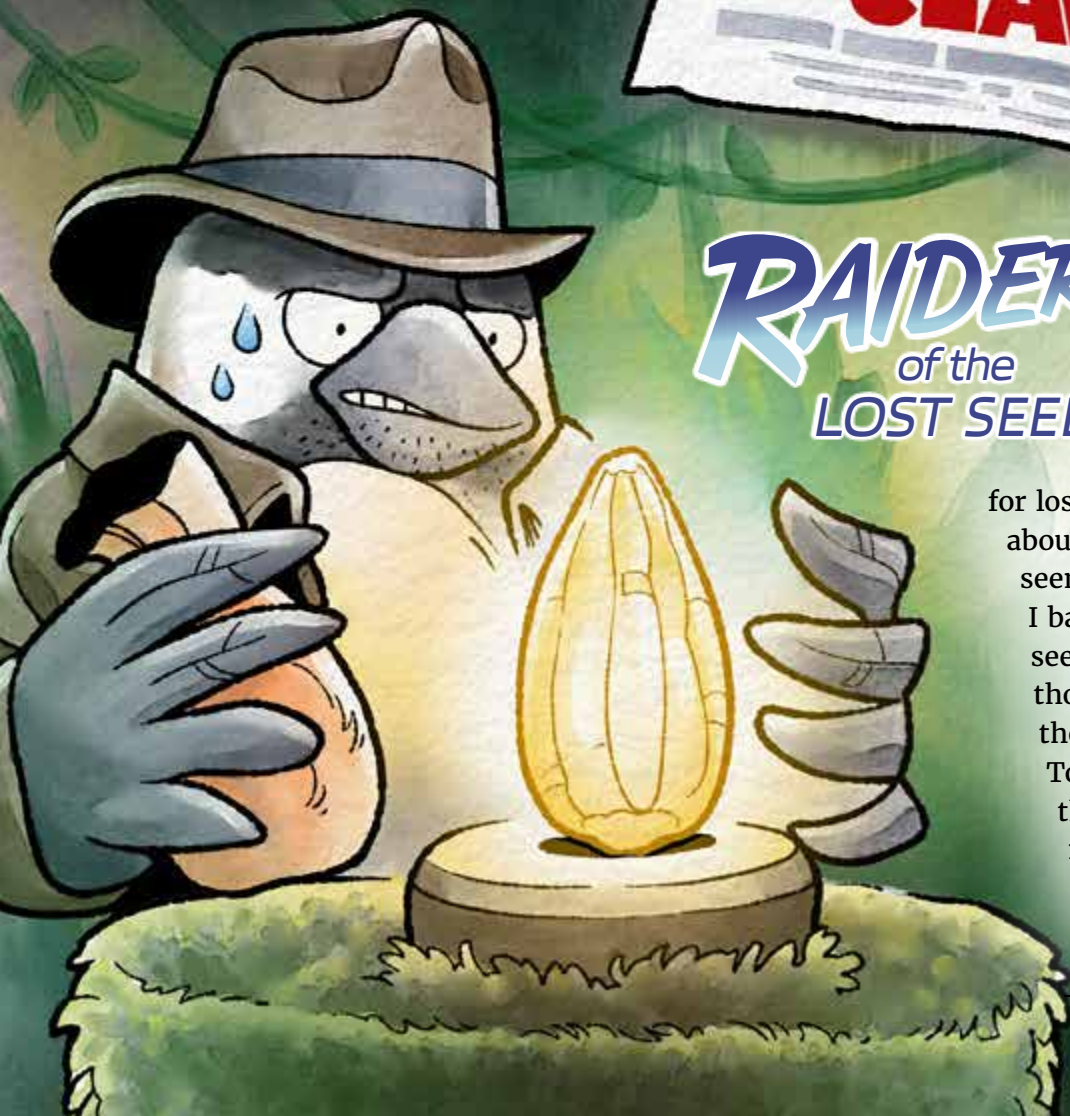


## FLOWN ALONE

My big break came as a child actor. Chickadees fledge — that is, leave the nest — when they're about 16 days old. They're fed by their parents for another three or four weeks. Then one day, the parents vanish, and the young find themselves alone in a wild and dangerous world.

## WE'RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER BRANCH...

Sometimes it seems as if danger lurks around every corner. Cats. Hawks. Paparazzi gawking at you through binoculars. (They're just dreadful, darling.) People often ask where I learned to act. Daily life, I say! For a tiny bird, every day feels like you're the victim in an action-packed blockbuster. Raccoons, squirrels, and snakes relish the chance to make an omelet out of chickadee eggs. And adult chickadees are preyed upon by cats, sharp-shinned hawks, and screech-owls.



## RAIDERS of the LOST SEED

In this scene, I played Chickadee Jones, a clever, adventure-loving archeologist who searches for lost treasures. The critics gushed about how lifelike I made the hero seem. The secret, my dear, is that I based him off of real life. You see, in the fall, chickadees gather thousands of seeds and stash them away for winter snacking. To help remember where we hid them, we make mental treasure maps. In fact, our brains actually grow bigger to help hold the extra information!



## PATTON

My portrayal of the tough and gruff World War II general, George S. Patton, earned me an Academy Award. Just like in the Army, chickadees have a rank, except we call it a pecking order. In most cases, older birds outrank younger birds. The pecking order is important — even for famous actors! Higher-ranked birds enjoy more food, defend larger territories, lay more eggs, and have better survival odds than lower-ranked birds. And if you want an A-list girlfriend, you better be at the top of the pecking order! It's just how Hollywood works, darling.





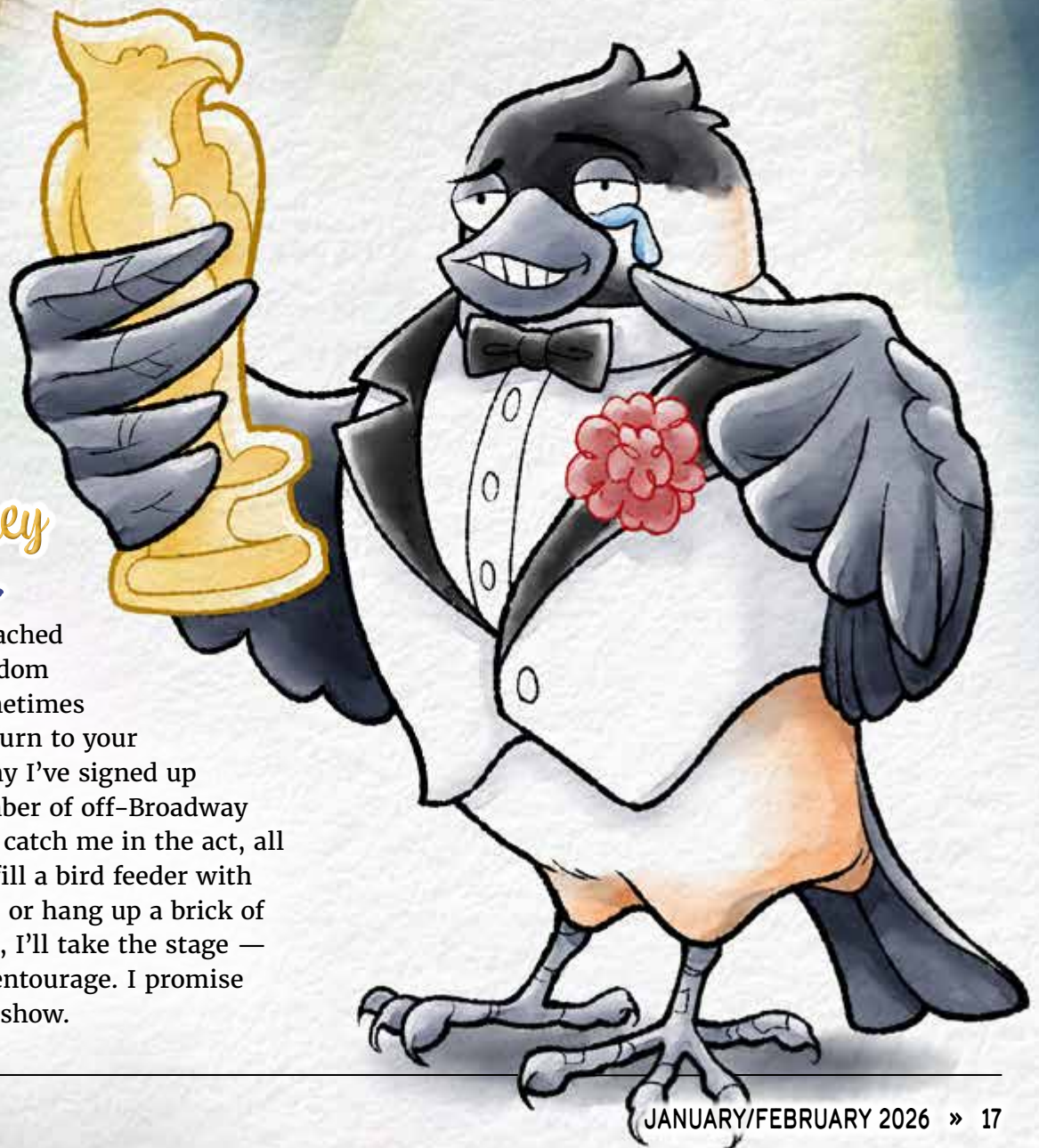
# Canary Potter

AND THE  
SORCERER'S  
SEED

I can't go anywhere in public these days without an entourage — my flock, if you will. Sometimes it seems as though I'm back shooting scenes at Hawkwarts, zipping around the Quidditch pitch, trying to catch the Golden Seed for my teammates. In winter, chickadees team up with titmice, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and kinglets to scour backyards and forests for food. Being together also makes it easier to spot danger. As lead actors, chickadees are the “glue” that holds the flock together, and other birds take their cues from us. We decide when the flock moves and where it goes.

## And The Osprey Goes To ...

When you've reached the level of stardom that I have, sometimes you yearn to return to your roots. That's why I've signed up to star in a number of off-Broadway productions. To catch me in the act, all you must do is fill a bird feeder with sunflower seeds or hang up a brick of suet. In no time, I'll take the stage — along with my entourage. I promise you'll enjoy the show.





## PREDATOR VS. PREY



In nature, everything has to eat. Some animals, called predators, catch and eat other animals to survive. The animals they catch are called prey.

“Predator vs. Prey” is played like the classic card game, “Memory.” In this game, instead of matching cards that look alike, you match the predator with its prey.

### PREDATORS and PREY

Most predators eat more than one thing. For this game, these predators eat ONLY the animal listed as their prey.

Coyote → Prairie vole

River otter → Crayfish

Little brown bat → Cecropia moth

Bobcat → Eastern cottontail

Great horned owl → Striped skunk

Peregrine falcon → Mourning dove

Pileated woodpecker → Carpenter ant

American robin → Earthworm

Summer tanager → Bumblebee

Western ratsnake → White-footed mouse

Black-and-yellow garden spider → Cricket

Collared lizard → Lichen grasshopper

American bullfrog → Dragonfly

Largemouth bass → Baby bluegill

Rainbow trout → Mayfly

### » Prepare to Play

Glue a piece of construction paper to the back of Page 19. (This way, the back of every card will look the same.) Once the glue dries, cut out the cards along the dotted lines. Keep them in a zip-top bag so you don't lose them.

### » Rules

- 1 This game works best with two to four players. Mix up all of the cards and then lay them in rows, face down.
- 2 Decide who goes first. The first player turns over any two cards. If one of the cards is a predator and the other is the prey it eats (listed to the right), that player gets to keep the two cards and go again.
- 3 If they aren't a predator and its prey, turn the cards back over. It's another player's turn. Hint: Watch which cards other players turn over. You may need them to match a predator with its prey.
- 4 The game ends when all the cards have been matched. The player with the most matches wins.





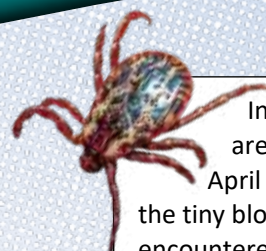
# GET OUT!

FUN THINGS TO DO  
AND GREAT PLACES  
TO DISCOVER NATURE



Witch-hazel  
blooms in  
winter!

The New Year is a great time to **START KEEPING A NATURE JOURNAL**. Every week — or every day if you can manage — write down something you notice about nature. Next year, you'll be able to look back and see when robins will arrive, when redbuds will bloom, and when box turtles will wake up from hibernation.



In Missouri, **TICKS** are most active from April through July, but the tiny bloodsuckers can be encountered any month of the year. During warm winters, it doesn't hurt to wear insect repellent when you hike through weedy, brushy areas.



Eastern fox  
squirrel

On warm, rainy nights in late February, head outside with a flashlight and search the shores of shallow, fish-free ponds. You might find dozens of **SPOTTED SALAMANDERS** marching toward the water, hoping to find a mate and lay eggs.



On sunny days around the first week of February, **NORTHERN CARDINALS BEGIN SINGING**. Both males and females sing, although females don't sing quite as much. Listen for their bright, cheerful *cheer, cheer, cheer* songs, announcing to the world that spring will be here soon.

January 21 is **NATIONAL SQUIRREL APPRECIATION DAY**. Here's how to show some love to your furry-tailed friends: Loop wire through an eye-screw, tie the wire around the branch of a tree, and twist an ear of dried corn onto the screw. Squirrels will appreciate the free meal, and you'll get to watch their corny high jinks.

Looking for more ways to have fun outside? Find out about Discover Nature programs in your area at [mdc.mo.gov/events](http://mdc.mo.gov/events).



WHAT IS IT?

— FROM PAGE 3 —



## AMERICAN BLACK BEAR

Despite their name, black bears aren't always black. Their long, shaggy fur can be brown, reddish-brown, or even blonde. Once thought to have vanished from Missouri, bear numbers have increased since the early 2000s, mostly in the southern half of the state. Bears sleep through winter in hollow trees, caves, and brush piles. While they're snoozing, they don't eat or drink. In March or April, they leave their winter dens and begin searching for food.

GO FIND IT!



Cut out this critter card and take it with you outside. How many of the things on the card can you find?

## GRAY FOX



ANDY-STOCK.ADOBE.COM



### TELL BY THE TAIL

A surefire way to tell a gray fox from a red fox is to look at its tail. The tip of a gray fox's tail is black, while a red fox's is white.

### TREE HUGGER

The gray fox is the only American member of the dog family that can climb trees. It shinnies up to rest and escape predators.

### RABBIT ROUSER

Eastern cottontails, rodents, and wild fruits (like persimmons) make up most of a gray fox's menu.

### WORKING THE NIGHT SHIFT

Gray foxes hunt at night. During the day, they rest on a branch high in a tree, in hollow logs, or in a brushy, secluded spot on the ground.

### FOX TALK

To call to their boyfriend or girlfriend, gray foxes give a raspy, yappy bark. They also growl, squeal, and chuckle.



ONE LIE

— FROM PAGE 3 — Lie: 1 (Stoneflies take their name from their habit of crawling on stones. They don't eat sand.)

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or update your address, visit  
[mdc.mo.gov/xplor](http://mdc.mo.gov/xplor).

FREE TO MISSOURI HOUSEHOLDS

# GO FIND IT!

Gray foxes are found in forests and woods throughout Missouri but are most common in the Ozarks. To learn more about these cute canines, trot over to [mdc.mo.gov/field-guide](http://mdc.mo.gov/field-guide).



GRAY FOX

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