

leap, or run, but we most often walk; a Rabbit can walk or gallop, but it almost always gallops. Our northern animals can be divided into four groups, based on their most common gaits and the patterns of tracks they create. Below is an outline of these four divisions, followed by a detailed discussion of each division and the animals within it.

Familiarize yourself with these basic patterns, so that when you find a track you can make a good guess as to which of four groups it belongs to; then use the detailed descriptions to make a more accurate identification.

#### FOUR BASIC TRACK PATTERNS

A.



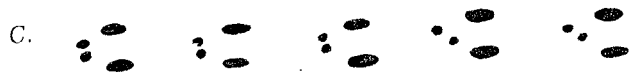
A track that appears to be nearly a straight line of single prints is characteristic of all canines (Dog, Fox, Coyote), felines (Cat, Bobcat, Lynx), and ungulates (Deer and Moose). It is produced by walking or trotting — the most common gaits of these animals.

B.

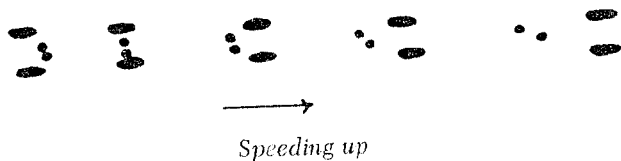


Evenly spaced pairs or bunches of prints are the characteristic pattern of all members of the Weasel family except the slower-moving Skunk; this pattern includes the Weasel, Mink, Marten, Fisher, and Otter. It is created by bounding, a gait well suited to animals with short legs and long bodies.

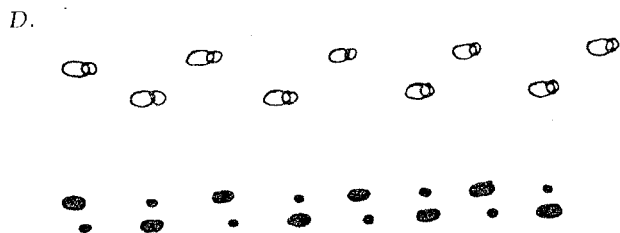
When moving at slower speeds, they all tend to show the same variations; these are the faster gaits of the Skunk.



This pattern is a gallop, produced by the landing of the hind legs ahead of the front legs. It is the most common gait of the Rabbit, Hare, Squirrel, and Mouse.



Shrews and Voles are also included in this division, for they sometimes gallop; their tracks are best compared to those of the Mouse, since all three make very small tracks.



These are two types of walking created by wide, heavyset animals as they waddle along. This is the characteristic track of the Raccoon, Muskrat, Opossum, Porcupine, and Beaver.

## Detailed Descriptions of Track Patterns

In each of the detailed sections is a chart, which shows what animals you can expect to find in the city, suburb, country, or wilderness. All identification relies on eliminating those choices which are unlikely, and these charts will help you do that.

Two measurements are often used in the descriptions: *stride* and *straddle*. Stride is the measurement from the center of one print or group of prints to the center of the next one in the trail. This is extremely variable, depending on the speed of the animal, and is listed here only as an average for the most common gait of each animal. When it is too variable, it is omitted.

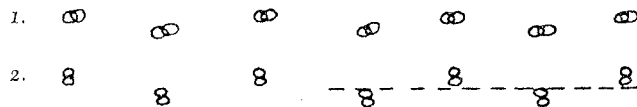


Although stride is only of minimal importance for identification, straddle is very important and far less variable. Straddle is the width of the trail, and in cases of similar track patterns often is the key identifying factor. Nevertheless, it is still variable and only to be used as a guideline.

AA.



All two-toed, and most four-toed, animals make this pattern. When walking they place a hind foot directly in the print of the front foot. Sometimes the hind foot lands behind or to the side of the front foot, making these two variations:



Notice that the paired prints in the second variation do not form a straight line like those of the Weasel family in pattern B, but are placed to either side of an imaginary line drawn down the center of the trail.

All of these animals display gallop patterns also, but they never gallop for very long in winter before changing back to more normal gaits.

What to expect where:

CITY                      SUBURB                      COUNTRY                      WILDERNESS

Cat \_\_\_\_\_

Dog \_\_\_\_\_

Fox \_\_\_\_\_

Deer \_\_\_\_\_

Coyote \_\_\_\_\_

Bobcat \_\_\_\_\_

Lynx \_\_\_\_\_

Moose \_\_\_\_\_

**CAT** Distinguished from others by small circular print (1 inch in diameter) and short stride. Average stride: 6-8 inches. Average straddle: 3 inches.

**BOBCAT** Circular print twice as large as that of Cat, and found mostly in wilderness. Average stride: 10-14 inches. Average straddle: 4½ inches.

**LYNX** Circular print almost twice as large as Bobcat's; toes seldom show through thick hairs on bottom of foot. Found only in Canada and northern border of United States. Average stride: 10-14 inches. Average straddle: 7 inches.

**DOG** Dogs vary so in size that no generalizations of stride or straddle are useful. Oval shape distinguishes Dog prints from those of all Cats, but it is still easy to confuse Dog  
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with Fox or Coyote. In general, their tracks show large feet, often being dragged, and their trail expresses a playful attitude toward their environment, rather than the keen awareness and stealth expressed in Fox and Coyote trails.

**FOX** Straight lines of neat, oval prints, often following prominent aspects of the landscape: for example, a stone wall, the side of a woods road, a swamp edge, or a ridge. It expresses careful curiosity rather than the abandoned curiosity of a Dog. Travels long distances between hunting areas at a constant trot. Average stride: 12-15 inches. Average straddle: 3-4 inches.

**COYOTE** Difficult to distinguish from Red Fox prints, for the size of the oval print and the length of the stride are similar. The straddle when walking or trotting tends to be larger. The prints are distinguished from those of the Dog by awareness and cunning expressed in the trail. Average stride: 12-15 inches. Average straddle: 4-6 inches.

**DEER** Deer and Moose almost always leave some indication of their two-toed hoof at the base of their print. Since these animals are heavier than any of the canines or felines listed above and have thin, long legs, their feet penetrate the snow's crust and leave a deep wedge-shaped mark. Sometimes the foot drags between steps.



In deep snow other deer will follow in the same steps, forming even deeper wedges. Average stride: 14-16 inches. Average straddle: 6 inches.

**MOOSE** Extremely large prints, sinking deep into the snow. Found only in Canada and northern border of United States. Average stride: 24 inches. Average straddle: 10 inches.

BB.



This pattern is created by both hind feet landing in the same spot as the front feet. Sometimes they land a little behind, creating separate bunches of three and four prints.



When the pattern forms pairs of prints, they are usually on a slight diagonal, rather than directly opposed.

What to expect where:

CITY	SUBURB	COUNTRY	WILDERNESS
Skunk _____			
Weasel _____			
	Mink _____		
	Otter _____		
		Fisher _____	
		Marten _____	

SKUNK



A slow animal that leaves a meandering trail of small, round prints as it searches for hibernating insects, fruit, or small rodents. The skunk is included in this group because when moving faster it has the same variations of gait as the rest of the Weasel family does when moving more slowly.



Skunk tracks always end at a ground den or similar lodging. Average straddle: 2½–3½ inches.

Note: Since all members of the Weasel family, except the Skunk, have similar patterns, you must use habits and size of straddle to distinguish between them.

**WEASEL** The Weasel is the smallest of the Mustelids, but it varies most in size, since the Least Weasel is only half the size of the Long-tailed Weasel. Nevertheless, Weasel tracks and straddles are substantially smaller than those of the Mink, with whose track it might be confused. The Weasel often tunnels, stays away from directly entering water, and its body sometimes makes a connecting impression between prints. Average stride: 10–16 inches. Average straddle: 2 inches.



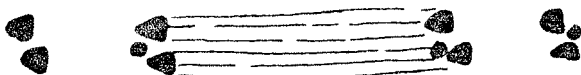
**MINK** Mink hunts in and near water, and its straddle averages an inch larger than that of the Weasel. Weasel tracks can be minute, but Mink tracks are slightly larger than those of a House Cat. The only other Weasel family print near water would be that of the Otter, but the Otter's is over three times the size of the Mink's. Mink have large hunting circuits and frequently travel overland. Average stride: 18 inches. Average straddle: 3 inches.

**MARTEN** Found only in Canada, and near the northern border of the United States — an unlikely print to find. The Marten lives in the forest and climbs trees as well as a Squirrel does. If a paired diagonal print leads to or from a tree, it may be that of a Marten. The Fisher also can climb trees but does not do so as frequently, and its print is almost twice as large. Mink and Marten could be difficult to distinguish except by habits, one entering water, the other climb-

ing trees; but the Marten is so rare that in most areas it should not even be considered. Average stride: 24 inches. Average straddle: 3½-4 inches.

**FISHER** The Fisher exists only in Canada and near the northern border of the United States. Its tracks are not rare in wilderness areas, and they are easily recognized by their large size. The tracks are often found in the mountains traveling cross-country. They could be confused with those of the Otter, since Otters also travel overland at times, but the Otter track is larger and the animal slides regularly in traveling. Average stride: 28 inches. Average straddle: 6 inches.

**OTTER**



Otter is the largest of the Weasel family and its track is easily recognized, since it slides with its body on the snow whenever doing so is easier than bounding. The slides are 8 to 10 inches wide and start and end with prints. Otters hunt primarily in water, but their tracks are so much larger than Mink's that there is no possibility of confusing the two. Otter tracks are not rare and may be found far from water. Average stride: 36 inches. Average straddle: 8-10 inches.

**CC.**



What to expect where:

CITY                      SUBURB                      COUNTRY                      WILDERNESS

Squirrel \_\_\_\_\_

Mouse \_\_\_\_\_

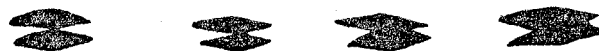
Shrew \_\_\_\_\_

Vole \_\_\_\_\_

Rabbit \_\_\_\_\_

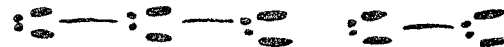
Hare \_\_\_\_\_

**SQUIRREL** Squirrel tracks begin and end at trees and rarely differ from the gallop pattern. In deep snow the hind and fore print on each side make one impression, resulting in this track:



Squirrel tracks often lead to diggings in the snow where nuts were buried in the ground. The strides of Squirrels vary greatly but their straddles may be some clue to different species. Chipmunk — Straddle: 2-3 inches. Red Squirrel — Average straddle: 3-4 inches. Gray or Fox Squirrel — Average straddle: 4-5 inches.

**MOUSE, VOLE, SHREW** These three types of animal make the smallest prints in winter. The Mouse typically gallops, sometimes leaving a tail drag.



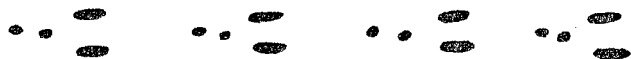
It can leap long distances, and its track can be told from the Chipmunk's by having a straddle less than 2 inches and by the occasional tail drag.

Vole and Shrew also may gallop, but they usually run. The main distinction from Mouse tracks is that these tracks vary between galloping and different types of running.



The two are distinguished from each other by the size of the straddle — the Shrew's is smaller. Mouse — Straddle: 1½-2 inches; mostly gallops. Vole — Straddle: 1½-2 inches; varying gait. Shrew — Straddle: less than 1½ inches; varying gait.

#### RABBIT, HARE



Rabbit and Hare always gallop, and tend to place their smaller front feet one behind the other, rather than paired like the Squirrel and Mouse.

#### Rabbit and Hare:



#### Squirrel and Mouse:



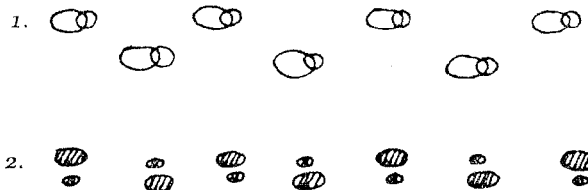
The hind feet of Rabbits and Hares are typically much larger than the front feet, and in the case of the Snowshoe Hare, they are so large that they are unmistakable (see Four-toed Prints). On the other hand, the Cottontail in shallow snow may show only the toes of its hind feet, making its trail look like the gallop of a House Cat.

In deep snow, the Cottontail may place both hind and front feet close together, making an impression where only its



body and tail show. Rabbit — Average straddle: 4-5 inches.  
Hare — Average straddle: 7-8 inches.

#### DD.



This pattern is seen only for heavyset, slow-moving, wide-straddled animals. All five of these animals spend a lot, or even the majority, of their time moving in other environments: the Beaver and Muskrat in water, and the Raccoon, Opossum, and Porcupine in trees. Hind feet are always larger, their print showing either on top of or overlapping with the front print (1, above), or alongside the smaller front print (2, above).

If these animals gallop, it will be for only short distances, and the spacing between gallops will be small, indicating a slow and lumbering movement.

What to expect where:

CITY                      SUBURB                      COUNTRY                      WILDERNESS

Raccoon \_\_\_\_\_

Muskrat \_\_\_\_\_

Opossum \_\_\_\_\_

Beaver \_\_\_\_\_

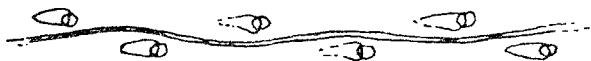
Porcupine \_\_\_\_\_

### RACCOON



Raccoon tends to place its larger hind foot beside the smaller front foot, as shown above. The pattern may be difficult to distinguish from the Opossum's, for the latter frequently walks with the same gait. But the Opossum trail sometimes has a tail-drag, while the Raccoon's never does. Details of hind prints easily distinguish the two (see Five-toed Prints). Average stride: 8-12 inches. Average straddle: 3½-5 inches.

### MUSKRAT



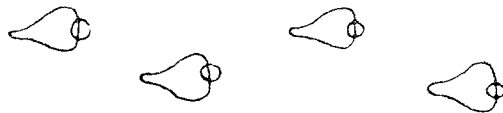
Muskrats typically overlap their hind and fore prints and their tails may or may not make marks. Their prints are distinguished from those of the Raccoon by smaller front feet, occasional tail-drag, and by entering deep water or plunge holes. When the Muskrat is in its lumbering gallop, the tail mark shows irregularly between sets of prints.



The Muskrat, of course, does not climb trees as do the Raccoon and Opossum. Average stride: 3-4 inches. Average straddle: 3-4 inches.

**OPOSSUM** Opossum gaits vary, making patterns similar to those of both Muskrat and Raccoon. Their stride is larger than that of the Muskrat and usually smaller than that of the Raccoon. Average stride: 6-8 inches. Average straddle: 4-5 inches.

### BEAVER



The hind foot of the Beaver makes an impression that is easily recognized, even when obscured by melting. The large webbed area and narrow heel distinguish its prints from those of the other four animals in this category. A Beaver track will not be far from water, and the animal does not leave the safety of water except for a good reason, so look for evidence of gnawing nearby. Average stride: 4-6 inches. Average straddle: 6-8 inches.

### PORCUPINE



Porcupines make a wide distinctive trough or series of prints. The prints are large and rounded, and they always alternate. Often arcs to either side show where the animal is lifting its feet around while waddling along. Its quilled tail usually drags over the trail, making a winding pattern over the prints. The trail usually ends at trees or dens before very long, at which point you may see evidence of chewed bark, or scats.

Many other animals will use a Porcupine trail also, since in deep snow it packs down a nice trough. Certain Porcupine trails between trees may be repeatedly used and worn down. Average stride: 5-6 inches. Average straddle: 8-10 inches.