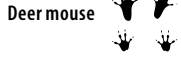


Opossum

Winter Tracking

by Kim Compton, Education Program Coordinator



Deer mouse



Raccoon



Skunk



Grey squirrel



Red fox



White-tailed deer

Despite grey skies and colder weather, winter walks in our local natural areas can be quite rewarding. You just have to know what you are looking for!

Although insects are dormant or have died, many birds have migrated, and cold-blooded critters like snakes, frogs, and turtles are all hiding away, the good news for wildlife watchers is that most mammals in our area are active all winter long.

As you approach the soft and quiet landscape of freshly fallen snow, you may be lulled into thinking that the animals had a peaceful night. But once you start looking, you will see that snow does not stop the circle of life. Look closely and you may just discover a world of animal activity. If you are not lucky enough to spot the animals themselves, you should find signs of their presence, especially the day after a night time snow fall.

Not all snow is good for tracking however. If the snow is too crusty, you won't see tracks; if the wind is blowing and the snow is drifting, all the tracks may be covered before you get to them. The best tracking snow is slightly moist and just a few inches deep. Pack a snack, some water, and a tracking field guide and you are ready for your adventure.

Use your observation skills

You may be able to identify an animal by a single, well-defined track. The easiest way to learn and remember different animal tracks is to count the toes and notice the claws (or the absence of claws). Members of the dog family, which includes dogs, coyotes and foxes, have four toes in front and four in back with their claws usually visible. Cats also have four toes on both front and back paws, but they rarely have claws showing since they can retract them. Rodents like squirrels, chipmunks, mice and muskrats have four toes on the front feet but five toes on the back. Raccoons, opossums and skunks have five toes on both front and back feet. White tail deer have two, toed hooves, while rabbits have such

furry feet, you can rarely count out individual toes. That is when the shape of the foot comes in handy. A rabbit's back feet are two to four times longer than their front feet, indicating what good leapers they are.

Pacers, bounders, and gallopers

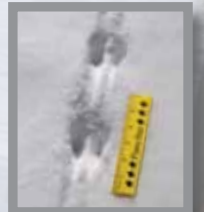
Another thing to observe is the pattern that a whole group of tracks follows. Some animals are diagonal walkers, some are pacers, some are bounders and others are gallopers. Diagonal walkers move just how you would crawl on your hands and knees—as the right rear foot (knee) comes forward so does the left front foot (hand) and then as the left rear foot (knee) comes forward so does the right front foot (hand). This tends to make a fairly straight line. Dogs, cats, and hoofed animals are all diagonal walkers.

Pacers move one whole side of their body at a time. So the front right and rear right feet move forward together, and then the front left and rear left move forward. This makes the animal a little wobbly and they appear to lumber along. It can also lead to wandering paths rather than straight lines. Raccoons, skunks, opossums, badgers and muskrats are all pacers. Bounders jump with both front feet first and then both their back feet follow behind them. Most weasels are bounders. You can tell their tracks indicated by a series of hops. Gallopers are similar but they push off with their back feet and while most species' front feet do hit the ground first, the back feet land ahead of them. Gallopers include rabbits and most rodents.

Of course, not all animals walk all the time. These gait patterns do change as an animal speeds up, especially if chasing another animal or running away from something. But learning the walking gaits is a good start.

It is a good idea to bring along a ruler to measure the size of the tracks. If you take a picture, be sure to include it or some other object for size reference.

Right: Squirrel tracks.



Check these out:
 Winter Scavenger Hunt, p. 18
 Winter Tracks, p. 19
 Squirreling Around in Winter, p. 20
 C.S.I.: Critter Scene Investigation, p. 20



Snow Sleuth

Get outside and explore this winter!

With each snowfall you get the chance to be a nature detective hiking through the snow, searching for clues to the many mysteries of our local animals' daily lives. To get started, try the activities on this page. Then head outside and solve your own nature mysteries this winter.

Match Up

When animals walk through the snow their foot leaves behind a mark that is called a "track". Each animal has a unique track. Once you begin learning the tracks of our local animals you will be on your way to becoming a nature detective this winter. Test your knowledge by matching the tracks to the right with the correct animal.

Answers: Great Horned Owl-C, Coyote-A, White tail deer-B



A



Great horned owl



B



Coyote



C



White tail deer

Field Sketch

Find an animal track outside that you have never seen before. Make a sketch of it below. Then look it up in a tracking field guide to identify what animal is living in the area.

Walk Like an Animal



Take a look at the Seasonal Sightings article, and then try to walk like an animal in the four different ways that are described.

TRY THIS!

After a fresh snowfall ask your parents to play "winter tracker" hide and go seek. Close your eyes as they hide somewhere outside in your yard. Follow their tracks to find out where they are. Too easy? Have your parents make it more challenging by backtracking and crisscrossing their tracks. You could even ask them to bury surprises or clues under the snow along the way.

READING CORNER

Footprints in the Snow
by Cynthia Benjamin

Tracks, Scats, and Signs
by Leslie Dendy

In the Snow: Who's Been Here? by Lindsay Barrett