



THE FIRST SNOW

By Melanie Parker

The first snow of the season brings added delight to those who can identify animal tracks. Whether you are cruising your woodlot or walking through the county park, you will find natural history lessons at every turn.

At Northwest Connections, we have been teaching animal tracking classes in Northwestern Montana for the past ten years. We do so as part of our mission to reconnect people with their environment in ways that provide them with a direct experience of ecology. 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 prints in the unthinned part of the forest, or a rare fleeing track in the middle of the open terrain.

Hunters and trappers have long known the wonder of tracking animals in the winter. 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, and how it manages in an increasingly human-dominated environment.

When approaching the art of animal tracking, it is important to work with an experienced tracker. No book, or magazine article, can provide you with the confidence to master this skill. The books are helpful, but they are better as finishing tools than beginning tools. Most texts provide you with perfectly drawn tracks showing every detail. In reality, what you are likely to find in nature is a pattern of marks in the snow lacking details such as claws, or the shape of the heel pad.

When encountering a track, think...

- ▶ 1 Habitat
 - ▶ 2 Gait Pattern
 - ▶ 3 Track Characteristics
- ... In that order.

First, we teach people to back up their focus and examine 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 a riparian area, mink, otter, and beaver are likely candidates. In a densely wooded upland, you might be tracking a pine marten or roughed grouse. And around a wilderness lake, it is not out of the question that you have come across 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 can be of similar size and 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 into the lodgepole pine forest in a straight line (shown left). By measuring the length of the animal's stride we saw that it was either a large mountain lion or a wolf that created the track. We guessed that it was a mountain lion, but followed it for more than a mile to confirm our theory. By following the tracks to a location where it had previously killed a deer, we found the carcass in a condition that only a cat would create...neatly cached under the protective canopy of a spruce tree (shown right).



Taking clues from tracks found in the snow.

Quite often, in such a situation, you will find a track that has been protected from the elements. If so, tracking books can be helpful. 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.

The point of animal tracking is not simply to identify tracks that we have encountered, but to let the animal guide us to learn about the interactions between wildlife and habitats, as well as our place in the natural world. By tracking animals and learning more about



Mountain lion kill found in the forest.

their behavior and critical habitat, Northwest Connections provides assistance to private and public land owners to manage their lands to protect wildlife habitat.

The available science on wildlife-forest interactions is miniscule compared to the body of knowledge waiting to be discovered firsthand by the willing observer. You can learn about animals and the kind of forest structure they require to thrive, right in your own backyard. Watch squirrels forage and nest. Observe deer as they seek out a living in the winter. Study a fox from afar with binoculars. By knowing how your backyard wildlife behaves and where it lives and feeds, you may make different choices about where you gather firewood, apply fire, or take a walk to minimize your impact on wildlife habitat.

Winter is a wonderful time of the year. For those of us who live in snowy regions, winter offers a unique opportunity to track wildlife and learn more about their behaviors and habitats to increase our knowledge and ability to minimize our impact on wildlife habitat.

Melanie Parker is the executive director and co-founder of Northwest Connections, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in the Swan Valley in Montana.

NORTHWEST CONNECTIONS

Northwest Connections (NwC) is a nonprofit partner of the National Forest Foundation that engages in community-based projects in the Swan Valley in Northwestern Montana. The Swan Valley is a forested mountain valley situated between the Bob Marshall Wilderness to the east and the Mission Mountain Wilderness to the west. This ecosystem sustains lynx, wolverine, grizzly bear, bull trout, elk, moose, mountain lions, goshawks, and eagles.

As you can imagine, wildlife roams across property lines as it travels within a specific ecosystem. Communities that are adjacent to public lands have a special interest in wildlife. NwC assists public land managers and private land owners to better understand, conserve, and restore critical wildlife habitats and habitat connections in the Swan Valley and surrounding areas in the Flathead National Forest.

As part of a large-scale project to census grizzly bears across the entire Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), NwC hired and involved a number of local community members. The NCDE includes Glacier National Park and parts of the Flathead, Lewis and Clark, and Lolo National Forests in Northwestern Montana, and is one of the last strongholds of the grizzly bear in the lower 48 states. Of the six established grizzly bear recovery zones, the NCDE is the third largest in area, potentially harboring the greatest number of grizzly bears. It is the only zone contiguous to a strong Canadian population. For these reasons, the NCDE may be the best prospect for the long-term survival for the grizzly bear.

NwC began involving local citizens in grizzly bear monitoring ten years ago. "We train local residents to help document track sightings while they are out working or recreating, or as part of an organized effort to gather data for the grizzly census," explains NwC executive director Melanie Parker. For this reason, the group possessed unique expertise to offer the Northern Divide Grizzly Bear DNA Project, when it was initiated in 2003. NwC was the only non-government organization on the project, working with federal and state agencies,

tribes, and private land owners, to survey nearly eight million acres of rugged Rocky Mountain terrain.

Whether teaching community members how to track wildlife or tracking wildlife movement for land-protection purposes, the NwC staff will be making their own tracks in the snow this winter. To learn more, visit www.northwestconnections.org.

Animal Tracking Clinic

Northwest Connections offers two introductory workshops on snow tracking. Participants learn how to recognize animals by track, gait pattern, habitat selection, and behavior. The two-day courses take place on weekends in 2007: February 17-18 and February 24-25. For more information, visit www.northwestconnections.org/education.htm.



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