The Old Naturalist - Animal Tracking

What is the best way to find out what type of animals live in your neighborhood? How can you find out what type of animals crossed the trail or were around your home in the night? In winter, studying animal tracks will give you a lot of information about the critters that are active in your area. Tracking is all about reading the patterns left in the snow. The best snow depth to read animal tracks is 1-4 inches.

What to do: 1. learn different tracking patterns
    2. look for tracks in the snow and keep a record of what you find by marking the box.
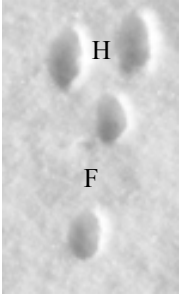---

There are three basic groups of track patterns to learn:

1. Hoppers: Hoppers make a clump of four tracks in the snow, a space, then another clump of tracks.
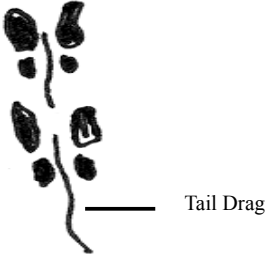The large tracks are the hind feet (H) and the small tracks are the front feet (F).

Direction arrow

Squirrel
Small front feet
are together

Rabbit
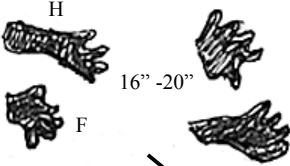One front foot is
ahead of the other.

Direction arrow

Tail Drag

Mouse
Small tracks often disappear
under the snow into a little hole.

2. Walkers - "big foot" and "little foot"
In identifying the three species below, the important things to look for is the size of the track and the position of the front foot and the hind foot. Also, the beaver and muskrat are only found in wetland areas, whereas raccoons are found in many different habitats, including wetlands.

16" -20"

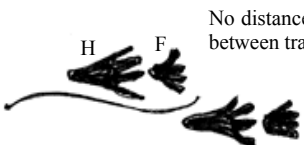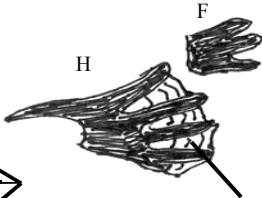Direction arrow

Raccoon
Tracks look like a baby's foot and hands

No distance
between tracks

Muskrat
Tracks are rarely seen.
Found in marshes

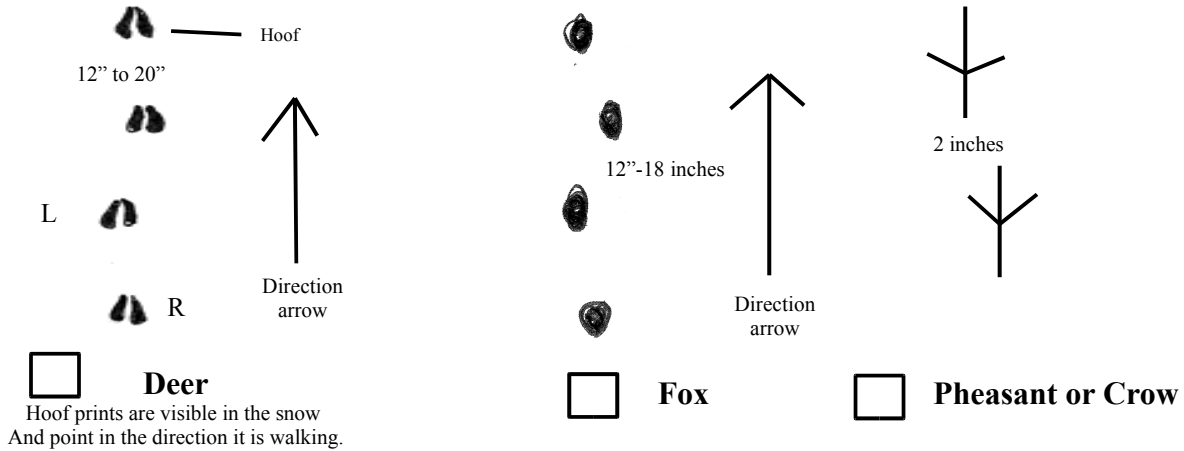Direction arrow

Webbed

Beaver
Large hind foot (6"); found near water
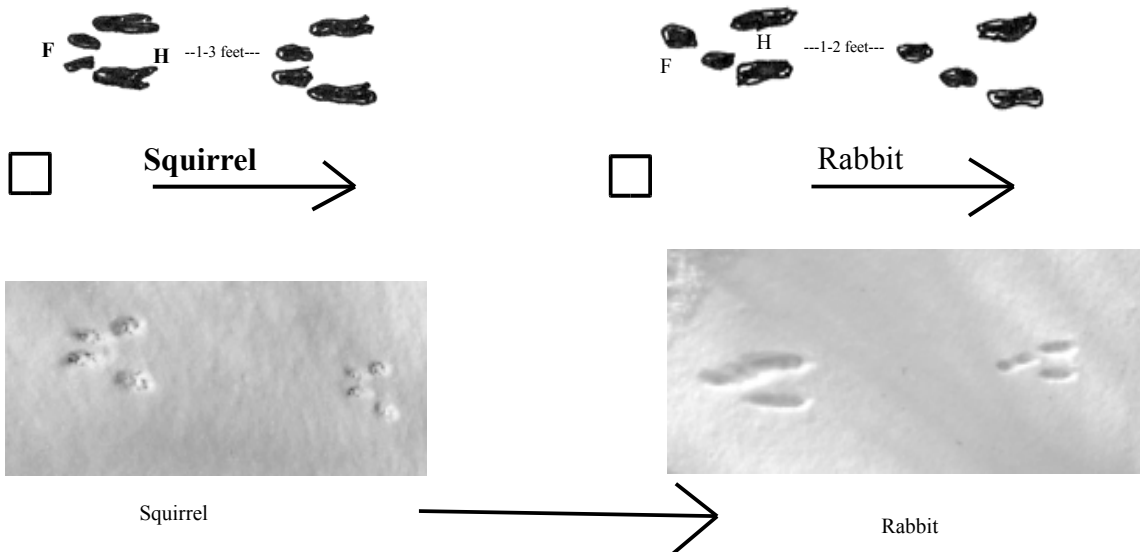
Raccoon

Beaver Hind foot

3. Straight line walkers

Both deer and fox step with the hind foot falling exactly in the track of the front foot. Thus, the pattern in the snow appears that the animals are two-legged. This behavior is called "registering"and it helps the animal to conserve energy when walking in deep snow.

Hoof

12" to 20"

L

R

Direction arrow

□ **Deer**

Hoof prints are visible in the snow
And point in the direction it is walking.

12"-18 inches

Direction arrow

□ **Fox**

2 inches

□ **Pheasant or Crow**

After you determine whether it is a **hopper, straight line walker, or a "big foot-little foot"**, look at the pattern closely and notice how many inches there are between tracks or clumps of tracks. Also, think about the habitat in which you are seeing the tracks. Some animals are restricted to certain habitats (e.g. beaver, mink, and muskrat are found in wetlands).
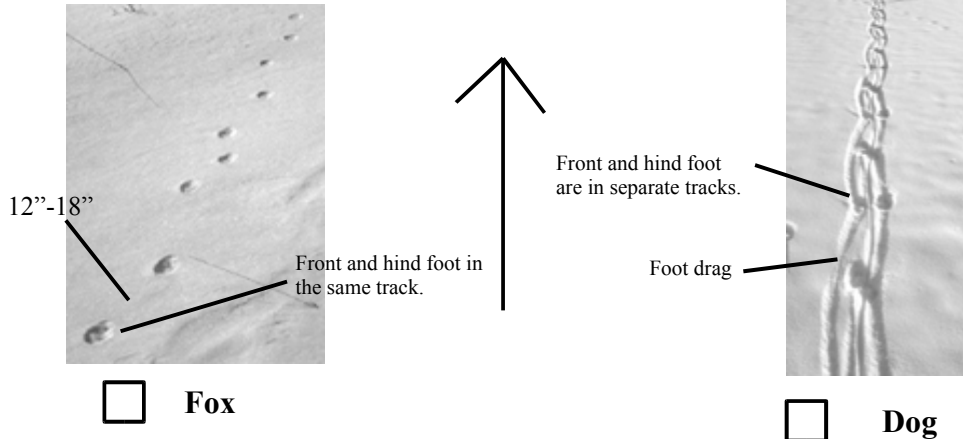
Squirrel vs Rabbit

F   H ---1-3 feet---

□ **Squirrel** →

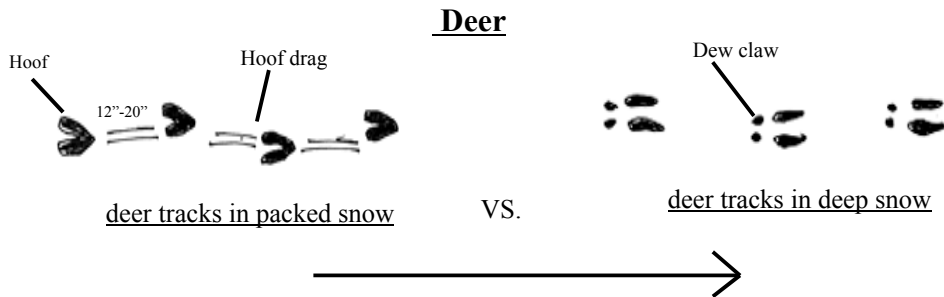F   H ---1-2 feet---

□ Rabbit →

Squirrel →

Rabbit

Squirrel tracks often end at the base of a tree. Gray squirrel has 1-3 feet between clumps of tracks. Red squirrels have 1-2 feet between clumps. Note that the smaller front feet (F) on the squirrel are together while the rabbit has one of the front feet ahead of the other. The pattern of squirrels and rabbits is confusing, since the larger hind foot is in front. Both of these animals are hoppers, and the front feet go down and then larger hind feet hop over the front.   Copyright *Nature Seeker Workbook*, 2013.

Fox vs Dog

12"-18"

Front and hind foot in the same track.

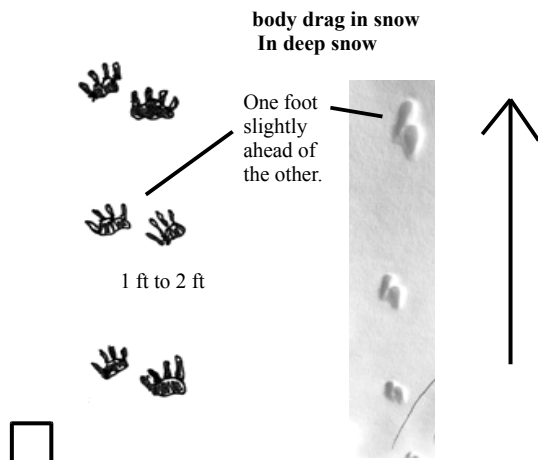Front and hind foot are in separate tracks.

Foot drag

☐ **Fox**

☐ **Dog**

Foxes (photo on the left) leave a neat pattern in the snow because the hind foot steps in the front foot track (registering). Registering helps a fox to conserve energy, when walking in deep snow. Its cousin, the dog (photo on the right), does not "register", and tends to drag its feet in the snow.

Deer

Hoof

Hoof drag

Dew claw

12"-20"

deer tracks in packed snow   VS.   deer tracks in deep snow

Deer also register, with the hind foot walking in the front foot track. A deer hoof is easy to see when the snow is packed, and they usually drag their hooves. However, in deep snow the hooves are more spread out and the dew claw is visible in the back of the track.
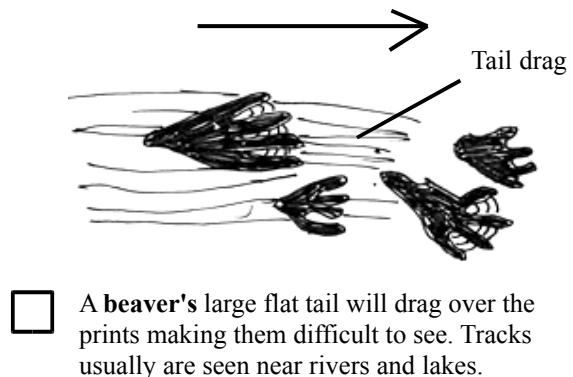
Weasel Family – Mink and Weasel

**body drag in snow
In deep snow**

One foot slightly ahead of the other.

1 ft to 2 ft

Beaver

Tail drag

☐ A **beaver's** large flat tail will drag over the prints making them difficult to see. Tracks usually are seen near rivers and lakes.

☐

Mink have paired tracks with one foot slightly ahead of the other. In deep snow, its body drags in the snow. The **weasel** is similar, but smaller (one foot between tracks). Weasel tracks often disappear down a hole in the snow.

Give yourself three points if you went out looking for animal tracks. Give yourself one point different type of track you found.
Total possible points: 16 Total for you: _____

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