

Animal Camouflage

by Janet McDonnell

What Is Camouflage?

Have you ever played hide and seek outside? Sometimes it is hard to find a good place to hide! But what if you could paint yourself brown and green like the ground? Or put on a costume that made you look like a tree? Or lie down and cover yourself with leaves? All of these tricks would make you much harder to find.

Some animals use tricks to hide themselves. Using colors and patterns to hide is called camouflage. Camouflage makes things very hard to find—even when they are out in the open. Animals, fish, reptiles, and even people use camouflage for hiding. When something looks like the objects around it, it is much harder to see. That is what camouflage is all about!

Why do Animals Need Camouflage?

There are many reasons why animals hide. They often hide from their enemies. Some animals move around at night and sleep during the day. They need to stay hidden while they sleep. Other animals hide so that they can be better hunters. Camouflage helps them sneak up on their dinner.

How do Animals Use Camouflage?

Animals use camouflage in many different ways. Some use it to blend in with the objects around them. These objects are called surroundings. The polar bear's white coat blends in with its surroundings—the white snow. This color hides the bear when it is hunting for seals. The black bear's dark coat helps it hide in dark trees and bushes.

But what happens if an animal's surroundings are more than one color? Some animals have camouflage with more than one color, too! Some fish have dark backs and white bellies. When a hungry bird looks into the dark water, the fish's dark back is hard to see. But to an enemy deeper in the water, the fish's white belly blends in with the bright sky.

Why Do Some Animals Change Color?

Sometimes an animal's surroundings change. Then the animal has to change color, too! That is the only way it can stay hidden. Some animals change color to match the season. The snowshoe rabbit changes color very slowly in the spring and fall.

In the winter, the snowshoe rabbit's fur is white like the snow. As the snow melts in the spring, the rabbit grows patches of brown fur. It looks just like patches of ground and melting snow.

Then summer comes, and the ground is brown. The rabbit's fur grows brown to match. When fall comes, the rabbit starts to turn white again.

Do All Animals Use Colors to Hide?

Some animals use designs, or patterns, instead of changing colors.

Blending into a pattern is a good way to hide. When an animal's body looks like its surroundings, it is very hard to find.

A fawn, or baby deer, is too weak to run fast. But it can hide by lying still. The fawn's back is covered with dots. The dots look like spots of sunlight on the forest floor. If the fawn stays still, it is very hard to see.

Another animal that uses patterns to hide is the bittern. This bird lies in marshes with tall grass. The stripes on its feathers look just like shadows in the grass.

When the bittern is in danger, it makes itself even harder to find. It points its beak straight up and sways its body in the breeze. The bittern looks just like the blowing grass!

What is Mimicry?

Some animals have a shape or color that looks like something else. This type of camouflage is called mimicry. Animals that use mimicry are good pretenders.

The walkingstick is one insect that uses mimicry. Its long, thin, bumpy body looks just like a small branch!

Walkingstickgs can even change color with the seasons. In the spring, the tree's branches and leaves are green. The walkingstick is green, too. When the branches and leaves turn brown, the walkingstick turns brown to match.

Some animals use other kinds of mimicry to fool their enemies. Some moths have large spots on their rear wings. The spots look just like eyes!

When the moth is resting, its front wings cover the spots. But when the moth senses danger, it lifts its front wings and shows the spots. If an enemy is afraid of the big "eyes," it will leave the moth alone.

Some animals even make their own costumes for camouflage. The masked crab uses seaweed to make a costume.

First the crab uses its claws to tear the seaweed into pieces. Then it puts each piece in its mouth and chews it until it is soft. The crab sticks the pieces of seaweed to itself. Little hooks on its shell and legs hold the seaweed in place.

From a rabbit that changes color to a crab in a seaweed costume, there are many kinds of camouflage. But each kind of camouflage has the same important job—to help animals hide.

Now that you know some of their tricks, maybe you will see animals where you never saw them before. But you'll have to look very carefully, or you might be fooled!