

What the Snow Can Reveal

As February comes to a close this week and each day stretches longer than the one before, I begin to struggle to suppress my spring fever. Fortunately, winter's many enjoyable activities are here to distract me. I know when the snow melts I will miss skiing and snowshoeing, so I am trying to take advantage of my ability to do these things while I still can. And of course, when winter releases its grip on the land, the tracks of animals will become less obvious and harder for me to find and the ways of many forest creatures will go back to being a mystery.

To me, the best thing about snow is the way it reveals what critters are out and about, and what they are doing. Skiing on the 5k loop through the woods of Long Lake Conservation Center is a great way to learn about the local wildlife. Most animals will take the path of least resistance through the snow, so any packed trail will produce quite a few tracks. Unsurprisingly, the most common tracks I have seen this winter are from the white-tailed deer. There are quite a few of these under the bird feeder in my yard! Another track I have consistently seen all winter here at LLCC is that of the deer's predator, the wolf. Wolf tracks look like a dog track, but bigger. They are approximately four to five inches long and three to four inches wide, and like all canine tracks, the claws are visible on a good print. I am always excited to find wolf tracks, and since there is no short supply of deer here at LLCC, the wolves seem to be in a good spot. Both deer and wolves are classified in tracking guides as "walkers", so their tracks are usually found one after the other in a straight line.

Another predator/prey pair whose tracks I have discovered this winter is the fisher and the snowshoe hare. The fisher, a member of the weasel family, is a "bounder." It typically moves by leaping forward, landing with its front feet close together. Its hind feet also move together, landing close to where the front feet just left the ground. Thus, the pattern of fisher tracks often looks like two feet next to each other, and then a space of about one to three feet where the animal leapt through the air, followed by another set of two tracks. If the snow is deep, a belly drag mark may be visible between tracks. The fisher is one of the very few predators of the porcupine, but its main source of food is the snowshoe hare. Snowshoe hare tracks are similar to those of a cottontail rabbit, though larger. They hop by reaching out with their smaller front feet, then landing their large back feet ahead of where the front feet landed. Back feet are less than six inches long and three inches wide.

A few mornings at LLCC we have discovered the tracks of a bobcat that headed down the campus paths on an evening's stroll. Bobcat tracks are about the same size as those of a grey fox, and the two can be easily confused. However, felines have retractable claws, so these do not show up on a bobcat track. Feline tracks also have a more overall round appearance, whereas the middle paw pads on a fox or other canine track point forward. Bobcats are very elusive animals and I think Fisher tracks close as I will come to seeing the actual cat this winter!

Winter's cold, grey skies and barren landscape can make the outdoors look lifeless from the window. But a simple walk in the snowy woods makes it clear that for many animals, the daily business of life goes on just the same in the winter. Without the snow cover, I would not have learned so much about the inhabitants of LLCC's woods. Tracking is a great addition to the many fun activities the winter season has to offer!

References

- Gibbons, A. (2004). *Northern Forest Mammal Tracker*. Huntington, VT: Discover Wonder.
- Powell, R.A. (1993). *The Fisher: Life History, Ecology, and Behavior*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



Fisher Tracks