

How To Track Wildlife



It is difficult to actually see chimpanzees or other wild animals in heavy cover. Researchers must be able to read signs that animals make and leave behind as they move through the landscape. **Anyone** can read the evidence animals leave behind. All you have to do is take the time to look **carefully** and you will be able to tell what they are doing and even when they do it.

If you are lucky enough to live where it snows in winter, the wildlife in your backyard will write a story in the snow that tells you everything they do when you're not watching them.

Here are some tips for observing wildlife in your own backyard by reading signs they leave behind. Use page 2 for reference on common animal footprints. There are also some good guides to tracking and reading animal behavior listed in the Resources section.

People who stand outside in freezing weather, thumbing through a field guide to animal tracks, may not think winter is much fun. Drawings and pictures of tracks in field guides usually don't look much like the ones you find on the ground. It's much easier to start tracking inside your warm, cozy house. If you have a dog or a cat, let it out in your backyard after a fresh snowfall and carefully watch where it goes, how it moves and what it does. Write down **exactly** what you observe. Bring your pet back in and go out to see how the tracks match up with the behavior you observed. If you don't have a pet, watch a squirrel or a rabbit that goes through your yard.

Even if an animal made tracks while you weren't looking, you can still estimate how big it was or how it moved. Look at how big the tracks are and how far they sink into the snow. Measure the stride, or length between the tracks. Measure the straddle, or width between them. When the stride gets longer—or further apart—you can tell the animals was moving faster.

You will probably only see a few kinds of animal tracks in your neighborhood. Tracks made by dogs, cats, squirrels,

and rabbits are seen quite often. Both dogs and cats leave **four** toes around a central pad, but **only** the dog track shows claws. If you find a line of neatly placed prints that look like they were made by a small dog, you may be looking at the sign of a red fox. Unlike dogs, foxes and cats move very deliberately. Because they carefully place their hind feet on top of the prints made by their front feet, their trail looks like a dotted line in the snow. A dog's sloppy trail goes all over the place.

Squirrels and rabbits also leave tracks that look alike at first glance. They both move like they are playing leapfrog; when they hop, their larger hind feet leave prints just in front of their smaller front feet. There is one **important** difference, though. Squirrels and other animals that climb trees put their front paws side by side when they hop. Rabbits and other animals that move only on the ground put them down at an angle.

Of course, if you see hopping tracks that stop at a tree trunk and disappear, you can be fairly sure the tracks weren't made by a rabbit!



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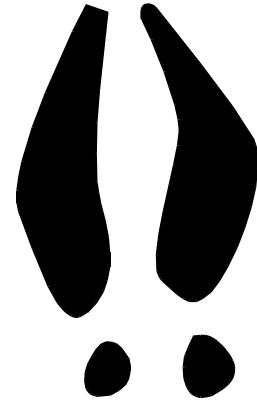
Can **you** find all these prints in your area? If you don't have snow, try finding a muddy area near a wooded area.



Cat



Dog



Deer



Rabbit



Squirrel

Did you find any tracks that **didn't** match these? Draw the mystery track(s) in the box below to see if you can find out what they are later.