AT THE SLOUGH

This is Wood Duck Slough, and true to its name, wood ducks are frequently seen here. If you have a scope, scan the far end of the slough. Watch for black-crowned night-herons, green-backed herons and egrets. In warm weather the pond turtles will be sunning themselves. Bullfrogs and smaller frogs are frequently seen and heard.

This is also a favorite area of the river otters. If you look closely at the ends of the logs sticking out of the water, you may see a pile of scat. This is a territorial otter marking. The tall bushy shrubtree in front of you with the small round balls on it is button bush. The ground here may show the cleft hoofprints of deer.

Now is a wise time to begin thinking about poison oak. It flourishes here in many forms — vines, shrubs and bushes. The clusters of white berries are a valuable food source for many birds and animals, but all parts of the plant can cause severe itching and swelling in humans. Its prevalence is a good reminder to stay on the trails.

Again, don’t forget to use all your senses. Keep watching the trail for dusty or muddy spots where you can find signs of the inhabitants that do not otherwise show themselves. Most mammals are fairly nocturnal, but when they are out they do leave telltale signs in the form of footprints, scat, and the remains of meals (a pile of feathers tells a harrowing story). Scraped bark hanging from trees and branches tells of a deer rubbing its new antlers. Look at the scat you may find on the trail. What does it tell you about the animal? Size tells you something. Is it composed mostly of fur? A coyote’s mouse meal remains? Lots of partially digested grapes or rose hips—could it be a raccoon passed here?

The tall square-stemmed plants on the sides of the trail are blue vervain. The flowering heads have tiny purple/blue flowers in season. The hanging vines that aren’t poison oak are mature California grape.