

Central Park home to more wildlife than meets the eye

In 2003, an army of 350 scientists and volunteers swept out across Central Park. Their mission, called a BioBlitz, was to find as many species as possible over the course of 24 hours. At the end of the day, they had compiled a catalog of 836 species of plants and animals.

It's impressive that Central Park—an 843-acre island in an ocean of Manhattan concrete—can play host to so many species. But that's hardly a complete inventory of the biodiversity of the place. Along with its plants and animals, Central Park is home to invisible wildlife too.

In recent years, scientists have developed powerful new tools for measuring that diversity. Rather than looking at feathers or stripes, they look at DNA.

A team of researchers has now used this approach to carry out a sort of MicroBioBlitz in Central Park. They marched their way systematically through the park, and every fifty 50 yards or so, they stopped, bent down, and scooped up some dirt. All told, they gathered 596 scoops. Back at their lab, they threw out everything from those scoops except for the DNA. And then they plucked out just one particular stretch of that DNA. To be more precise, they plucked out different versions of that stretch, each carried by a different species.

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