Animal Tracks

and how to know them

Trappers are past masters at track identification. Animal numbers, haunts, dens, and general habits are learned rapidly from impressions in the mud, sand or snow, and fur collectors profit quickly from the experience.

Whether you are a trapper, hunter, fisherman, or simply someone interested in the outdoors and its creatures, knowledge of animal tracks will add vastly to your storehouse of nature. Certainly few pursuits can compare in fascination to tracing routes and habits of wildlife with tracks.

Most people associate snow with animal tracks, since fresh snow reveals the dramatic story of animal life so quickly and obviously. Yet snow is not the best medium for study though the tracking is made easy. The best medium for footprint study is soft mud or fresh, moist sand. Snow melts quickly and soon loses its depth and structure. Drifting flurries also obliterate animal tracks soon so that they are only vague impressions in the snow without outline. Mud holds shape well. So does fine wet sand. First, if you will look for animal signs in good media, you give yourself an advantage.

A mudbank stream is one of the richest and most rewarding places to look for animal signs. Here the mink makes his nightly haunts, the raccoon prowls after crayfish, the muskrat drags his tail after tubers, and waterfowl and shorebirds waddle at will. In our eastern marshes, the rare otter puts in an occasional appearance, and in the more wooded areas, particularly the mountains, the busy beaver shows his workings. All leave distinctive signs, tracks that are easily identified.

After a rain, a good place to look for animal tracks is around sand bars, washed sandy places from fields, ditches, and gully washes. Here you may find almost any kind of tracks from white-tailed deer to opossum.

Although not the best medium for footprint reproduction, fresh earth does furnish a good place for some forms of animal track study. The heavier mammals such as deer and bear leave fairly clear signs in freshly prepared fields and these should not be passed up for study.

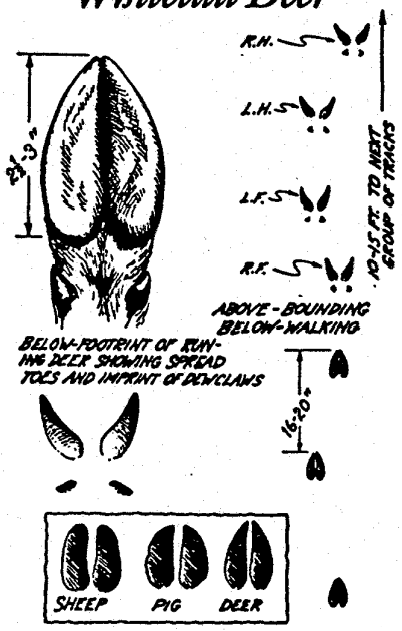
A soft carpet of fresh snow offers a fine picture medium for animal study. The advantage here is that animals can be tracked for distances and their various habits and moods can easily be noted. Best results are obtained from new fallen snow before melting or drifting has begun. The age-old pastime of tracing the routes of animals in the snow is as enriching an outdoor pursuit as any found in nature and those who have not taken part in it are certainly missing a great deal of fun. This, too, is one of the best ways to instruct children in the ways of wildlife.

The following common Virginia mammals have certain characteristics that set them apart. Measurements are in inches with width given first, length second.

Historical records etched in stone tell of man's early interest in animals. Some of the oldest cave markings in the Old World reveal not only man's intense love of nature but also the progress of his intellectual development. The cave dwellers were adept sign makers. So were the early Chinese, Babylonians and Egyptians. American Indians were well versed in sign markings and animal tracks. Early pioneers followed the river courses of the New World to set the stage for the greatest empire on earth, all through an intimate knowledge of animals, their haunts, signs of abundance or scarcity.

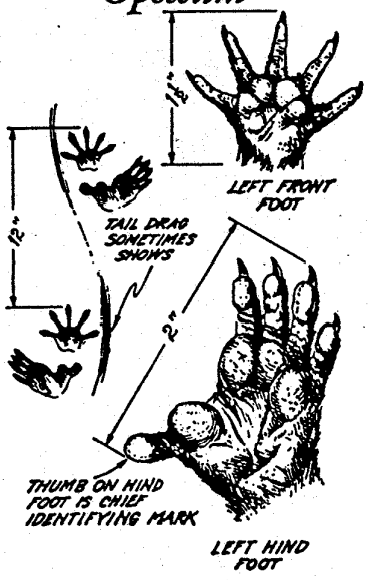
Track markings, then, have been a tool of knowledge for man through the ages. An understanding of animal signs is still important today, and ever will be, for interest and love for wildlife is universal. The modern zoologist and biologist relies heavily on the signs for understanding. The late Ernest Thompson Seton, a renowned American naturalist, followed the tracks of wild animals closely. His superb works, the volumes of *Lives of Game Animals* clearly shows the great import he gave to tracks as a means of identification.

Whitetail Deer



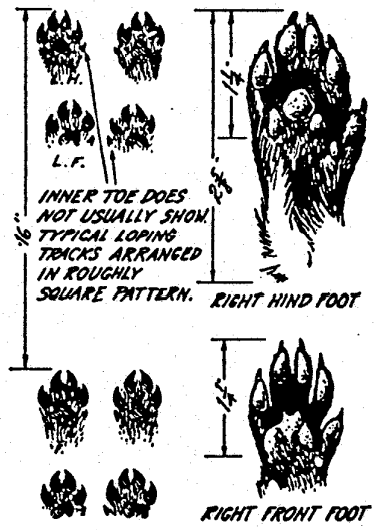
DEER: Easily identifiable by two-part hoof marks, roughly 2"-2½". Contrary to general belief, hoof prints in both sexes are indistinguishable when of the same size. Deer tracks are more sharply pointed than those of domestic hoofed animals.

Opossum



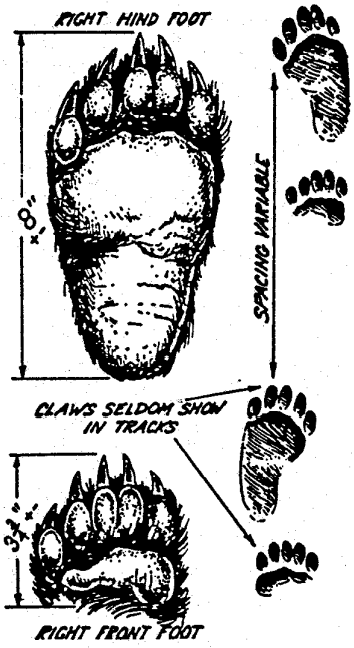
OPOSSUM: Front foot 1¾" × 1½", with five toes and claw marks. Hind foot is 1½" × 2½" with four toes and "opposing thumb." The 'possum track is easy to recognize with its fan-shaped widely separated toes and tail mark.

Mink



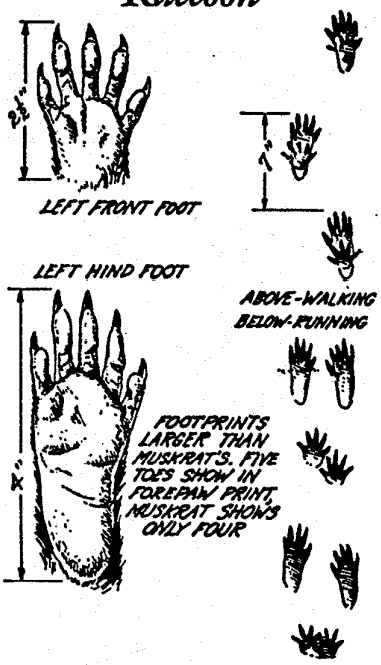
MINK: Although the mink has five toes on each foot, only four show and the claws leave little if any impression. The trail of a bounding mink is made up of sets of four prints very close together. Front foot 1½" × 1½", paired. Hind foot, 1½" × 1½", four-toed, paired.

Black Bear



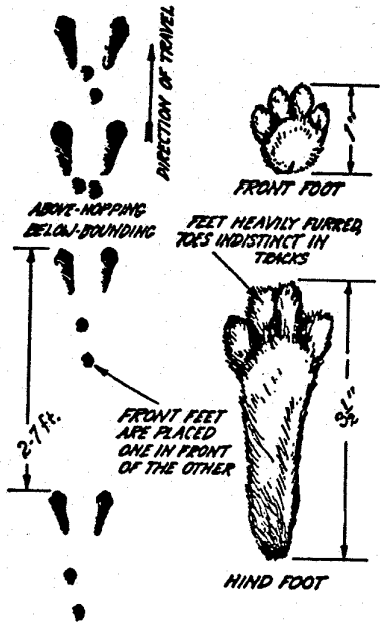
BLACK BEAR: The bear walks on the entire foot as does man and the track resembles human footprints. Both front and hind feet show the mark of five claws. The front foot measures 3" × 4" and the hind foot, 4" × 7" plus.

Raccoon



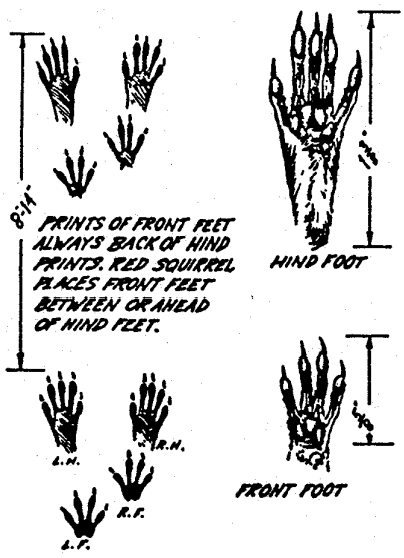
RACCOON: Front foot 2½" × 3", five thin fingers. Hind foot 2½" × 4", five thin toes; 7" stride. Leap, up to 20". Track is often compared to a baby's footprint. The woodchuck track, with which it is sometimes confused, is blunter and rounder than that of the raccoon.

Cottontail Rabbit



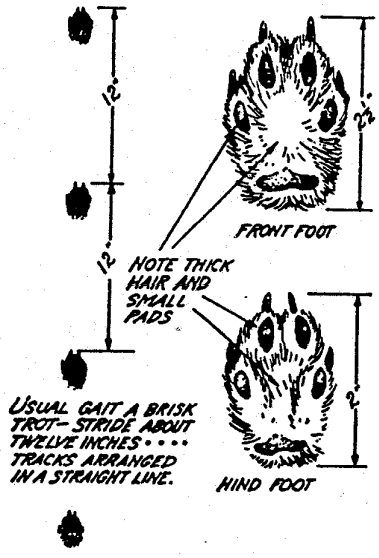
COTTONTAIL RABBIT: The two long marks of the hind feet, placed well ahead of the rounded prints left by the front paws, are the unmistakable sign of the cottontail. Front foot 1" × 1", paired or not. Hind foot 1¾" × 3½", paired. Spread to 5" and leap, to 7'.

Chipmunk



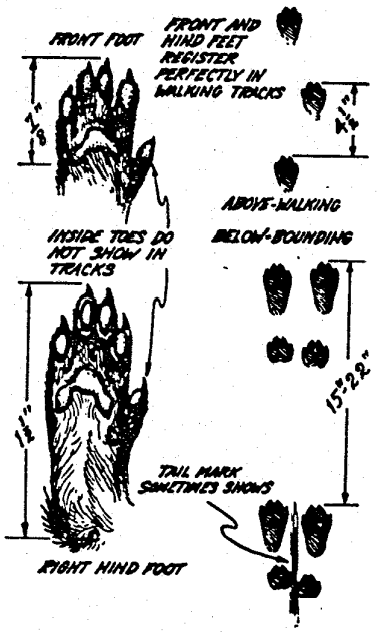
CHIPMUNK: Front foot, ½" × ⅜", five-toed, not together. Hind foot ¾" × 1¼", five-toed paired. Spread to 2": Common around stumps and stone walls.

Red Fox



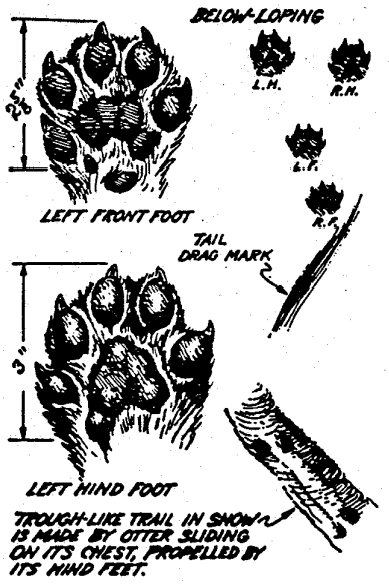
RED FOX: The "string-straight" character of the fox's trail makes it easy to distinguish from that of a small dog, which it otherwise resembles. Front foot is 1½" × 2" and four-clawed. Toe marks are elongated, narrow, rough. Hind foot is 1¼" to 2½", four-clawed. The stride is from 8 to 18 inches in a straight line.

Weasel



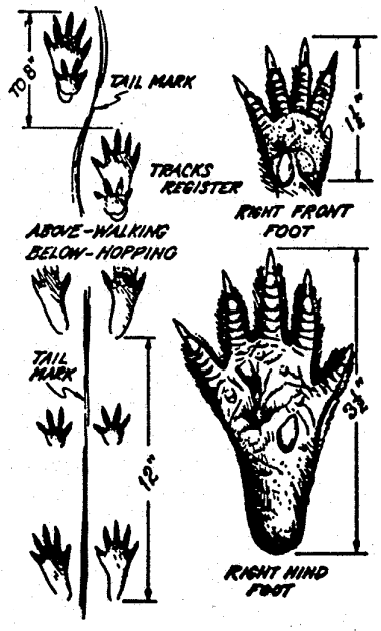
WEASEL: Front foot, 1" × 1", four-toed, paired. Hind foot ½" × 1½", four padded toes. Tracks overlap. Tail drags.

Otter



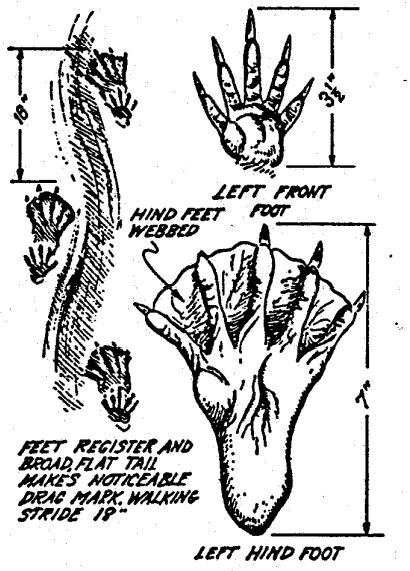
OTTER: Front foot, 2½" × 3½", five padded toes. Hind foot, 3" × 3", hair padded, paired. An otter's feet leave round tracks with distinct toe marks, almost in a straight line with a tail mark that undulates from side to side so that it is usually to the left and then to the right of three paw marks. It is too short-legged to move easily on land.

Muskrat



MUSKRAT: Front foot, 1½" × 1¼", four-toed. Hind foot, 3½" × 1½", five-toed. Three-inch spread and eight-inch stride. Its dragging tail leaves a slender line and the print of the forefoot is characterized by widespread toes, similar to but smaller than a 'possum's.

Beaver



BEAVER: Front foot, 2½" × 3½", five-toed. Hind foot, 5½" × 7", webbed toes. 16" stride. Toes in. The flat scaly tail drags and his broad mark plus the wide webbed feet of this water-dweller make his track unmistakable.