

ELF NOTES

Environmental Learning for the Future - Vermont Institute of Natural Science

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TRACKING

Examine your own tracks in snow, and then look for those made by other animals that are active in the area.

Follow any tracks you come across, and try to piece together something about the animal's activities.

Shadows make a difference in the way a track appears; the best time to find tracks 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.

DESIGNS OF NATURE

TRACKS AND TRACES

Tracks can provide a glimpse into the lives of animals whose actions 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.

There are questions to pose that can help to identify the animal that has left a track. Where is the track? How deeply embedded is it? What is the pattern and size of prints? What animals would you expect to find in this specific habitat?

Track patterns are grouped according to the way animals move: galloping, bounding, waddling, and walking or trotting. Measurements of stride and straddle can help distinguish between animals that create 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 help us determine an unseen animal's identity and tell of its activities and encounters with other animals.

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