

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Whether it's snowy or muddy, there's nothing more fascinating than finding animal tracks and signs of wildlife on your nature walk. You can tell a lot about what's going on in nature by paying attention to these telltale marks left behind. As you head out on the trails, keep your eyes peeled for some of the following:

TRACKS AND FOOTPRINTS Animals leave their footprints, tail prints and wing impressions in the snow

NESTS With no leaves on the trees, many nests, both bird and insect, become much easier to find. Twiggy nests are from birds. Nests with leaves sticking out are from squirrels. Gray papery nests are from wasps.

BURROWS AND TUNNELS Many animals find safety and shelter by tunneling in the snow, grass or soil - look for a hole with loose soil, strewn leaves or other signs of recent activity

MIDDENS Conspicuous piles of eaten seed pods, pine cone bracts, nut shells and other signs that a feast occurred.

FUR OR FEATHERS Sometimes a predator leaves behind signs of a struggle with its prey. Other times, one might find fur caught on thorns or briars as an animal passes by.

SCAT The scientific word for "poop." Each animal's scat looks different and can be identified. Sometimes you can also tell what the animal has eaten. (Many creatures' scat turns purple in blueberry season!)

SHED SKINS In the warm weather you can find snake skins where they have been cast off.



When identifying tracks, there are a number of things you should ask yourself:

- 1. WHERE ARE YOU?** What habitat you are in can narrow down the possibilities. For instance, you aren't likely to see a river otter on a hilltop, but if you're near a pond or stream, it could be a distinct possibility.
- 2. WHAT IS THE TRACK PATTERN?** Four legged mammals are generally divided into four track pattern groups (see graphic), and you can greatly narrow down what animal it is by the pattern you see. Of course two legged animals make tracks too, like birds. Four legged non-mammals like frogs and turtles rarely leave discernable tracks behind.
- 3. WHAT DOES THE TRACK ITSELF LOOK LIKE?** Is it large or small? How many toes does it have? (see graphic) Does it leave claw marks? There are lots of good questions to ask yourself as you narrow it down. For instance, if the track is a "hopper" and the footprint size is only 1/2 inch, you probably aren't seeing a rabbit, but perhaps a mouse. Canines like fox, dog and coyote leave claw marks.
- 4. FINALLY, WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS?** Tracks degrade quickly. In mud they shrink up as the mud dries. In snow they expand and become larger as the snow sublimates. Many a hiker has mistakenly thought some old house cat prints were actually the larger wild bobcat, because they didn't take the conditions or location into account. It's best to hunt for tracks right after a fresh snow or rain storm.



If you would like to learn more about identifying animal tracks and signs, please join Audubon for an upcoming tracking program or winter hike.

TRACK PATTERNS

When you see a set of tracks, first look at the pattern - this is how the animal walks. Here are basic patterns to look for:



STRAIGHT WALKERS They walk in a straight line and their hind feet land in the print made by the front feet.



HOPPERS These creatures jump off with their hind feet, which touch down first, and the hind feet land ahead of the front feet.



BOUNDERS They push off with their front feet and land their hind feet in nearby spots.

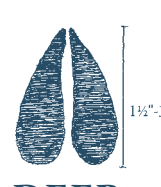


WADDLERS These animals are slow walkers whose hind feet don't land in the same spot as the front feet.

TRACK SHAPES

Each animal species has a unique foot shape, which helps to identify the track. Look at the overall shape. Does it leave claw marks? How many toes? Here are some tips:

TWO TOES: deer, moose



DEER

FOUR TOES on both the front and back feet with claw marks: dogs, coyotes, fox



FOX

FOUR TOES on both the front and back without claw marks: house cats, bobcats



RACCOON

FOUR TOES on the front and five on the back: rodent family: mice, chipmunks, squirrels, woodchucks, muskrats, porcupine.



FIVE TOES on both front and back feet: raccoon, skunk, otter, mink and other members of the weasel family.



COYOTE



DEER



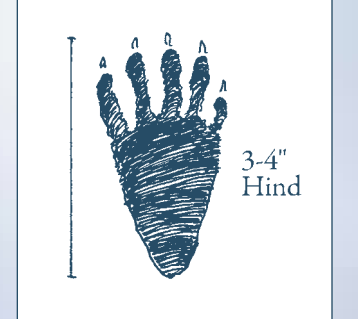
FOX



CHIPMUNK



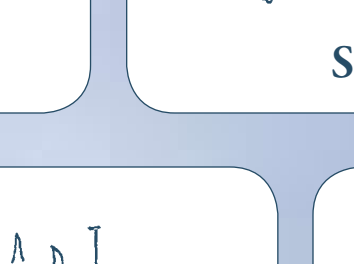
RACCOON



SKUNK



SQUIRREL



RABBIT



SQUIRREL



SQUIRREL



RABBIT



RABBIT