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# LIVING

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# Diaries in the snow

To the great frustration of many observers of nature, mammals are usually shy, nocturnal, and difficult to see. In winter, however, they do leave behind a diary of their comings and goings, written by their feet. Although the art of identifying and interpreting tracks requires considerable practice, it will eventually allow the observer to enter the secret world of mammal activity. Being able to read tracks also adds a great deal of enjoyment to any winter outing.



## OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

The best conditions for tracking are fresh, damp, shallow snow or soft, damp mud or sand. As a beginner, you will have more success and less frustration if you limit your efforts to tracks laid down in these conditions. Tracks that are incomplete, faint or badly worn are best left for another day.

An excellent introductory lesson to tracking is to watch how tracks are laid down by your cat, dog or resident squirrels. When you understand how these common but representative animals move, the pattern of the tracks they leave behind makes a lot more sense. A dog, for example, provides an introduction to the tracks of the various members of the canine family.

The following are a few general tips for identifying tracks.

1. Get yourself a good guide book. *Animal Tracks of Ontario* by Ian Sheldon is a good beginner's guide. However, simply studying pictures of tracks serves no useful purpose unless it's accompanied by actual observations in the field.

2. Try to find a clear print. Take note of the average length and width, the number of toe prints visible (if any), and whether there are claw marks. You should also look for the presence of a heel mark.

3. Verify your measurements and observations by comparing them to other footprints in the same trail.

4. Try to determine which is the fore print and which is the hind.

5. Check to see if the prints are overlapping or if one is registering directly on top of the other.

6. Remember that the appearance of tracks changes depending on whether the animal is walking, trotting or running.

7. Determine the general pattern by following the tracks for whatever distance is necessary. The pattern is often the most important clue in identification, especially when different species have similar tracks. You may also discover whether the animal went up a tree, went down a burrow, stopped to eat, or stopped to get rid of body waste.

8. Habitat, geographical location and time of year also offer clues.

9. There is a saying that "the successful tracker rises with the sun." This is because animals are more active during the early hours of dawn, and the tracks they make are in the best condition early in the day. In addition, because the sun makes long shadows early in the day, the tracks stand out more clearly.

*Being able to read tracks adds enjoyment to any winter outing*



White-tailed deer. Deer have a split, heart-shaped track showing two toes. Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

10. Keep in mind the characteristics of the most common tracks seen. The following comments apply mostly to animals that are walking.

■ Canine tracks are rectangular or egg-shaped. The four toes and claws often show. However, dog tracks do not fall one upon the other and, compared to wild canines, a dog's trail pattern appears sloppy.

■ The dainty tracks of the red fox in freshly fallen snow are one of the most beautiful sights of winter. Foxes leave prints that fall nearly one behind the other in a straight line. Unlike a dog, which wanders and lopes along in a haphazard fashion, a fox moves straight ahead as though it knows exactly where it's going. The hind print falls directly on the fore print, so each mark actually represents two tracks — fore foot first, overprinted by the hind foot.

■ Coyotes, too, leave a fairly straight trail when walking. The hind foot falls directly on top of the front. The average distance between coyote tracks is about 20 inches (50 centimetres), whereas the stride of the red fox averages closer to 15 inches (38 centimetres).

■ Feline tracks are round, rather than rectangular. Four toes show but no claws.

fore prints. Unlike the rabbit, the fore prints are usually side by side, so the overall shape is more like a square or rectangle. Quite often, squirrel tracks can be traced from tree to tree. You may also find holes in the snow surrounded by seed shells. These are where seeds were hidden during the fall for winter use.

■ Mice, voles and shrews leave dainty tracks with a line between them caused by tail dragging.

■ The raccoon's print looks like a human hand print showing five distinct toes. The fore and hind prints usually appear side by side.

■ The skunk also has five toes on the fore and hind prints. Its tracks, however, are very small, measuring only about two inches (five centimetres) in length. The long nails of the fore feet are the key characteristic.

■ Otters often leave long, furrowed tracks in the snow. Even on a level surface, otters will alternate their loping run with slides. You often see these furrows on snow-covered ice between open sections of creeks in winter.

■ Deer have a split, heart-shaped track showing two toes. If the snow is deep enough, you can also see small spots behind each footprint that are left by the two small dew claws. Deer tracks are almost always in a straight line. A walking deer will leave prints from the fore and hind feet that almost overlap. When the animal is traveling fast, the prints are deeper, more spread out and appear in groups of four.

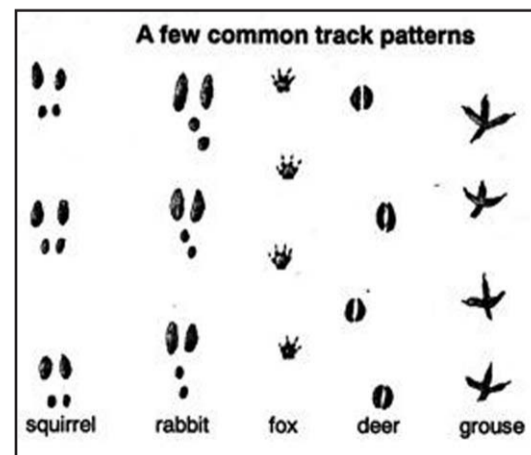
Bird tracks, too, are interesting. Look for tracks in fresh snow around feeders or in patches of weeds. They will usually show three forward toes. Paired tracks often belong to sparrows or juncos because they hop along. If the tracks are one after the other, such as in the case of the crow or ruffed grouse, the bird was walking. Grouse tracks are not unlike a clear line of crosses. The three large fore toes and small fourth hind toe are easy to make out. Similar but larger tracks probably belong to wild turkeys. If you're especially lucky, you may even see wing prints in the snow where a hawk or owl grabbed an unlucky mouse or vole.

Clues by which we can interpret animal stories are also left in other ways. Fruit trees stripped of bark near the ground show that rabbits or mice have been feeding.

Chips of wood at the base of a tree usually indicate woodpecker excavations. Pellets of fur and bone usually indicate the presence of owls. Body impressions in the snow indicate where deer have bedded-down for the day in a secluded, protected spot. Other important clues include hair, feathers and especially scat — a whole area of study in its own right.

As the American outdoor educator David Wescott writes, experienced readers of animal tracks and signs can eventually reach a point in which "every jaunt in the wild becomes an experience to rival the 'Arabian Nights,' as 1,001 remarkable stories unfold themselves before you."

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Sketch by Drew Monkman

The hind feet step in the tracks of the forefeet. They are only about an inch apart.

■ Rabbit and hare tracks show very large hind feet landing in front of the small fore feet. This is because the rabbit places his long hind feet in front of his fore feet in leap-frog fashion at every hop or bound. Together, the four prints form a triangular shape.

■ Like rabbits, squirrels also show the larger hind print falling slightly ahead of the