



Fifth Grade Students from Lincoln Elementary in Delta learn about animal tracks during a winter ecology day at Ridgway State Park. (Submitted photo/Anne Janik)

# Sleuthing snow tracks for animal intel

Like the pages of a book telling a story, the tracks, trails, and impressions in the snow reveal the activities of animals in your neighborhood. Each type of animal has unique tracks which reveal a lot about their lifestyles and habits.

By discovering tracks, scat, and other signs of wildlife in snow, you can turn a winter hike into a treasure hunt for your child. Select a snowy area where you are likely to find an assortment of animal tracks, and keep the hikes short and leisurely. Fresh snow early in the morning is best, before tracks melt away.

Imagination is key. Animal tracking combines science, creativity, and storytelling. You won't see the animal itself but the tracks they leave behind are pieces of the puzzle for you to solve. What kind of animal made the track, and what was it doing? Where did they come from, and where were they going? Prompt your child's curiosity and help sharpen their observation skills.

To identify a track start by counting the toes. If it has two toes, it's probably a deer, elk or moose. If it has four toes and a heel pad, it could be a bobcat, lynx, or mountain lion; it could also be a canine like a fox, coyote, or dog. The easiest way to tell a cat from a dog track is the presence of nails. Cat's toenails are critical for catching prey so they keep them retracted for protection when not in use. Most canine tracks, on the other hand, have visible nail marks above their pads. Five toes? It could be a raccoon, or another animal that uses its paws like hands.

Next, take a good look at the size and how deep the tracks are in the snow. A mouse is smaller than a squirrel. A smaller and lighter animal will leave a shallower impression. Show your child how much deeper your tracks are compared to theirs.

Among the big cats, a bobcat track is smaller (and likely more shallow) than that of a lynx or a mountain lion, with the mountain lions having the biggest print – almost the size of an adult fist. Lynx tracks can be distinctive because their tracks have hair impressions around the pads.

Dog and coyote tracks look similar, but coyote tracks are narrow and diamond shaped while dog tracks are rounder with more space between the pads. Fox tracks are shaped like a coyote but much smaller.

Another clue is the animals stride or the repeating pattern of their prints in the snow. Animals walk in four basic patterns: walking, galloping, bounding, and pacing or waddling. Those patterns are influenced by the length of an animal's legs and their overall body shape.

A walking pattern is characteristic of animals with long legs like a cat, dog, coyote, deer or elk. These animals are very efficient and will often place their back foot on top of where their front foot was. Their

## Outdoors

By Anne Janik

stride pattern is a series of single prints generally in a straight line.

Squirrels, chipmunks, mice, rabbits and snow-

shoe hare are gallopers because they leap from one location to another. Rabbits and squirrels are similar in that their larger hind paws land in front of the smaller front paws, making four distinct prints per track – two parallel long prints in front of two small round prints. Tracks of snowshoe hare are similar to rabbits but much larger. Look for the round toe impressions of rabbits compared with the long finger marks of squirrels.

Bounders are animals that have a bounding stride like weasels, mink, and otters. Their front paws hit first and then their back paws land where their front paws were. Their tracks appear as two paws that fall side-by-side. Weasels often drag their tails, leaving a central furrow.

Pacers or waddlers are short-legged, heavy-set mammals (beavers, porcupines, raccoons, skunk, and bears) that have a distinctive track with four paw prints. They waddle, shifting their weight to the right so their left front/back paws can move forward, then shift their weight to the left so their right front/rear paws can move forward. You can't miss a bear track – its paws are huge with five rounded toes and a wide heel pad.

Don't forget bird tracks. You can usually only see their footprints, but sometimes you can see the wing marks where one landed.

Take a look at the bigger picture surrounding a set of tracks. Look at the direction of the tracks, and where they end up. A good tracker will be on the lookout for other clues such as blood and/or wing marks indicating maybe a hawk caught something, a spot where an animal burrowed, seeds of a pinecone scattered about (squirrel lunch), or yellow snow—animals pee too.

If you want to expand your identification skills, there are apps to help you such as by Nature Tracking. All are easy to use, contain high resolution photos with detailed information, and work offline.

Remember to be safe. If you spot the actual animal, give it space and an escape route. Always observe from a distance. If you are causing a change in their behavior, you are too close.

Whatever tracks you and your child find are clues to an awesome winter treasure hunt, and will spark wonder and discoveries about the animals in your neck of the woods.

*Friends of Youth and Nature is a non-profit that promotes opportunities for youth and families to get outside, experience outdoor activities, and explore nature. To learn more, visit: [www.friendsofyouthandnature.org](http://www.friendsofyouthandnature.org)*

# The Outdoor Myths

In my line of work, I talk to people, from all walks of life. The discussion will usually rotate to something outdoor related. My wife says it is because of my very limited attention span, and nothing non-outdoor related interests me. I had a really snappy retort but forgot what it was because I was involved in the planning stages of an upcoming hunting trip. Perhaps later it will come back to me.

In all of these discussions with people, it amazes me how many outdoors myths are around. More concerning, is just how many folks regard these myths as fact. We all know about these myths. Some have been around for centuries. I guess if they are recited often enough, people accept them as fact.

Take the one about moss always growing on the north side of a tree. Head into a very damp and healthy forest sometime and look at how the moss grows around all sides of trees. Depending on the local climate, moss will grow wherever the conditions are most suitable. Better to carry a compass.

While we are discussing find your way, look at a GPS. I have people tell me all the time, "I will never get lost because I have my GPS."

While a GPS, and the knowledge to use it, are a valuable survival tool, don't rely on them. If my buddy Murphy, of Murphy's Law fame takes a part in the proceedings, those folks are in trouble.

A GPS runs on batteries and they can and will die. You could lose the GPS unit while taking a tumble down a hill, or break the screen open, thereby rendering the unit as dead as easy credit. The unit is a mechanical object and will eventually fail. Best to keep a map and compass handy, with the knowledge to use them. I also like to keep track of landmarks for reference points, as I move through the woods.

One myth that really gets me is the "I am not worried about survival, because I am not going that far," or "I don't need a survival pack because I am just going on a short hike."

That myth gets many people an aromatic pine box every year. The weather will change, or you could get lost or injured. Any one of these turns the little walk into a survival situation. Always carry some extra food, water, clothes, compass, flashlight and a few first aid supplies, and let someone know where you are going and when you expect to return.

Boiled water is always safe to drink is a myth that has made many people sick. Boiling water before drinking will kill off all the organisms and bacteria, but will do nothing to cure chemically contaminated water. If the water was dirty



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

or murky, all the small dirt particles will still be there after it is boiled. You are better off with a water filter system, such as the ones made by LifeStraw.

And speaking of water, have you heard about drinking from a cut open cactus? You always picture a barrel shaped cactus, bigger than a basketball. Someone lops off the top and ladles out water.

Truth is, that is not water. It is the most vile, noxious fluid high in alkalis you will ever encounter. In short order, you will have cramps and be vomiting. In a real survival situation, you are going to fall into deep trouble as this fluid begins to tax your kidneys and send you into heat stroke. There are five varieties of barrel cactus, but only the fishhook barrel is not poisonous. Best look elsewhere for water.

Another myth about thirst involves eating snow to stay hydrated. Some folks have told me this would keep them alive. Truth is, while snow is water, it is frozen. Eating that snow will quickly lower your body's core temperature, which will send you into hypothermia. The hypothermia will kill you faster than thirst. Best to melt the snow and drink it through a filter.

Suck on a small stone to stay hydrated. I remember that one from my Boy Scout Manual, from long ago. We all know you are not going to get water from a stone. The stone in your mouth will just cause saliva to flow, making you think you are hydrated. If you take a spill, you could swallow the stone and choke to death. Probably better to suck a piece of hard candy or chew gum.

Rub two sticks together to make a fire. We have all seen that one on TV, but have you ever tried it? You will die of exhaustion long before you ever see smoke. Carry weatherproof matches, lighters and magnesium fire starter instead, and relax by the fire you will quickly build.

Shelter means you must have a roof over your head. I hear about people who will spend all day building a lean-to shelter, only to die freezing to death trying to sleep on the cold ground. The proper thing to do is craft a very well insulated bed to keep you from the cold ground. Add a roof if time allows.

Drinking liquor will warm you up in the cold. I

hear the stories about "antifreeze" all the time. If you are outside and cold, booze is the last thing you want. You may feel warmer from a shot of hooch, but alcohol actually dilates blood vessels and capillaries, which will cool your core even faster. Have a cup of coffee from a thermos instead.

Space blankets are useless. I have said that one a time or two myself, even though I have lugged one around in my pack for decades. This myth may have been born from someone who tried to stay warm using it during a very windy night.

The aluminum coating on these Mylar coated wonders is thermal reflective redirecting infrared energy; body heat. When you are getting cold, from shock or exposure, the heat you are radiating is lost to the air and not replaced. Wrapping up in a space blanket will actually redirect that lost heat back to your body.

You should carry several of these lightweight wonders in your pack. Better yet, is the space blanket bivy. These are like a lightweight sleeping bag you can climb into. They are much easier to keep covered up with and work better in the wind. One of these worked for me one cold night as I removed my heavy boots and climbed in. It works.

The last thing I would offer is to not take your survival information from those reality survival shows on television. All of those shows give a very romantic, even glorified view of survival in the outdoors. The truth is, when you find yourself in a survival situation, it's because you have made some really bad decisions and probably experienced some bad luck on the way.

If a full-blown three-alarm emergency arises in the woods, you had better make sure the disaster insurance is paid up. Survival in the woods is not something you should take lightly because it can cancel your life memberships in short order, much to the dismay of your creditors.

In the meantime, I thought of that clever retort to my wife's smart-aleck comment about my attention span and I need to go find her before I forget.

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