

Tracking Stories

All Ages

The winter woods seem quiet and still compared to the noisy bustle of summer birds and animals with young to raise. It is a different kind of 'busy' in winter with the struggles for survival. Much of the activity happens at night with only tracks left to tell the tale in the light of day. It takes a sharp eye to see the evidence and a keen mind to interpret it.

Identifying which creature made the tracks is just the beginning. Tracks give us clues about how animals behave. They teach us about the animal's behavior and about how they interact with the rest of nature. When reading a track story, look for other evidence such as nibbled twigs, feathers, fur or scat. See the following pages for a look at three common tracks, which animal makes them and more.

When: Look for tracks anytime, anywhere. Mornings after a light snowfall are best for tracking. Tracks will be fresh and clear.

Where: A good place to begin is in your own yard. A light dusting of snow on the smooth surface of a sidewalk, driveway or parking lot records clear tracks. Search places where critters hang out. Squirrels are busy writing and rewriting their stories in neighbourhood parks. Foxes and raccoons often visit urban green spaces, wooded parks and cemeteries. For more variety, visit larger natural areas such as conservation areas, forest tracts, provincial parks, and wildlife areas.

Tip: Animals will follow human trails because it is easier than trudging through the snow. This can be a good place to start identifying tracks. But the real stories are found when you leave the trail and do a little bushwhacking! (stay safe, bring your grown ups along)

Equipment: Tracking does not require any special equipment. Here is all you need: warm clothing, a measuring tape (for determining track size and length of stride), a notebook and pencil (for recording information and sketches.) A tracking guide is very helpful, especially if you can take it with you. The pocket-sized book, Animal Tracks of Ontario (a Lone Pine book by Ian Sheldon) is a handy guide. There are tracking apps such as [MyNature Animal Tracks](#) (\$15) available as well as other excellent in-depth, detailed guides.

How: A little bit of homework goes a long way. Learn a bit about how animals walk, run, hop. Watch a pet walk. Notice the changes when they run or jog. This helps you understand how tracks are made. Hopping animals, like rabbits and squirrels, make very different tracks from animals that walk and run, like cats or dogs. Think about where the animal lives and how it might move about. Look for beavers and muskrats near ponds and porcupines in forests. Winter is about surviving so most birds and animals stay close to cover (shrubs and trees.) Look for tracks long the edges of a habitat. Water is important so look near lakes, ponds, streams and wetlands for rewarding tracks. Practise, practise, practise. The more you go tracking the more you learn about tracks and the animals that make them.



How many critters left tracks here? See page 7

Tip: Practise by making 'track stories' in the snow for each other. Make a track trail for your family to follow - run, hop, skip, turn, roll, somersault, walk backwards, break a twig, knock snow from a branch, shake seeds loose, pick off a burr and so on. See how well you read each other's 'track story'.



Three Common Animals to Track

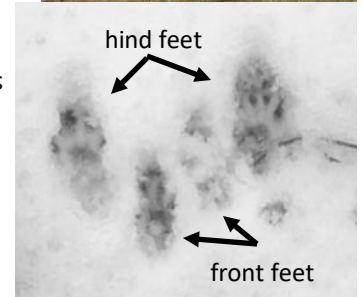
1. Squirrels

Eastern gray squirrels (which are also black) are probably the most well known squirrel.



They are comfortable living in yards and parks, even in big cities. They are cheeky and, therefore, easy to see. The little red squirrel prefers wilder spaces with lots of evergreen trees. Both are busy during the winter and leave plenty of tracks. Squirrels have long skinny toes, four on the front foot and five on the back or hind foot. Very often you can clearly see the toes and even sharp claws marks in the tracks.

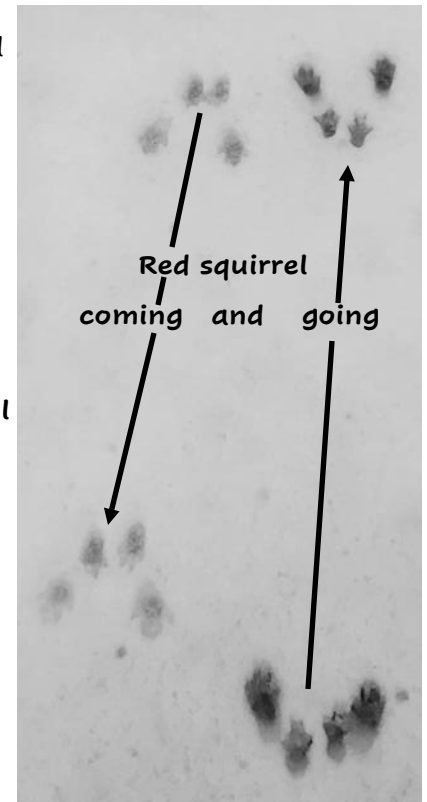
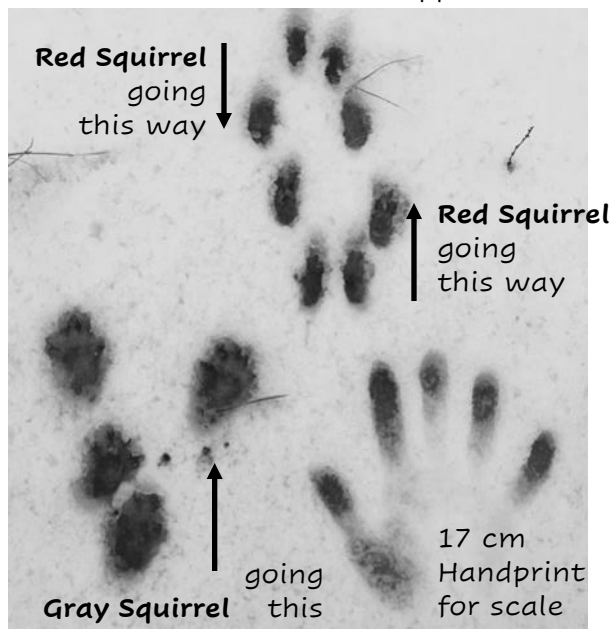
To get around gray squirrels either walk or bound. When bounding, the distance between sets of tracks can be quite big. Red squirrels bound or hop leaving tracks that most often start and end at the bottom of a tree. Red or gray, the squirrel's paired hind prints always fall in front of paired fore prints. The squirrel travelled in the direction of the hind feet. See the last page for an illustration of how this happens.



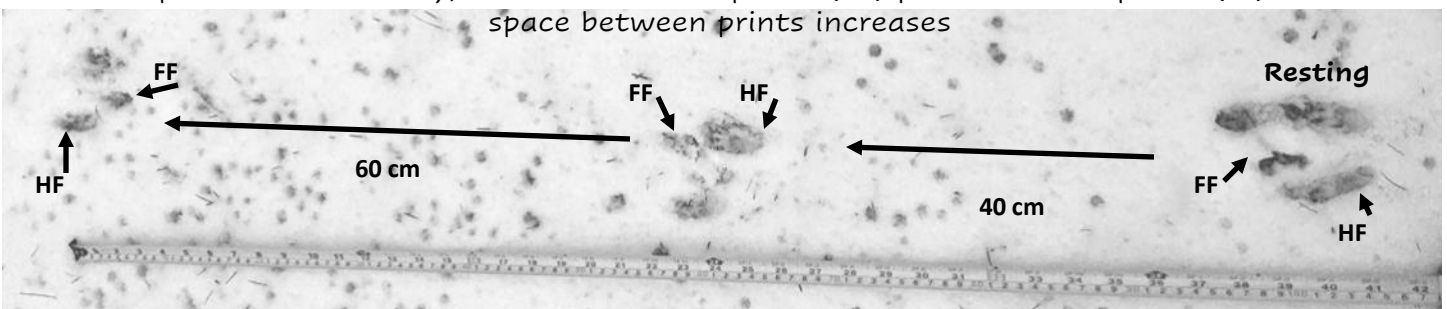
Other evidence:

- Chattering/scolding sounds
- Pinecone bits and cores
- Nut and seed shells
- Drays (nests) made of leaves and moss in trees

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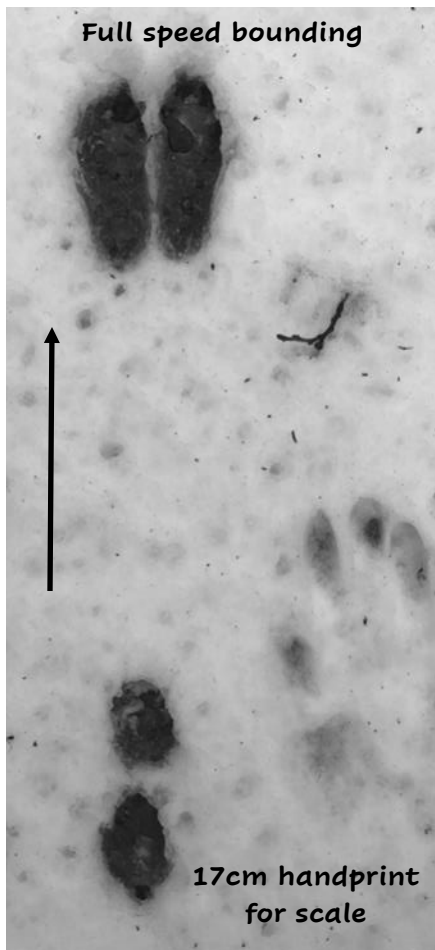
A red squirrel bounds away, see how the hind prints (HF) pass the front prints (FF) and the space between prints increases



Three Common Animals to Track

2. Cottontail Rabbit

Cottontails are commonplace in yards, parks, and almost every green space. You will find their tracks in town and in the wild. Rabbits feel safe near cover which they can bolt under. Look for tracks along hedgerows, near shrubs and under trees. Rabbits leave tracks as they dash from one hiding spot to another or hop about looking for food. Cottontails do not live in burrows. They find shelter under dense bushes, brush piles and, in urban areas, under sheds. Following tracks may take you to their hideout. The distinctive tracks of cottontails are easy to recognize. The two small front feet leave round prints and the two big back feet, for jumping, leave long, oval prints. Rabbit feet are covered by fur so the toes are not often visible. When rabbits jump or hop forward, one front foot lands, then the other. The big hind feet land side by side in front of the front feet. This means the rabbit is moving in the direction of the hind feet. Think "Front, Front, Hind feet, Front, Front, Hind feet." to help you identify rabbit tracks. Go to the last page, make a flip book and see to how a rabbit hops.

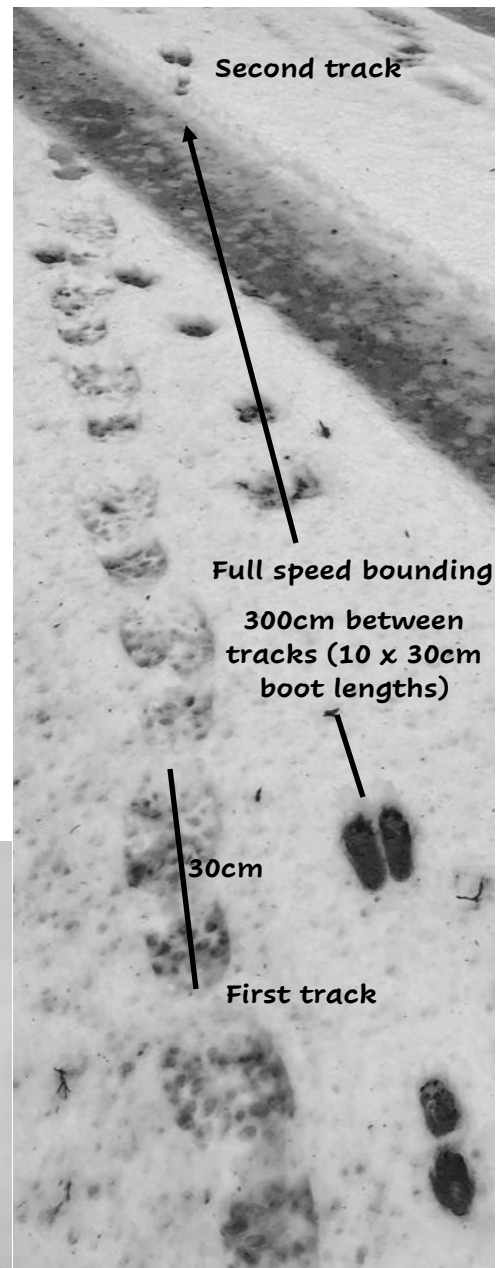
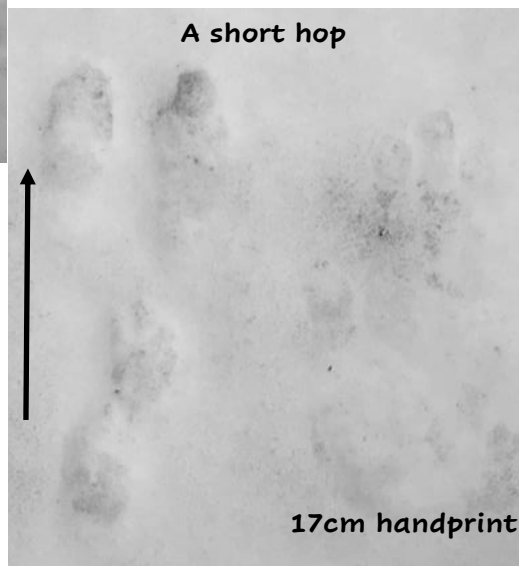


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Other Evidence:

- Scat/Rabbit raisins about the size of Cocoa Puffs
- Twigs and shrubs nibbled off in sharp 45-degree angles
- Brightly coloured pee - the colour depends on what plants they are eating



Three Common Animals to Track

3. White-tailed Deer

Deer are common in most wild spaces and in suburbs where gardens are plentiful. They have

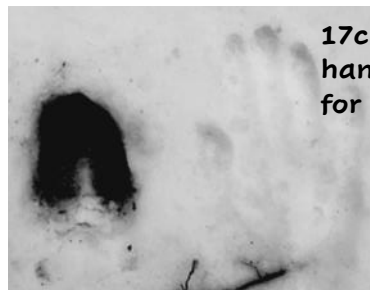
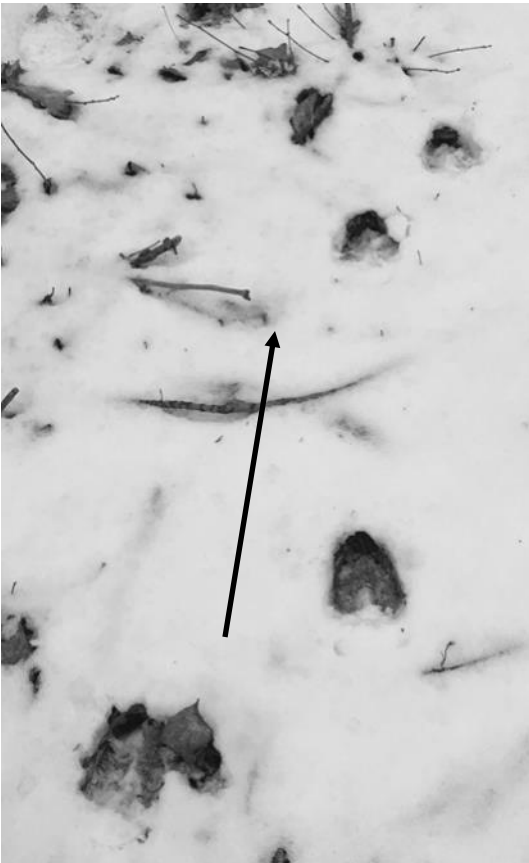


distinctive tracks that are easy to spot all year round. The pointed end of the heart-shaped tracks points in the direction the deer travelled.

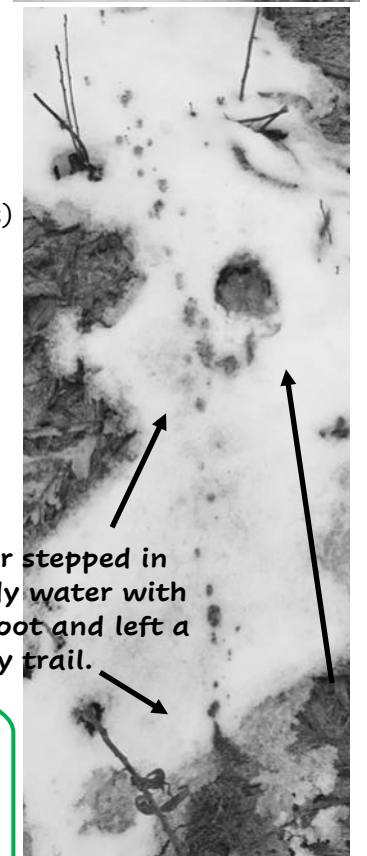
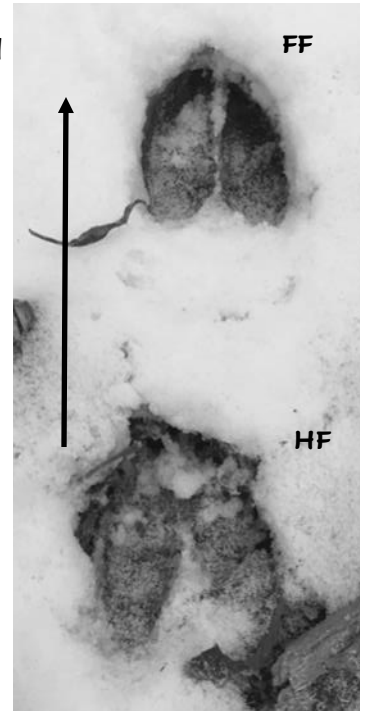
Deer are big, four footed animals that walk on two toenails or hooves. Their weight drives the pointed hooves into the snow or ground. On hard-packed surfaces only impressions of the tiny tips may be visible. When deer need traction, for speed or in slippery terrain, the toes spread apart. The track loses the heart shape but the sharp points are still visible. As deer walk, the hind foot can step (or register in tracking) on top of the front track. This muddles the tracks and looks a bit confusing. In deep snow the tiny hooves and thin legs punch deep holes.

Other Evidence:

- Scat - Pellet about 2-3cm long
- Deer browse - rough cut or snapped twigs, torn plants
- Antler rubs - bark is scrapped and shredded on saplings (small trees)
- Deer bed - look for a large, oval-shaped, packed down area where a deer may have rested.



17cm
handprint
for scale



A deer stepped in muddy water with one foot and left a drippy trail.



There's good stuff here!

- ⇒ ontarioparks.com/parksblog/winter-wildlife-tracking/
- ⇒ cwf-fcf.org/en/resources/DIY/outside/tracking-down-winter-wildlife.html
- ⇒ www.naturetracking.com/the-5-most-common-animal-tracks-in-snow/

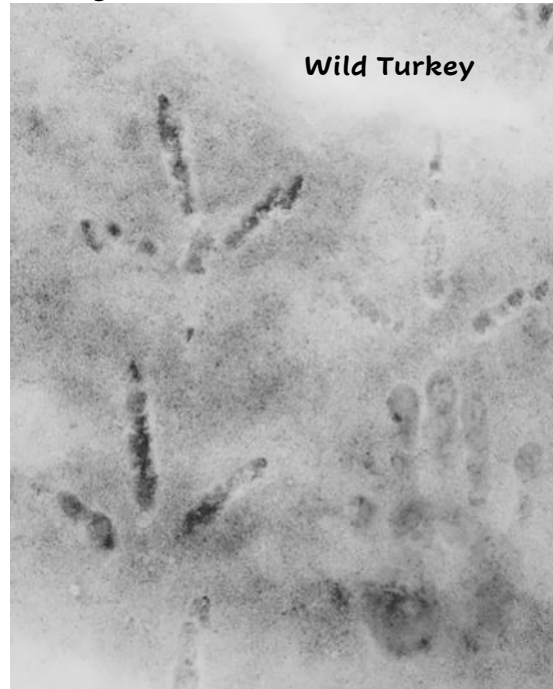
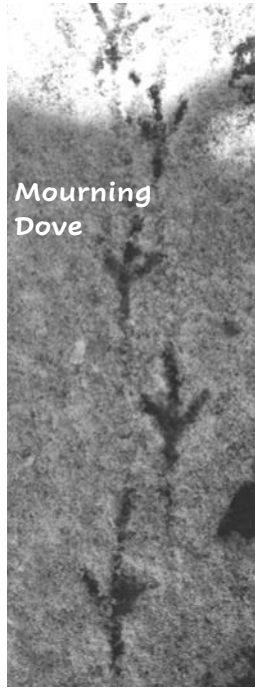
A few other tracks you might see.

Birds – look near birdfeeders and around plant seed-heads sticking out of the snow.

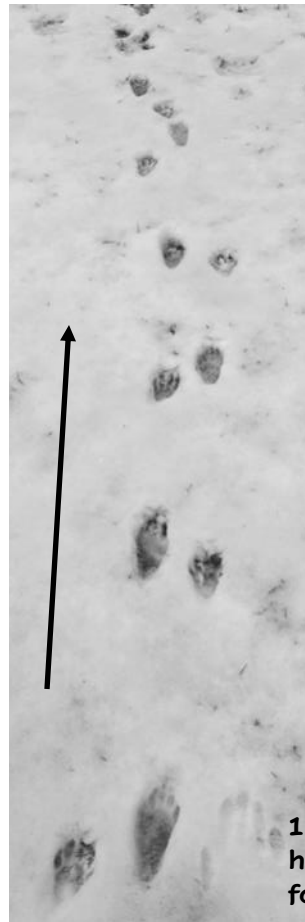
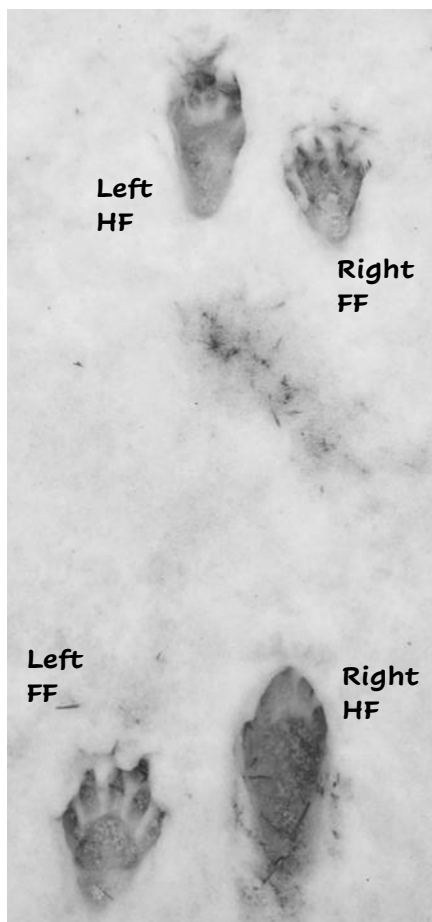
Small birds that hop.

Medium-sized and large birds that walk. Watch for full body and wing

prints of owls and hawks catching prey.



Raccoon



At home in the woods, farmland and urban areas, raccoons are active in the winter. The front paw print looks like a tiny hand and the hind foot much like a human foot. Raccoons are wide and have a waddling gait (walk). Their track trail has two lines of foot prints.

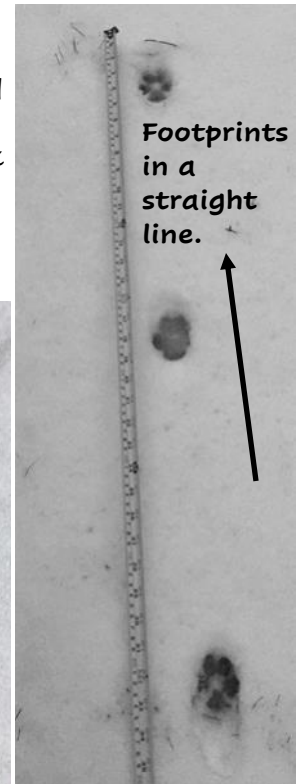
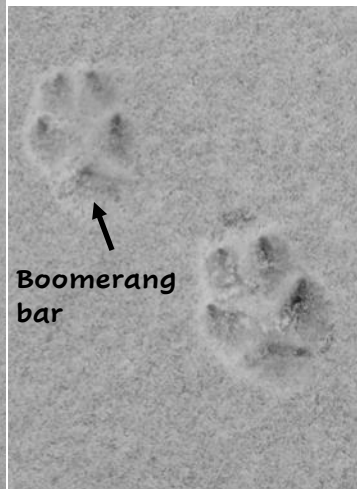
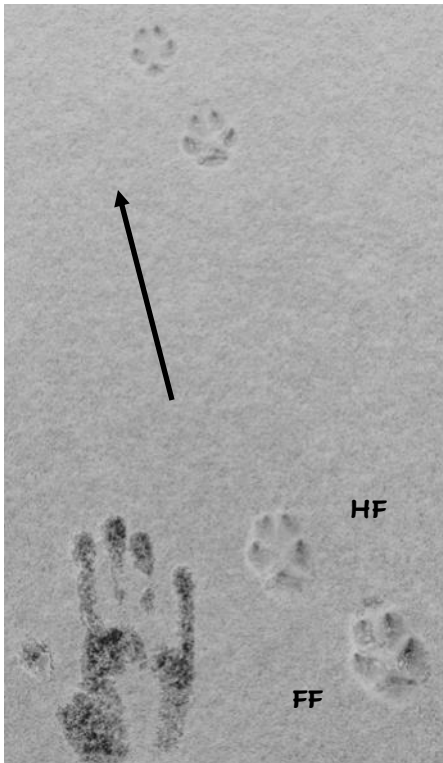


17cm
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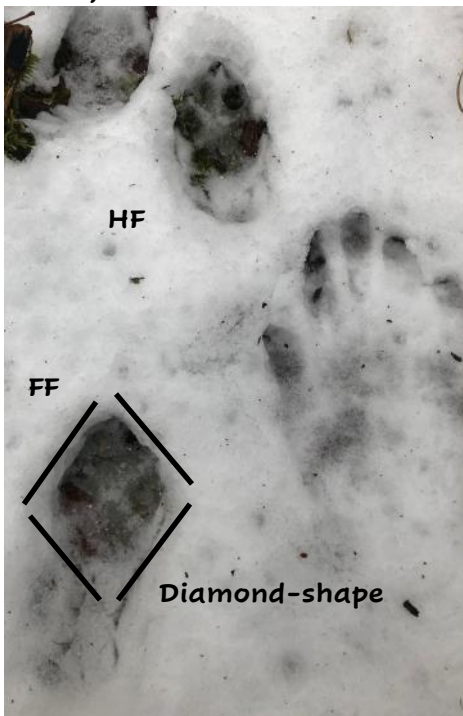
Red Fox – Lives in wild and urban spaces. Foxes usually make a straight line of tracks.

Their tracks are blurry because, they have furry feet and, like a cat, step the hind foot directly into the track of the front foot (called direct register). Like dogs, the hind foot is smaller than the front. The front print of a fox has a distinctive boomerang bar that no other animal has. Foxes mark their space with pee – in winter it smells like skunk!



Coyote – Live in wild and urban spaces. Coyote tracks look like dog tracks at first

glance. A closer look reveals distinct differences. Coyote footprints are diamond-shaped. The claws on the middle two toes are very close together. A coyote trail is straight, but the tracks are staggered or in a zigzag pattern. As the top (apex) predator, coyotes are bolder and will travel across open areas.

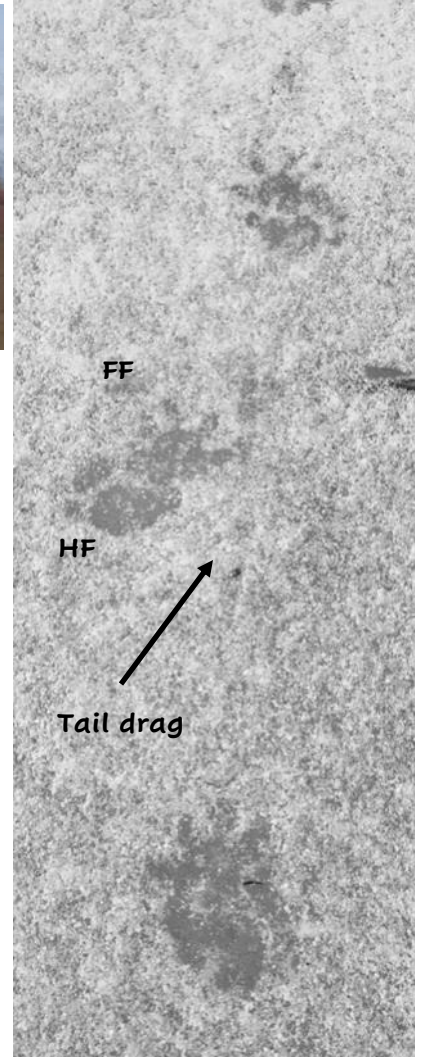
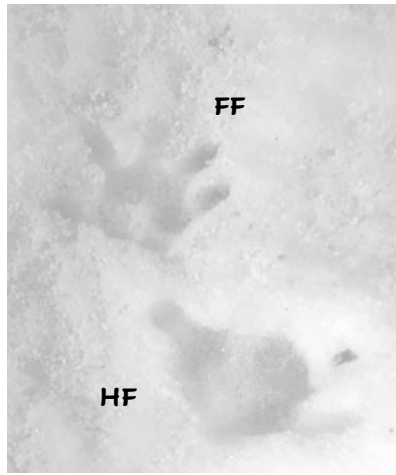


Make a **Track Journal**. Take notes on your observations, discoveries, and thoughts. Include sketches, measurements, and research notes. You will have a detailed record of your tracking adventures to keep.

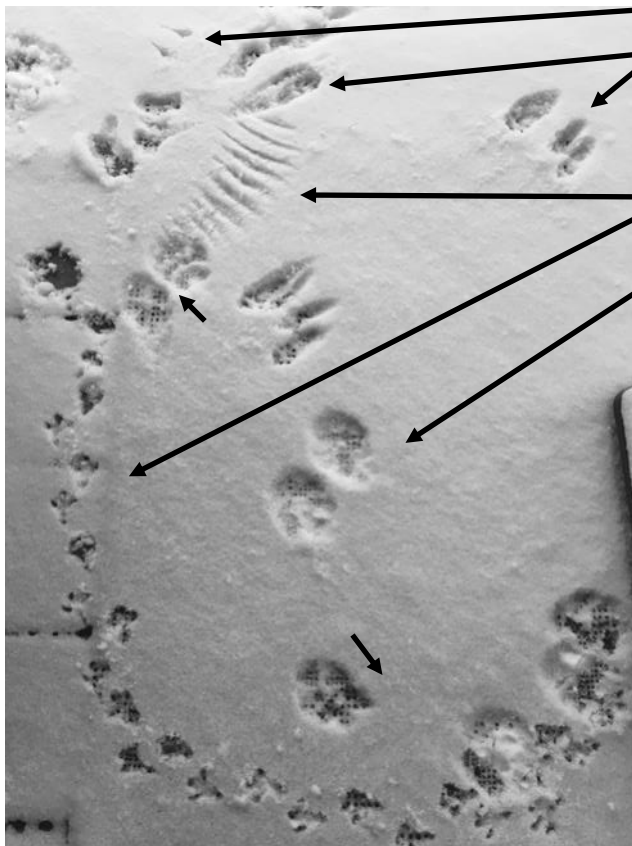
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Opossum -

Lives in urban and wild spaces. They are nomadic, so trailing one could lead you on a merry chase. Opossums make small star like tracks. The track pattern is similar to the raccoon but may show tail drag marks.



How Many Critters?



1. **Junco**
2. **Red Squirrel** - maybe two
3. **Morning Dove** - walked about and then took flight
4. **Red Fox** came and went



A turkey stretched, flapped his wings (4 times) lifting him up enough to make only light bouncing tracks and leave brush marks from his wingtips.

What happened here?

- A good-sized hole in the snowy grasses
- Mammal tracks (Fox)
- 2 mouse droppings and a spot of blood in the tire track.

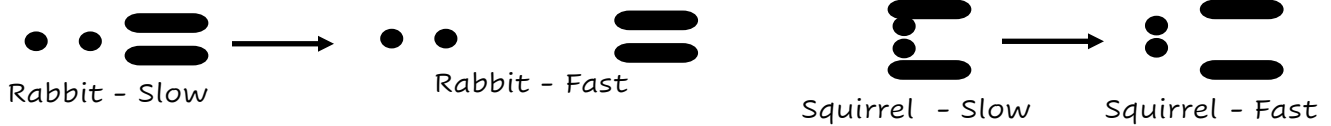
The keen ears of a passing fox heard a mouse rustling in the grasses under the snow. The fox plunged his head and front paws into the snow. He caught the mouse and brought it out to the packed snow. (If the mouse escaped, there would be nowhere to hide) The fox ate the mouse.

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Mechanics of a four legged hop - How a bunny hops

Rabbit and squirrel tracks appear backwards at first. The small front footprints are at the back and the big hind or back footprints are in front. When you understand how the animal moves the tracks make sense. The sketches below show how a rabbit leaps. Squirrels move in the same way except their front feet touch the ground together, side-by-side. The faster the animal is moving the bigger the space between the front prints and the hind prints.



To see a rabbit makes tracks turn the sketches below into a flip book. Print a few copies of this page. Cut out the rectangles to make flip book pages. Stack the pages with page 1 on top and 4 at the bottom, repeat 1 to 4, the more repeats the more leaps your rabbit makes. Use a copy of page 5 for the first page and, perhaps, to replace the last page 4. The blank page is for a title page or to make new moves for your rabbit. A bulldog clip on the spine holds all the pages together. See our **FLIP BOOK FUN** activity for more ideas and illustrations.

