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Eye on the Environment: The Last Snow

By Melanie Parker for The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

You may be starting to pack away the skis and pull out the fishing rods. Or you may be finding yourself planning the garden and your summer vacation. But one local resident reminded me the other day, “we could still be in for a fair bit of winter.”

Spring in this part of the Rockies actually brings a fantastic opportunity to appreciate our native wildlife. While the snowpack may be shrinking from the warmth of some of our sunniest March days, it still brings delight to those who can identify animal tracks. Whether you are cruising your woodlot snowmobiling the back roads, or hiking a nearby backcountry trail, you will find that there are natural history lessons at every turn. As many of you know, we teach animal tracking classes in the Swan Valley. We do so as part of an overall program to keep people connected with their environment. It is one thing to read in a book that snowshoe hares require dense cover for forage and hiding cover. It is another thing altogether to go out and observe a multitude of large furry foot tracks in the unthinned part of the forest, and a rare fleeing track in the middle of the open terrain.

Hunters and trappers have long known the wonder of tracking animals. The snow offers a perfect canvas on which the story of the animal is painted in great detail: where it sleeps, where it stalks, where it kills, what it eats, how it manages through an increasingly human dominated environment. Our business, Northwest Connections, has been working for ten years to integrate science and local knowledge in the conservation of the forest habitats of western Montana. Nowhere does that integration of traditional ways of knowing and science come together better than in our carnivore snow track surveys.

When approaching the art and science of animal tracking, it is important to work with a live teacher. No book, or newspaper article, can provide you with the confidence to master this skill. The books are helpful, but they are better finishing tools than beginning tools. Most provide you with perfectly drawn tracks with every detail showing. In reality, what you are likely to find out there will be a pattern of marks in the snow, lacking details such as claws, or the shape of the heel pad. We like to tell people to back up their focus and first look at the overall scene. What kind of habitat are you in? Is this a riparian area along a frozen stream? Is this a densely wooded upland? Are you at a wilderness lake in central Idaho? Each of these places suggests a totally different suite of animals. In the first case: mink, otter, beaver might be more likely. In the second case pine marten or roughed grouse. And in the final case, perhaps not out of the question to luck into a wolverine track.

Next, it is important to learn to recognize the overall pattern of the tracks. Each family of animals tends to lay down their own pattern. Squirrels and weasels might be a similar size and be found in the same habitat, but their track patterns are completely different. The important thing about this fact is that you can identify many species of animal without ever confirming the specific track details such as toes, claws, and foot shape just by knowing their habitat associations and their gait pattern.

One recent example comes to mind. We encountered a highly weathered set of tracks that led off into the lodgepole pine forest in a straight line. By measuring the length of the animal's stride we could see that it was either a large mountain lion or a wolf that left the track. We guessed that it was a lion, but had to follow it for over a mile to confirm this fact. We did so by finally tracking this cat to where it had previously killed a deer and we found the carcass in a condition that only a cat would leave...neatly cached under the protective canopy of a spruce tree.

Quite often, in this sort of situation, you will be able to find a track that has been protected from the elements, and finally brings you to a place where the books can be of more use. In this case, we found a few tracks that clearly displayed four toes arranged in a circular pattern, no claws, and a heel pad that was much wider than it was tall. All of these clues confirmed our suspicion that we were tracking a mountain lion.

But the point of animal tracking is not simply to identify what we're seeing and make ourselves feel good. The point is to put ourselves in the place of student, and let the animal guide us to what we need to learn about wildlife and habitats, how they interact, and what our place in that world is.

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As people interested in forestry and forest health, we can learn all sorts of critical information that can assist in our forest management decisions. The available science on wildlife-forest interactions is miniscule compared to the body of knowledge waiting to be discovered first hand by the willing observer. Watching your local squirrels as they forage and nest, your local deer as they eek out a living in the winter, or your local weasels as they hunt hungrily about will teach you multitudes about what kind of forest structure and species should be retained for their benefit. Questions about where to gather firewood, where to harvest saw logs, where to carve out roads and trails, where to apply fire, or where to simply let natural processes rein...can be answered in part by the tracks and trails that we see on the forest floor.

As we prepare to say goodbye to winter, let us celebrate all that it offers. I for one will be sad when the last snow melts.

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