



Cloverbud Investigators: Career Detectives

Animal Track Stories



Background: Have you walked around outside after a fresh fallen snow, and witnessed the story that mother nature has laid out for you to see on her clean white canvas? Right after a snow is a great time to go on an animal track hunt. While we occasionally see animals such as deer, squirrels, or even rabbits, we often have no idea of all the species sharing our neighborhoods. Looking for signs of their travels is a great way to identify and learn more about their comings and goings. While most of us in Ohio have seen White Tailed Deer, do you know where they go in the morning? How about what they do during the day? Where do they sleep at night? Wildlife Biologists spend their careers answering questions like these. By studying animal signs such as tracks, scat, and surrounding habitat the Wildlife Biologist can come up with theories about their habitat needs. From professionals like these, we know that White Tailed Deer are most active at twilight (dusk and dawn), they call this being crepuscular, pronounced (cre.pus.cu.lar), a term that comes from the Latin word for twilight. Deer often choose this time of day to move around, drink water, eat, and even find a mate. But what about animals that are nocturnal, meaning they only come out at night, like raccoons? How would we know if they live around us? A good way to find out, is to look for their tracks. Raccoons have a habit of rinsing their food with water before they eat it, so a good place to look for tracks is around ponds, creeks or lakes. This makes them a favorite for track hunters, as they often leave their footprints in the wet soil by the water's edge.

Learning to identify animal tracks can not only tell you which animals live in your neighborhood, but by studying them you can learn: about their lifestyles, what they eat, where they go, where they sleep, how big they are, if they were hunting something or if something was hunting them. Who knows? Maybe you can even become a Wildlife Biologist yourself one day.

Whose Foot Print is this?

Just by knowing a few simple facts about tracks, you can learn to start identifying the animal that left them and understand the story the tracks are telling. First, look at the shape of the track. Do they look like a cat or dog paw print, having a center pad and smaller toe marks above it? Or does it look more like an animal with hooves like a cow or goat, with two ovals side by side, which might look round on the back and come to a sharp point in the front. Maybe they look like three little lines in the shape of two "V's" or a "W"? Next look at the size of the print, is it big or small? Is the print pushed deep down in the snow or mud or slightly visible? The impression is important in indicating size and weight of the animal that left it. Can you see any claw marks? Or maybe even marks that might indicate a tail or belly was rubbing the ground. Once you have collected your evidence, you can start narrowing down what animal could have made that print.

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Last Updated by T. Riehm, 1/2019

For example, prints that look like paw prints could have been made by a dog, cat, fox, bobcat, coyote, skunk, raccoon, etc. To narrow it down, look for claw marks. Animals like raccoons, skunks, coyotes, fox and dogs do not have retractable claws and these will often show up in their prints; whereas cats and bobcats retract their claws when they walk and thus you will not see claw marks. Dog, coyote and fox prints will look very similar with front and back feet being similar, whereas: raccoons, skunks, rabbit, mice, beaver, mink, otters, and opossums have front feet that are smaller than back feet. Size can help you narrow down a print even more. Dogs and coyotes will have a larger print than a fox. Fox may also have areas around the print that look fuzzy or marked by hair as they tend to have hairy feet. Opossums will have prints that often look like little hand prints on both front and back feet due to their opposable thumbs. Mice and other small rodents will have very small prints, less than a half inch in size. While squirrels, skunks, mink and otters will have prints about an inch long or larger. Prints that look like hooves would be made by goats, cows, sheep or deer. Size, shape and location tracks that are found will help identify these prints. *For pictures of common animal tracks, you can download the iTrack Wildlife App for your smart phone from the App Store or purchase an animal tracking field guide, we recommend Stokes Nature Guides by Donald and Lillian Stokes.*

What happened here?

Once you have identified who made the tracks, you can start to figure out what was going on at the time the tracks were made. Tracks close together in a line may indicate the animal was walking, while tracks spread out farther may indicate the animal was running. Tracks can even show if the animal hopped (like a rabbit or maybe a squirrel) or pounced like a cat catching its prey. With a little practice, you can start picking up on other signs that will show you if the animal was browsing around eating or bedding down to sleep or maybe drinking from a water source. You may even find more than one set of tracks, maybe a mother with babies or a male and female during mating season.

Local Career Connections: Careers to discuss

- Wildlife Biologist
- Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Educators
- Game Wardens
- Naturalist
- Hunters
- Conservationist





September's Mystery: Who made those tracks?!

Supplies:

- Air Dry Clay
- Track stamps
- Wax paper
- Tooth Pick or Pencil
- Mammal Track Guide



Science Behind:

Animal tracking is a great way to get kids outside and teach them to use their scientific reasoning skills, spatial skills and investigation skills. It is a chance to study their environment and make predictions about what they see. Tracking animals goes all the way back to the days of early man. Being good at tracking prey and avoiding predators was the difference between living and dying. Today tracking animals for food is more of a sport than a survival task for most people. Researcher, conservationist, naturalist and wildlife biologist often use tracks to support decisions about animal populations, migration patterns, the health of a species and much more. For the amateur tracker, muddy stream banks, sandy areas, and freshly fallen snow are good places to look for tracks. Armed with a good animal track field guide, a note pad, and a camera, anyone can try their hand at animal tracking.

What to Do:

Step 1: *Divide the air dry clay into balls about the size of a racket ball (2 inch diameter). Each investigator will get one or two balls depending on group size.*

Step 2: *Have the investigators work the clay in their hands to soften it.*

Step 3: *Next, shape the clay into a flat disc about the size of their palm and place on wax paper.*

Step 4: *Have the Investigators select a track stamp and carefully press it onto their clay disk to make a print. Take care to lift the track up so they don't damage the print. Then carefully scratch the species name with a toothpick or pencil below their print.*

Step 5: *Allow the clay to dry for about 24 hours. It can then be painted with tempera or acrylic paints.*



(Optional) Animal Tracks Game

Using preprinted animal tracks and animal pictures, make a set of matching playing cards. Challenge players to match the track to the animal that made them.

Field Trip: Take your investigators outside, locations around ponds, creeks and beaches are great places to look for tracks. Caution safety precautions and adult supervision is a must around water. If it happens to be snowing or you have just had lots of rain track can be seen around feeders, in gardens and even on hard concrete surfaces. Optional equipment: magnifying glasses, digital camera, sketch pad, and pencil. Have your investigators record animal evidence, such as tracks, scat, feathers, hair, egg shells etc., then report back on their findings.

Optional Activity: Have the investigators make up a story about the animal evidence they found. Allow them to draw a picture or create a model of what the animals may have looked like, with markers, paint or clay.

Go Over Findings:

Where could you find tracks at your house?

What animal tracks did we learn about today?

How could we use the skills we learned in a career?

What jobs can you think of that we could use this skill set?

Investigate, Create, & Take: Investigators can take with them:

- ✓ Tracks they made with the clay
- ✓ Animal Tracks Game
- ✓ Animal Tracks Guide sheet

Sources: *Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife* <http://wildlife.ohiodnr.gov/>

Additional Links: Many places offer print cards you can purchase.

<https://www.prekinders.com/animal-tracks-book/>



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