

FEBRUARY 1-14, 2015 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow

As members of the EastView community venture out and about during winter, I thought it would be interesting to write about what you might see in the snow other than domestic dog or cat tracks while walking or snowshoeing.



Gray Squirrel front foot print

Photo © Dick Harlow

TRACKS AND TRACKING

When the snow flies and animals, especially mammals, have to find food, they leave footprints; they make tracks of where they are going and where they have been. They also can leave tell tale markings that will tell you what is going on in their life.

There are all kinds of signs in the woods, in the fields or on ice about what animal had been there and what it was doing, if we only knew how to read the signs. If you decide you would like to try to develop or learn this skill there are several things you need to keep in mind.

- A. What do the tracks tell you about the animal's movement? Does it walk, trot, run, hop or plod?
- B. Are there specific parts of the track or track run where you can take a picture of the imprint and a picture of the trail or run? If no regular camera is available use your cell phone or iPhone or take notes. Even a close-up or sketch of a single paw print is helpful.
- C. What other clues can you discern from the tracks, such as what **habitat** you are in, defecation (**scat**), prey item if it's a predator, or food item that it has been eating and any noticeable habitat aspects of where the tracks were found?
- D. Follow the tracks for a short distance to see what the animal might have been doing or coming from to give clues as to who it is and what it was up to. If you like to snowshoe out and about our meadow and field, you will have the opportunity to see an abundance of tracks: possibly coyote, fox, rabbit, mice, weasel, mink, deer, etc. along with the possible dog or cat and human.

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With any track you are looking at there are several tricks to determining who made them.

For example, the Eastern Cottontail Rabbit and Gray Squirrel are hoppers. A rabbit puts its two front feet down and pushes off with its hind feet, thus the hind feet **will always** land in front of the front feet. The two front feet will be seen in the snow as two small round blobs, whereas the hind feet will be two semi-rectangular blobs ahead of the front feet. Where the front feet are relative to the back feet (close or far apart) depends on what the rabbit was doing at the time. However, it is very difficult to see the actual impression of the foot and toes in snow.



Eastern Cottontail Rabbit, hopping

Photo © Dick Harlow



Eastern Cottontail Rabbit, sitting

Photo © Dick Harlow

The Gray Squirrel does the same, but the track of the Gray Squirrel will show its fingers and toes as seen in the first image. Mice are similar, but when looking at rodents to determine the species you have to go by size of the print as well. Again, a good image will help you make the right decision. Then you can make a comparison with the many references and pictures provided, either through the Internet via Google or the references I provide at the end of this article.

The Coyote and Red Fox can either walk, or trot so their patterns tend to be in a straight line, one footprint in front of the next, called a **direct register print**. They will sometimes use what is called a side trot, but whatever the track does, it will come

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back to a direct register if it is a Coyote or Red Fox. So, if you think you are looking at a Coyote or Fox track, the trick is to follow the track for a short distance to see if it goes from whatever gait, straddle or weird change of step and see if in fact the track turns into a straight line. If so you are most probably looking at one or the other dependent on the size of the paw print. If you take a picture of the track with your iPhone you can compare it with tracks in the many references that are available.



Eastern Coyote track in line called a direct register print

Photo © Dick Harlow

Notice, that you can observe in the picture above that the paw prints are almost in a straight line.

The one thing to remember is that domestic dogs, being well fed, do not have to hunt for food. Consequently, they will expend a large amount of energy in their running about when they are outside. A fox or coyote on the other hand needs to find food to survive. Therefore, their prints will be purposeful and direct. That is why you can never attribute a straight line, direct register print to a domestic dog! The print below is a single paw print of an Eastern Coyote.



Coyote paw print,

Photo © Dick Harlow

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Dried Scat, (not as disgusting as some may think), the tell tale remains of what an animal has been eating can give you more clues as to who the tracks belong to, especially if they tend to be jumbled or diffused due to snow melt. All of these skills are a means to an end, determining who made the tracks and what the animal was doing. As can be seen in this picture below, there are seeds of berries visible in the scat. Many mammals eat berries in the summer and fall. What is in the scat, its shape, long, narrow, fat, wide and consistency can determine who it belongs to.



Possible Red Fox scat, Photo © Dick Harlow

With this knowledge what a fun way to spend a winter morning or afternoon!

References:

1. **Mammal Tracks and Signs**
A Guide to North American Species
By Mark Elbroch
Stackpole Books
2. **Mammal Tracks and Scat**
Life-Size Tracking Guide
By Lynn Levine and Martha Mitchell Heartwood Press
3. **Tracking & The Art of Seeing**
How to Read Animal Tracks and Signs
By: Paul Rezendes
Harper Collins Press

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Downy Woodpecker



Downy Woodpecker, (Male), *Picoides pubescens*
Photo © Dick Harlow

Most people usually know this common woodpecker of our woodlands and wood edges. The difficulty is trying to determine whether you are observing a Downy or a Hairy Woodpecker. Both birds have practically the same black and white coloring. The basic difference is in size, the Downy is small and the Hairy is larger. Easier said than when you are looking at just one bird. Easier still when looking at both, then maybe we can see the difference in size.

Notice the red color on the back or toward the top of the head. The red signifies this bird is a male. This red mark is the same on both species and forms in the same area on both species. However, with juvenile males of both species, the red is more on the forehead. Also, look at the size of the Downy, relatively small by comparison to other woodpeckers and with a shorter bill, significant when looking at a Downy as compared to a Hairy Woodpecker. A Hairy Woodpecker is 9+ inches in length and a Downy is 6+ inches. A Hairy Woodpecker is a third longer and bigger with a longer bill than a Downy Woodpecker.

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Hairy Woodpecker, (Male), *Picoides villosus*

Photo © Dick Harlow

The female Downy, below, has no red, is all black and white, short, thus looking smaller when placed side by side with a Hairy, a short-billed woodpecker. The profile gives a good view of the relatively short bill and smallness of this woodpecker.



Downy Woodpecker, (Female), *Picoides pubescens*

Photo © Dick Harlow

We have both species here at EastView, with a predominance of Downy Woodpeckers. Downys like woodland edges more than do Hairy Woodpeckers. However, as trees

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mature here at EastView we should see more Hairy Woodpeckers. But, winter levels the playing field, where birds will seek out food regardless of habitat preference.

Weather Tidbits

February First Two Week Totals

All Measurements taken at solar noon (1230 EST).

PRECIPITATION

February 1-14, 2015

Total Precipitation: 46.1 mm or 1.8 inches

Precipitation includes rain and snow melt.

Snow Days: 10

Snowfall for February 1-14: 620 mm or 24.4 inches

Overcast Days: 7

WIND First Two Weeks

Highest wind gust: February 2, 26 MPH, Direction: North

Average Wind speed for February 1-14: 4.2 mph,

Dominate Wind Direction: North

Days w/wind gusts 20-30 MPH: 7 Days w/wind gusts 30 MPH: 0

TEMPERATURE First Two Weeks

Mean Temp: -12.1 C⁰/10.2⁰F

High Temp: 0.1 C⁰/32.2⁰F

Low Temp: -29.0 C⁰/-20.2⁰F

DAYS OF:

Min. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32⁰F: 14 days

Min. Temp.: -18 C⁰/-0.4⁰F: 7 days

Max. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32⁰F: 13 days