

Winter is an excellent time to watch for animal tracks because snow is such a useful medium for track formation. Considerable interest can be added to a cross-country ski outing or a snowshoe hike by becoming familiar with the most frequently encountered tracks. The sketches on these two pages show the tracks of nine of our more common wild mammals. Three of these, racoon, striped skunk, and red squirrel may enter into periods of dormancy and are less likely to be active during the winter months.

Red fox. Since dogs and foxes are members of the same family their tracks are somewhat similar and can be difficult to distinguish. Both have four toenails which usually show in the track. However the fox track tends to be more slender, oval-shaped or pointed at the front than does a dog track. Fox footprints lie in an almost straight line although this may vary with speed and individual gait. Front-foot prints are wider and more sprawling than the narrow more-pointed hind-foot tracks. In a clear print, a distinguishing feature of a fox track is the T-shape of the rear pad.

Snowshoe hare. These large footprints are the most distinctive and easily recognized of our winter tracks. The hare spreads its toes to obtain a snowshoe effect and facilitate over-the-snow travel. Tracks are most frequently found in woodlands, swampy thickets and 'edge' habitats.

Racoon. Hind tracks look like tiny human foot prints while front tracks resemble small hand prints. In winter their tracks are most likely to be found along streams or wet areas with woods nearby.

Mink. Mink and weasel tracks are somewhat similar although mink prints are larger. Although running track patterns differ, a common mink trail shows paired prints with the hind feet tracks almost registering in those made by the front feet. Mink will sometimes dive into snow or push itself along, leaving a trough in the snow. Mink tracks are most commonly seen approaching or leaving areas of open water.

Weasel. Running weasel tracks often appear as paired prints. Distance between pairs of tracks may vary as the weasel varies its length of leap. Trails often loop and double back and may include tunnels beneath the snow. Weasels are found in woodlands or bushy areas.

Striped skunk. A skunk trail shows a pattern of short steps and often follows a meandering trail. Skunks are likely to be encountered in areas of mixed woodland and farmland not too distant from water.

Muskrat. Tracks feature large 5-toed hind feet and smaller 4-toed (the fifth toe is so tiny it hardly shows) front feet. Tracks are most often found along marshes and pond edges.

Red squirrel. These tracks resemble tiny snowshoe hare tracks. They are usually found in mixed woodlands.

Mouse. Tiny tracks disappearing into snow tunnels mark mouse trails. They may be found in wooded, brushy or open areas.

References:

- Murie, Olaus. 1954. A Field Guide to Animal Tracks. (Peterson Field Guide Series). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Claridge, Edward and Betty Ann Milligan. 1977. Animal Signatures: A Field Guide to Some Nova Scotia Wildlife. Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum.