


NATURE'S NEWS

From: Four Winds Nature Institute - www.FourWindsInstitute.org

A Newsletter for Parents, Teachers, and Students participating in Four Winds Natural Science Workshops

Topic of the Month: Animal Tracks



Tracks and traces can provide a glimpse into the lives of wild animals whose activities are otherwise hidden from us. Each kind of animal leaves a particular pattern of tracks in snow or mud that reflects the animal's size, shape, and the way the animal moves.


The location of a track, how deeply embedded it is, and the size and pattern of prints are clues to the identity of an animal.

Track patterns are grouped according to the way animals move: hopping, bounding, waddling, and walking or trotting. Measurements of stride (length) and straddle (width) can help distinguish between animals that leave similar track patterns.

Other signs of animal presence are scat, browse or chew marks, and den or nesting sites. Noticing these traces and following tracks can reveal an unseen animal's identity and tell of its activities and encounters with other animals.

TRACK DETECTIVE

Put on your boots and go for a walk in the snow or where there's soft dirt. Look at your own tracks, then look around for tracks made by other animals that are active in the area. Follow any tracks you come across, and look for clues that help to piece together information about the animal's activities. Ask these questions: Is the animal running or walking? Are there signs that tell if it is hunting or looking for food or water? Are the tracks on a path to or from a den? Can you guess the height or size of the animal by the places it goes?



Shadows make a difference in the way a track appears. The best time to go tracking is during the morning or late afternoon when shadows are longer.

You can improve your chances of following an obscured trail by using a tracking stick: a three-foot long stick with a rubber band wrapped around the end. Record the distance between two defined tracks by marking the length on your stick with the rubber band. Hold the stick parallel to the ground and line the rubber band up with the last track found. You can then move the end of the stick in an arc to mark the area where the next track should be found.

NEWS FROM SCHOOL

~ Did you know that here in Bolton we have our own tracking group called Nashaway Trackers, sponsored by the Bolton Conservation Trust? To learn more about animal tracking in Bolton, check out their website at:

www.boltonconservationtrust.org

~ Follow the link to Nashaway Trackers
Another fun website for tracking is:
www.scat-chat.com



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CLUES THAT TELL A TALE

To discover animal tracks in the snow or to come across footprints along the muddy edge of a pond is almost as exciting as seeing the creatures that made them. In fact, it may be more so, because unless you are lucky, or very well concealed, an animal will flee at the first hint of your presence. Tracks, on the other hand, remain waiting to be examined, measured, and followed. Infrequent glimpses of an animal tell you little about its habits and behavior, but the tracks and traces it leaves behind can give you a wonderful window into its life.

The immediate impulse upon finding a track is to ask what made it. There are many questions to pose that can help to identify the animal. One of the first questions has to do with habitat - where is the track? Is it near a pond? a stream? in the middle of a field? deep in the woods? The answer eliminates some track-maker possibilities. You would not expect to find a beaver track in the center of a field any more than a rabbit track in the middle of an iced-over lake.

Additional questions go beyond a consideration of habitat. How big and how deeply embedded is the print? Sometimes, in deep snow especially, it is unclear whether a print was made by a single foot, or by all four feet landing together. At this point, it is necessary to decide whether you are looking at one large footprint, like that of a dog, or a cluster of smaller footprints, like those of a squirrel. Once the relative size of the footprints is determined, one can guess the approximate size of their owner.

If the prints are clear, individual tracks can help solve the mystery of who made them. They rarely are though, because melting, freezing, rain, snow, and wind tend to blur distinct features. Sometimes the prints are obliterated by excited trackers; remind children to step carefully. Details to notice that will help identify the print include shape, length, width, number of toes, presence

or absence of toenail marks, and even the shape and number of pads.

Just as habitat and details of the footprint provide us with information about the animal, so too does the pattern of the trail. For many trackers, the design or pattern made by a series of footprints is the single most important clue. Most animals typically move in one of four distinct ways: walking, trotting, galloping, bounding, or waddling.

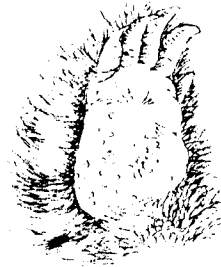
In the walking/trotting pattern, the animal alternates right and left feet, placing the hind feet in the prints made by the front feet. The result is a straight or nearly straight line of single prints. Members of the dog, cat, and deer families typically walk in this fashion. Gallopers such as mice, squirrels, and rabbits push off with their front feet and then swing their two back feet around so that they land in front and a little outside of the prints made by the smaller front feet, creating a cluster of prints. Stocky, short-legged animals like raccoons and porcupines waddle from side to side, creating an alternating big little pattern as they place their large hind feet next to

their smaller front footprints. The bounding pattern is typical of animals like the weasel, mink, and otter. These long-bodied animals land with their front feet planted nearly side by side, and then leap forward so that the two back feet fall into the prints just vacated by the front feet.

WADDLER (PORCUPINE)

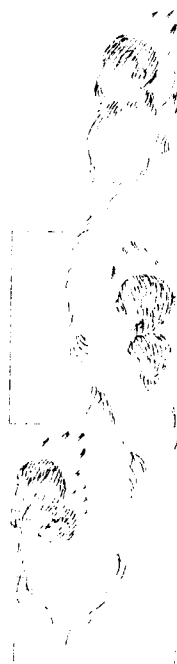


front foot



hind foot

6"-10" stride
2"



5"-9" straddle

Once you have determined the pattern, it's time to take measurements. This can help you to distinguish among animals that create similar patterns. The distance between footprints (as in the walkers) or between sets of footprints (as in the gallopers) is called the **stride**. The width of the track from the outer edge of one print to the outer edge of the next print or across the set of prints is called the **straddle**, or trail width. The size of animals of the same species can vary, as can their speed of movement, and both of these can affect the size of their leaps. But if you consider all the clues available – the habitat, the pattern, the stride and straddle, and the print size – you will have a better chance of figuring out what made the track. Of course, a good field guide is indispensable.

Identifying the tracks gives great satisfaction, but following them reveals a chapter in the animal's life otherwise closed to most of us. Knowledge about any animal increases with observations about where it's been, what it's been doing, and where it's going. Does the path follow a fairly straight route toward some seen or unseen destination, and are the tracks evenly spaced? If so, the animal was probably neither pursuing nor being pursued. Does the animal go under low branches, around them, or step over them? (A hint as to its height.) Do the tracks end at a tree or at a hole?

Animals move about for three main reasons. They are probably looking for food, for shelter, or for mates. Nibbled branches, cone scales, bits of fur or feathers,

and blood are traces left by very different animals. Deer or rabbits nibble branches; squirrels peel off cone scales to get at the seeds; and **predators**, like foxes or hawks, account for remnants of hair or feathers. Holes in the snow or well-trodden paths leading to hollow trees or evergreen groves can indicate a shelter or home. Porcupines and deer reuse paths to and from their sheltered spots. Ruffed grouse will dive into soft snow on cold nights to take advantage of the snow's insulation. In the spring, tracks of animals that usually appear alone, like fox tracks, are often paired. Such signs inform us of the habits and activities of the animals who left them.

Tracking may leave its followers with more questions asked than answers found, but, without interfering in their lives, there is no better way to learn about the secretive world of wild creatures.

Suggested References:

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- Headstrom, Richard. *Whose Track Is It?* New York: Ives Washburn, 1971.
- Murie, Olaus J. *Field Guide to Animal Tracks*. Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1954.
- Rezendes, Paul. *Tracking and the Art of Seeing*. 2nd edition. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.
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TRACK PATTERN DIAGRAM

Galloping

Back feet land ahead of front feet tracks; stride lengthens as speed increases.



Bounding

With long, slender bodies moving in an undulating way, bounders' back feet land in front feet tracks.



Waddling

Clearly not designed for speed, waddlers amble along on short legs.



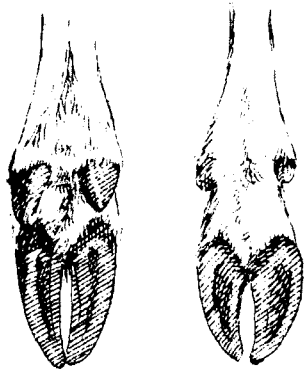
Walking/Trotting

Walking leaves an almost straight path, which changes with increasing speed.

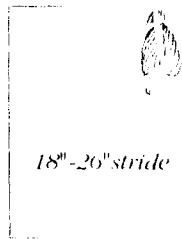


Note: Real track patterns vary a lot!

WALKER (WHITE-TAILED DEER)



front foot *hind foot*



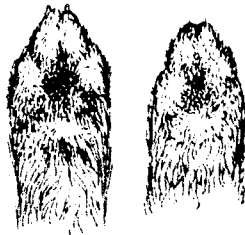
18"-26" stride



5"-9 1/2" straddle



GALLOPER (COTTONTAIL RABBIT)



front foot *hind foot*



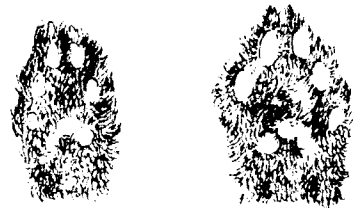
8"-22" stride



4"-5" straddle



BOUNDER (FISHER)



front foot *hind foot*



21"-50" stride



3 1/2"-5 1/4" straddle



FOCUS: Tracks and traces can provide a glimpse into the lives of animals whose actions are otherwise hidden from us.

OPENING QUESTION: *What can we learn about animals from their tracks?*

PUPPET SHOW

Objective: To compare some different animal track patterns.

Perform, or have the children perform, the puppet show. Afterward, review the animals in the puppet show, how they move, and what their track patterns look like.

FOLLOW THE FOOTPRINTS

Objective: To learn how track patterns can help us identify the animals that made them.

Using a track pattern diagram, discuss the four main types of patterns and which groups of animals make them. Tape oval pieces of cardboard to the floor in each of the four track patterns (adjusting the scale to the size of the children). Then have the children try to follow each set of footprints on hands and feet. (It's not easy!) Discuss how each animal's shape and way of moving relate to the track pattern it leaves. Explain how to measure stride and straddle, and show how these give clues about an animal's size and shape.

WINDOW SHADE STORY

Objective: To practice interpreting tracks to discover the story they tell.

Ahead of time, copy or illustrate a "tracks and traces" story on an old window shade. Gradually unroll the window shade to show the picture story in stages and have the children figure out what happened. Discuss how the location of the tracks, as well as the tracks themselves, give clues about the tracks' makers.

Story: A fox came out of the woods, trotted to a hen house, and grabbed a chicken. Just then, someone let the dog out of the house. The dog chased the fox, and the fox ran off, dropping the hen. The hen hurried back to the hen house. The dog walked along until it encountered a skunk, which turned and sprayed the dog. The dog ran home to its doghouse. Elsewhere that same evening, a mouse emerged from a hole near the base of a tree. An owl swooped down and captured the mouse.

★ PRINT MATCH

(Mention indoor substitute on teaching suggestions page)

Objective: To practice distinguishing among prints.

Divide the children into groups with even numbers. Assemble each group near a different patch of clear snow or dirt. (Use a broom to clear away footprints, if necessary.) This could also be done on a dry cement walk with wet footprints. Ask the children to form pairs, one a tracker, the other a print-maker. Have the trackers move away from their partners, face the other direction, and close their eyes. Each of the print-makers makes a footprint in the fresh snow, and then shows the sole of their boot to their partner. Trackers now try to distinguish their partner's prints from the others. Have the children switch roles and try it again.

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Materials:

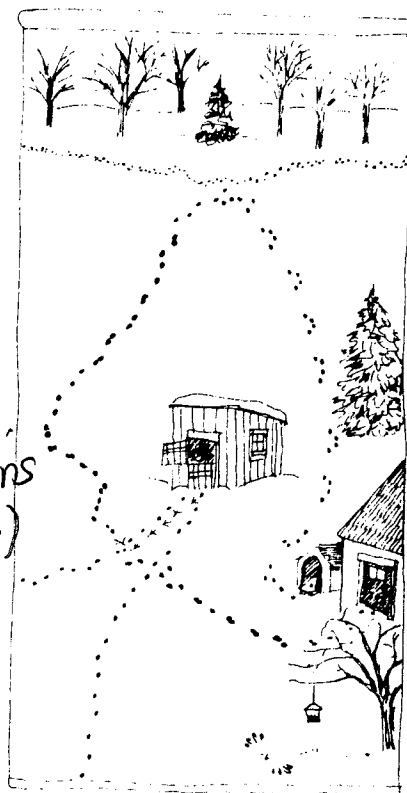
- script
- puppets
- props

Materials:

- track pattern diagram
- cardboard ovals, in two sizes when need to show front and back feet tracks
- tape

Materials:

- shelf paper or window shade
- permanent markers



PATTERN PRACTICE

Objective: To practice making and recognizing the four basic track patterns.

Divide the children into small groups. Assemble each group near a clear patch of snow or dirt. One child in the group is selected to make one of the four basic track patterns (galloper, walker-trotter, waddler, or bounder) while the other children hide their eyes. They then look at the pattern and try to guess what movement was used. Now let other children try making different track patterns. Bring out the track pattern diagram for children to refer to. Children may also have fun making up their own movements (e.g., skipping, rolling, hopping) for the other children to try to interpret.

For younger children, play "Follow the Leader" in pairs with one child recreating the movement of the leader by following in his/her tracks.

PICTURE PARADE

Objective: To recognize the tracks and traces of some common animals.

Show pictures or slides of different animals' tracks, including representatives of the dog, cat, rodent, rabbit, weasel, and deer families, and have the children describe the differences they observe. Also include pictures of scat, browse or chew marks, and denning or nesting evidence of animals common to your area.

TRACK DETECTIVES

Objective: To find tracks and traces of animals, and, by noticing the location, size, shape, and pattern, to try to determine what animals made them and what they were doing.

Lead the children in small groups to areas where you have previously found animal tracks or sign. Have them comment on all the characteristics they notice about the tracks, and together try to discover as much as possible about the track-maker and what it was doing. With older children, measure the prints and patterns, and refer to track field guides for identification.

TRACK STORIES

Objective: To reconstruct a story they "read" outside or to invent a story and tell it in tracks.

Divide the children into groups of 3 or 4. Each group gets a large piece of paper. First ask each group to decide on an animal story – either one they have seen outside or a made-up one. After sketching and coloring in the habitat, children use sponge tracks or stencils you've provided to print their story. It works well to have each child in charge of printing one set of tracks. Groups take turns holding up their track story while the other children try to interpret it.

EXTENSIONS

Home Track Detectives: Ask the children to check outside their house every morning for tracks. Can they tell which person, car, or animal was there?

Track Scouts: Suggest to the children that they go for a walk with their parents to look for tracks. Follow some and try to figure out what the animal was doing.

Creative Writing: Have the children write a story that involves following tracks as an important part of the plot.

Materials:

- broom
- track pattern diagram

Materials:

- slides or pictures of animal tracks and sign

Materials:

- track and sign field guides
- track pattern diagram
- tape measures or yardsticks

Materials:

- sponge cushion tracks or stencil tracks of representatives of the dog, cat, deer, rodent, rabbit, and weasel families
- markers or ink pads
- shelf paper, crayons

ACTIVITY STATIONS:

- 1) Print Match, Pattern Practice, and Track Detectives (outside)
- 2) Track Stories (inside)

Tracks and Traces

PUPPET SHOW

Characters: Henry (dressed in coat and hat), Mother, Mouse, Mink, Porcupine

Props: 4 track pattern signs - Walker/Trotter, Galloper, Waddler, and Bounder

Henry

Mom, have you seen Woof? I've called and called, and he hasn't come home. It's his dinnertime.

Mother

That's odd. He's always hungry for his supper. Let's take a walk and see if we can find him.

Henry

With all this snow, we should be able to follow his tracks. Those must be his over there. *[walk/trot track pattern sign held up briefly]* They're in a pretty straight line, and I can see his toenail marks.

Mother

Well, let's see where he went. You can go first, if you'd like. I know you want to run, and I'll follow along behind.

Henry

OK, Mom, good idea! I'll follow Woof's tracks, and you can follow mine! *[both exit; Henry re-enters alone]* Hmm. Woof's tracks are going right over to this stone wall. *[galloper track pattern sign appears]* Looks as if he's following these other little tracks. *[Mouse enters]*

Mouse

[out of breath] You bet he was following those tracks. They're mine, and I was scared to death hearing that loud, snuffing nose and feeling the snow shake under those big, clumsy feet.

Henry

I'm sorry, Mouse. Your tracks are so tiny; Woof probably had to use his nose to follow you. But I can see your tracks clearly - four prints, then a space, then four more prints.

Mouse

Yes, I may be little, but I can move pretty fast. I'm a galloper. My strong back legs push off, and I land on my front feet. Then, my back feet land ahead of my front feet and push off again. I have to move along quickly so I won't get caught and eaten by dogs, or owls, or other predators. Speaking of which, I'd better be galloping. Goodbye. *[galloper prints down; Mouse gallops off]*

Henry

I'm glad that mouse went back under the snow before Woof got him. *[walks along, then stops; waddler track pattern sign appears]* What tracks did Woof follow here? That's a pretty wide path, and deep, too. I'd say the animal wasn't in much of a hurry. *[Porcupine appears]*

Porcupine

No need to hurry with these quills of mine to protect me.

Henry

Oh, you must be a porcupine. Do you leave a wide path in the snow when you walk?

Porcupine

Yes, I do. Good thing too, makes it a lot easier to get around, following my own trail in the snow.

Henry

And I see a big print next to a little print.

Porcupine

Yup, I put my back paw next to my front paw. Some folks call me a waddler because I walk along flat-footed and slowly, but I usually get where I'm going. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going that way. *[waddles straight at Henry, who moves aside]*

Henry

[backing up] Certainly, certainly. Don't let me hold you up. *[waddler pattern down; Porcupine leaves]* Whew! When I find Woof, I'm going to tell him to stay away from **that** track. It could mean prickly trouble. Hmm, here it looks as if Woof headed down to the stream. *[bounder track pattern sign appears]* Now, what are these tracks Woof found? Looks like somebody doing a whole bunch of broad jumps. *[Mink appears]*

Mink

[cheerfully] Did you say broad jumps? Ha, ha, ha, I never thought of it that way. I think of myself as a bounder.

Henry

Hi, Mink. So you're a bounder? Well, how do you make those tracks?

Mink

Just look how I'm built, long and skinny, with short legs. I spring forward and land on my front feet. Then my back feet follow into my front footsteps. My back arches up when I run that way.

Henry

You mean, sort of like a slinky coming down the stairs?

Mink

Slinky minky, that's me. And now I'm in need of some dinner, so I'll just bound off to where the crayfish abound! *[bounder pattern down; Mink exits]*

Henry

Speaking of dinner, I'm hungry. From Woof's tracks, I'd guess he is, too. *[walk/trot pattern sign appears briefly]* He's trotting right along toward home. *[hurries across stage and exits]*

Mother

[Henry and Mom enter] There you are, Henry. I've finally caught up with you, and here we are back home again.

Henry

Hi, Mom. I ran a lot. And when I got back home, there was Woof waiting for me on the front stoop!

Mother

That dog led us on a wild goose chase all through the fields and the woods, and then he beat us home!

Henry

Well, there weren't any wild geese, but there was a galloping mouse, and a waddling porcupine, and a bounding mink. Woof's a great tracker.

Mother

He sure is. And I can see that he's still tracking.

Henry

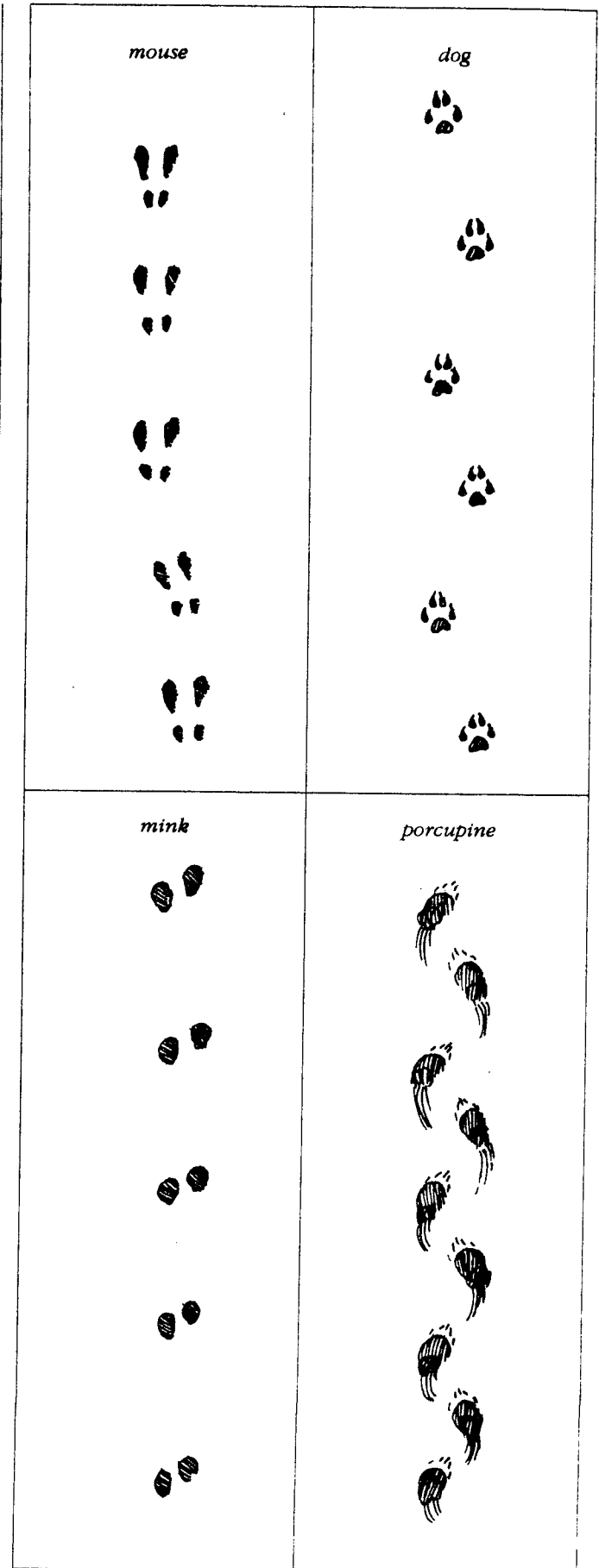
Gee? He is? What can he be tracking in here?

Mother

He's tracking mud all over the kitchen floor! And you'd better go get those wet boots off or you will be, too.

Henry

Oops! OK, Mom, I'll go do that right now!





Patterns of Similarities and Differences: Animal Tracks

Focus: When we study track prints and patterns, we often can identify who the track-maker was and what the animal was doing as it was passing by. (*Hands-On Nature*, pgs. 215-221).

What can we learn about animals from their tracks?

Puppet Show: compare some different animal track patterns to help identify the maker.

Follow the Footprints: act out the movement patterns of different groups of animals to learn how an animal's body shape and size are evident in its track pattern.

Window Shade Story: practice looking at pattern, print and place to interpret track stories.

Print Match: outside observe similarities and differences in prints.

Pattern Practice: outside practice making and identifying different track patterns.

Four Winds Tracks Slide Show: recognize and compare the tracks of different animals and some common traces.

Track Detectives: discover tracks and traces outside and try to identify the animal maker.

Track Stories: create a visual representation that describes different animals' behavior .

Unit Concepts/Ideas:

- A. Each kind of animal leaves a particular pattern of tracks in the snow or mud that reflects the animal's size, shape and the way that the animal moves.
- B. There are four types of track patterns, grouped according to the way animals move: Hopping/Galloping, Bounding, Waddling, Walking/Trotting.
- C. The measurements of stride and straddle can help distinguish between animals that create similar track patterns.
- D. Following tracks reveals a story of an animal's activities and of encounters with other animals.
- E. Other signs of animal presence are scat, browse or chew marks, and den or nesting sites. These signs combined with track patterns can give a positive identification of an unseen animal.

Vocabulary: Tracks, Straddle, Stride, Hopping/Galloping, Walking/Trotting, Bounding, Waddling, Scat, Browse

Skills:

- A. Comparing different animal track patterns and relating them to the animals' size, shape, and way of moving.
- B. Active listening to learn to distinguish different animal's track shape and pattern.
- C. Identifying and categorizing tracks to use in interpreting the story they tell.
- D. Creating a model on paper using markers and animal track stamps to reconstruct or invent a story of animal behavior.
- E. Recognizing the tracks and traces of some common animals through outdoor observation using location, size, and shape and track pattern.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS: PATTERNS

ANIMAL TRACKS

PUPPET SHOW

This presentation may be easiest with three people, one just to handle the animal track puppets.

FOLLOW THE FOOTPRINTS

Start this activity by having children crawl on their hands and knees like babies do. Which limbs move together? (This is the gait of a walker.)

Track templates for this activity can be made from no-slip rug pads.

Photographs or stuffed pets representing a galloper, bounder, waddler and walker are helpful visuals.

WINDOW SHADE STORY

City dwellers might modify the picture to tell an urban story. For example: *After the snow stopped falling in the late afternoon, a cat was let out of a house into the backyard. It crept under a bench to watch the birds at the feeder hanging nearby. A squirrel ran across the patio and leaped onto the feeder. Spying the cat, the squirrel left the feeder and jumped onto the roof to scurry away. The cat walked across the patio but was chased off by the neighbor's dog, who had been trotting by but broke into a run to chase the cat into the garage. Later that night, a skunk feasting on the fallen seeds under the bird feeder was snatched up by a swooping owl, who dropped a couple of feathers, but not his meal. Nearby, a raccoon was slinking along the outside garage wall after tearing open a trash bag that someone had left outside the overfull garbage cans.*

PRINT MATCH

If snow conditions aren't cooperating, use Shelburne Farms' Project Seasons "Sole Search" activity where kids make a rubbing of their right shoe with paper and crayon. They then trace the outline of their left shoe around the rubbing. Place all the left shoes in a central spot. Pass out a shoe rubbing to all children (don't take your own!) and have them find the correct match to their print. Check the shoes and prints matches. Then have children return the shoe and rubbing to the owner!

Students could compile sneaker rubbings or prints into a field guide to the students' shoes.

TRACK DETECTIVES

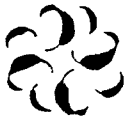
In a city, include track identification information for urban animals such as dogs, cats, raccoons, mice, rats, gray squirrels, and birds of different sizes, like crows, pigeons, and house sparrows.

EXTENSIONS

If you have a fresh snow outside, send the teacher out for a walk. With the children, go outside to track him around the school to where he is hiding.

Local game wardens may loan pelts from road kills, many of which have the feet still attached.





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Patterns: Animal Tracking

1. **Deer:** Most wild animals stay out of sight when humans are around, but they leave behind signs we can learn to read. What animal leaves these small heart-shaped prints?
(Deer)
2. **Tracks on log:** What about this straight row of prints along the top of a fallen log? What animal might balance on a log? Here's another clue...
3. **Bobcat print:** ... a footprint with four rounded toes, and a large heel pad. And no claw marks! That's how we know that this print, and the tracks on the log, were made by a...
4. **Bobcat:** ...Bobcat, which, like its cousin the housecat, pulls in its claws when it walks.
5. **Coyote, Fox, Bobcat Tracks:** Foxes and coyotes also make prints with four toes, but they have claws that show. You can see an X shape in their prints, but not in bobcat tracks. Most coyotes, foxes or deer wouldn't want to balance on a log like a cat!
6. **Mouse Prints on a Log:** Here's another set of tracks on a log - four tiny footprints and then a space as the tiny animal hopped along. What might have made this pattern? It must be a.....
7. **Mouse:** ... mouse, which mostly uses tunnels beneath the snow to get around, but comes out now and then to run lightly across the surface.
8. **Tracks on Ice:** The place where you find tracks can be an important clue. Here on frozen river ice we find two sets of tracks, bounding side by side. Let's look closer at the prints.
9. **River Otter prints:** How many toes can you count? - five toes on each large foot. This animal, at home in freshwater streams and ponds, is a
10. **River Otter:** ... River Otter! If you follow its tracks you'll find that it often slides along on its belly. Even when you don't find tracks, you can find other signs of wild animals...
11. **Stripped Pinecones:** ... like these stripped pinecones. Each scale on the pinecone holds two seeds that are yummy food for a
12. **Red Squirrel:** ... red squirrel like this one that may scold you from a branch.
13. **Rabbit Sign:** Here are some other signs of eating. The pellets are animal droppings, and the teeth marks on the branch tell you that this animal has been eating bark. Round pellets like these tell you it is was a ...
14. **Eastern Cottontail:** ... rabbit, eating the fresh bark from branches that got knocked down by wind or snow.

15. **Bear Nest:** You can find other signs in trees. If you look high up in the treetops you might see some messy nests of branches. They look something like birds' nests, or a squirrel's leafy nest, but they are very, very large. Let's look around for other sign...
16. **Bear Print:** ... like this very large print, with five large toes and claws...
17. **Beech Trunk:** ... and on this trunk, scratches made by five large, sharp claws. An animal has climbed this beech tree, probably to sit on those platform nests and eat beech nuts. Would you believe these scratches were made by ...
18. **Black Bear:** ... a black bear, fattening up for a long winter inside a cozy den. Tree trunks are good places to look for animal sign.
19. **Dog carrying a branch:** Once you start to notice them, there are many stories to be read in the tracks and sign that are all around. Sometimes the stories make you laugh. Can you tell what made these different marks in the snow? If you can, then you're learning to be a good track detective! (*Dog and person tracks. Branch carried by dog made stripes in the snow.*)



Pattern Practice: Fun Patterns to Guess

Hop on one foot. Just before your last hop, make it look like someone is walking even though you are still on one foot.

One person ride piggy back on the other. Midway through, both walk side by side so one set of tracks turns into two.

Do Cartwheels

Crawl

Hop forward on both feet a few times

Two People: Walk toward each other, hug, then both fall in the snow

Jump backwards

Do a somersault

Skip

Put boots on the wrong feet and then make tracks

