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NOVEMBER 2008

PROFESSOR OF PAW PRINTS 

Melanie Parker offers pointers on identifying animal tracks in Montana's Swan Valley.

By [Dina Mishev](#)

Melanie Parker doesn't mind following in others' footsteps. Living in Montana's Swan Valley between the Bob Marshall and Mission Mountain wilderness areas, Parker straps on snowshoes each winter to trail after wildlife from bobcats to wolverines. She and her husband, Tom, teach the tricks of tracking through Northwest Connections, a community nonprofit they founded. (406) 754-3185, northwestconnections.org.

Q Why track in winter?

A It may be cold, but tracking's a lot easier when there's a uniform landscape like snow. Other times you might get individual tracks in dust or mud, but it's harder to follow a trail consistently.

Q The basics?

A Even if you're like me and can't draw a stick figure, sketching a footprint will imprint details you wouldn't notice otherwise. Also, learn to recognize gait patterns rather than just footprints. Hunching over and counting the number of toes is more work than you need to do.

Q How did you get good?

A I didn't learn a whit from books or studies. I just went out with people who knew more than I did—hunters, trappers.

Q Your favorite animal to follow?

A Pine martens are exciting. They are exceptionally curious, bouncing all over the place and never holding a line.

Q Is it ever risky?

A Some people might think going into the woods when it's 10 degrees out to follow wild animals is dangerous, but it's probably safer than driving to the store.

Q Do you have people dashing through streams and running up mountains?

A This isn't an extreme sport. Anyone fairly active will be fine.

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