TRACKS AND SIGNS OF NORTH DAKOTA WILDLIFE

We don't necessarily need to see an animal to know if it was in the area or to learn something about its habits. Whether it is tracks in the mud or snow, scat found alongside a trail, or a burrow dug into the side of a creek bank, there is a wealth of information left behind by wildlife. Those signs provide us information on which species are present, where those animals live and travel, and what they like to eat. We just need to know how to read the clues they leave behind. Sometimes reading those clues can be straightforward and other times it takes a bit of practice and a greater understanding about the lives of the animals in question. We hope this brochure will help get you started in your practice of reading the wildlife clues all around you.

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BIG GAME

White-tailed deer

White-tailed deer walking pattern in snow

White-tailed deer tracks:
Front track slightly larger
Front–1-3/8" - 4" L,
7/8" - 2-7/8" W
Rear–1-1/4" - 3-1/2" L,
3/4" - 2-3/8" W
Walking stride: 13" - 26"

Mule deer

Exhibits a "hopping" movement called stotting where tracks are separated by an 8-15 foot stride.

Mule deer tracks:
Front track slightly larger
Front–2-1/4" - 4" L,
1-5/8" - 2-3/4" W
Rear–2" - 3-1/2" L,
1-1/2" - 2-3/8" W
Walking stride: 15" - 25"

Pronghorn

Lack dew claws.

Pronghorn tracks:
Front and rear tracks similar size
2-1/8" - 3-1/2" L
1-1/2" - 2-1/4" W
Walking stride: 17" - 26"

Moose

Similar to deer, but larger. Adult bulls will have blunt hoof tips.

Moose tracks:
Front track slightly larger
Front–4-1/2" - 7" L,
3-3/4" - 6" W
Rear–4" - 6-1/2" L,
3-1/2" - 4-1/2" W
Walking stride: 28" - 44"

Elk

Elk tracks:
Front track slightly larger
Front–3" - 5" L,
2-1/2" - 4-1/2" W
Rear– 2-1/2" - 4-1/2" L,
2-1/2" - 4" W
Walking stride: 18" - 35"

The big game hoof prints above show a "relaxed" track of walking on even terrain. A hoof print may be spread apart or "splayed" (see left) as an animal attempts to get more traction moving downhill, running or in loose soil. Except for pronghorn, tracks may show dew claw imprints in soft substrate.

Bighorn Sheep

Hoof print generally less pointed in front.

Bighorn sheep tracks:
Front track slightly larger
Front–2-1/8" - 3-3/8" L,
1-1/2" - 3" W
Rear–2" - 3-1/4" L,
1/2" - 2-3/8" W
Walking stride: 12"- 25"

FURBEARERS

Coyote

Dog family – *Canidae* – tracks typically show nail prints. Track pattern can vary depending on whether animal is walking, galloping or trotting. Distinctive triangle shaped rear pad.

Coyote tracks:
Front–2-1/2" L, 2" W
Rear– 2" L,1-1/2" W
Walking stride: 13-1/2" - 17"

Red Fox

Dog family – *Canidae* – nail prints often present. Dense fur in foot often makes track less identifiable.

Red fox tracks:
Front foot larger than rear
Front–2 1/4" L, 1-3/4" W
Rear– 2" L, 1"W
Walking stride: 8" - 12"

Bobcat

Cat family – *Felidae* – no nail prints – retractable claws. Exceptions may be climbing, on slippery surfaces and chasing prey. Rear pad has two front lobes. Twice the size of housecat tracks.

Bobcat tracks:
Front/Rear– 2" L,1-3/4" W
Walking stride: 6" - 14"

Mountain Lion

No nail prints - retractable claws. Rear pad has two front lobes. Tracks are round and asymmetrical.

Mountain lion tracks:
Front– 3" L, 3-1/2" W
Rear– 3" L, 3" W
Walking stride: 19" - 32"

Badger

Often displays imprints of large front claws. Trails often begin and end with a burrow.

Badger tracks:
Front track significantly larger than rear
Front–3-1/2" L, 2" W
Rear–2-1/2" L, 1-3/4" W
Walking stride: 5-1/2" - 9-3/4"

Raccoon

Toes of the front feet of a raccoon appear "finger-like".

Raccoon tracks:
Front–1-1/2" L, 2" W
Rear– 3" L, 1-1/2" W

Striped Skunk

Distinctive long nails on front tracks. Walking patterns often irregular.

Skunk tracks:
Front– 1" L, 1" W
Rear– 1-1/2" L, 1" W

Long-tailed Weasel

Trails often explore holes, nooks and crannies in brushpiles, under buildings and under the snow. Weasels often move in a bounding pattern like mink.

Long-tailed weasel tracks:
Front/Rear–1" L, 1"W

Mink

Tracks often appear pointy and sharp. Snow movement pattern often a hopping or loping in sets of two.

Mink tracks:
Front/Rear– 1-1/4" L, 1-1/2" W
Walking stride: 3-1/2" - 7-3/4"

River Otter


Diane Hargreaves

Otter tracks in snow are often accompanied by sliding marks or tail dragging.

River otter tracks:
Front/Rear– 2" L, 2-1/4" W
Walking stride: 5-3/4" - 14"

Muskrat

A "shelf" impression surrounds the toes of the hind feet created by the stiff, long hairs that aid in swimming.

Muskrat tracks:
Front– 1" L, 1" W
Rear– 2.5" L, 1" W

Beaver

Distinctive larger rear track with webbed toes. Beavers drag their tails which often cover up their tracks.

Beaver tracks:
Front– 2" L, 2" W
Rear– 6" L, 4" W

Fisher

Similar to marten, only larger. Males twice as large as females.

Fisher tracks:
Front/Rear– 2 ½-4" L, 1 1/2- 4" W
Walking stride: 7" - 11-1/2"

American Marten

Brian Fauske

Bottom of foot can be hairy, to the point where it will obscure pad details. Male marten may be confused with female fisher.

Marten tracks:
Front/Rear– 1-1/2" L, 1-1/2" W
Walking stride: 5"- 9"

OTHER ANIMALS

Gray Wolf

Gray wolf tracks:
Front– 4-1/2" L, 4" W
Rear– 4" L, 3-1/2" W
Walking stride: 13" - 24"

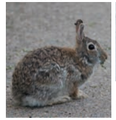
Dog family – *Canidae* – nail prints most often present. Tracks may be confused with a large domestic dog.

Black Bear

Bear tracks:
Front–6" L, 4" W
Rear–7" L, 5" W
Walking stride: 17" - 25"

Large five-toed track with wide pad. Heel may or may not show.

Cottontail



Cottontail tracks:
Rear track significantly larger
Front–1-1/4" L, 1" W
Rear–2-1/2" L, 1-1/2" W

Furry feet often obscure track details. Rabbits move by hopping.

White-tailed Jackrabbit

White-tailed jackrabbit tracks:
Front–2-1/8" - 3-3/4" L,
1-1/2" - 2-5/8" W
Rear–5" L, 2-1/2" W

Track pattern bounding with a 9"-72" stride.

Porcupine

Porcupine tracks:
Front–2-3/4" L, 1-1/2" W
Rear– 3-1/2" L, 1-3/4" W

Front track significantly smaller than rear. Large claws often seen in imprints. Pads have characteristic pebbly surface.

Fox Squirrel

Fox squirrel tracks:
Rear track larger
Front–1-3/4" L, 1" W
Rear–2-1/4" L, 1-1/4" W

Often confused with rabbit tracks; rabbit front feet appear with one in front of the other.

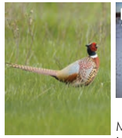
BIRDS

Wild Turkey

The short rear toe may register as a nail hole to rear of 3 forward pointing toes.

Wild turkey tracks:
4" - 5" L

Pheasant



Male (rooster) track is larger than female (hen).

Pheasant tracks:
2" - 3-1/2" L

Waterfowl (Ducks, Geese and Swans)

Feet are webbed and leave prints that generally look like the example provided, size being the difference:
Duck: 2-3" L
Goose: 3-4" L
Swan: 6-7" L

Songbirds

Songbird tracks generally take on this appearance and include many species like robins, finches and sparrows. Tracks vary in size.

ANIMAL SIGNS

Tracks are one way to determine what wildlife, and possibly how many, are presently living or passing through a particular habitat. Without actually seeing tracks, there are other ways to determine the presence of wildlife. The following section may aid you in identifying some common signs left behind by North Dakota wildlife.

Deer Scat – Deer are common across North Dakota. A deer's waste can be found in the form of droppings called scat. Deer scat is generally found in piles where they have bedded or where they were standing. Scat may also be found deposited along a trail as the animal moved. Scat is pointed on one end and slightly concave on the other. Scat is generally oblong and about ½-inch in length. Scat can be light brown when deposited but turn dark brown a day or two later.

Deer Scrape and Trail – Narrow trails are formed as deer move from one location to another. A good example of daily movement is from an area where deer bed to an area where deer feed. The bare ground in the middle of the deer trail pictured above is called a scrape. Scrapes are created by bucks in the early fall as a place to leave their scent so other deer know they are in the area. Scrapes are most often made below overhanging branches. To leave scent, a buck will rub on an overhanging branch with a scent gland near the eye called the preorbital gland.

Deer Rub – Bucks rub their antlers on smaller trees to mark their territories before the breeding season. Rubs are often found on the edges of woods or along trails. A variety of tree species are rubbed, but favorites include willow, cottonwood, aspen, ash and caragana.

Deer Bed – A sign that deer were in an area may be as simple as where the deer laid to rest or sun itself on the side of a hill. Areas where deer have rested for any length of time form a "bed." Deer beds are a couple feet long and generally an oval shape. There may be several in one location. In vegetation, they are recognized by flattened grass. In snow, they may be recognized by melted snow and ice or exposed earth. Often, scat can be found in bedding areas.

Upland Game Dust Bowls – Upland game birds such as sharp-tailed grouse, pheasant and turkey "bathe" in dust to help minimize body parasites. Dust bowls are found in locations where soil is exposed such as cultivated tree plantings or under dense brush. Feathers and tracks can help you identify the species.

Upland Game Scat – Pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse and turkey droppings are generally lighter in color compared to mammals. They have a distinctive white coloration which is the result of dried urine products (the birds' digestive system is different than mammals and the feces and urine exit the body from the same opening). Scat is often found in piles where birds have roosted overnight.

Grouse Snow Cave – Sharp-tailed grouse have survived in North Dakota for thousands of years and have evolved to live through extreme winter conditions. Grouse will burrow into a snow bank before a blizzard to protect themselves. After a storm, they will fly out of the snow with no weather related injuries. Snow caves can often be identified by the scat inside. This one also shows a wing mark left by the bird as it escaped the hideaway. Birds such as pheasants, which were introduced to North Dakota, have not adapted to this climate and will stand in the wind, snow and/or cold temperatures until they may die of exposure.

Cottontail Habitat – Cottontail rabbits live in many places, but prefer shrubby or brushy cover. They may also use underground dens of other animals. Trails going into holes, hollow logs, or dense brush patches is a good sign cottontails are present. Look for a round scat about the size of a garden pea to confirm it is a cottontail.

Rabbit Sign – Cottontail rabbits and the white-tailed jackrabbit can be found statewide. Both have scat almost perfectly round. Cottontail scat is smaller and can be compared to the size of a small garden pea (¼-inch in diameter). Jackrabbit scat has a diameter of 3/8-inch or larger. Rabbits eat many vegetative materials, but tree bark becomes a mainstay when snow blankets the landscape. Bark taken from trees at or directly above snow level is a telltale sign rabbits are in the area. Small shrubs and tree limbs that have been bitten off at a 45 degree angle is evidence rabbits have been busy.

Vole Damage – Voles are small, mouse-sized mammals that live in the prairies of North Dakota. They are an excellent food source for many species including fox, coyote and birds of prey. Vole populations cycle from low to high densities over a number of years. In winters with heavy snow, voles are still active beneath the snow, eating what vegetation they can find, including tree bark. Damage beneath the snow revealed after the spring thaw is a sign the vole population is high.

Owl Pellets – Owls are predators that eat many types of prey, but they cannot digest bones, hair and feathers. Owls regurgitate this material in the form of a "pellet" that can look somewhat like mammal scat. You can identify the difference because they are many times found in large groups where they have been dropped below an owl's favorite perch. They are also light grey in color and full of hair and small undigested bones.

Shrike Sign – The shrike is the only carnivorous songbird in North Dakota. Shrikes feed on small mammals such as mice and voles. They will also eat snakes and grasshoppers. While carnivorous, they do not have large talons and power to dispatch prey quickly. Shrikes will "stab" their prey onto the thorn of tree such as a plum or use barbwire to assist in their kill. They will return later to consume the prey.

Skunk Sign – Skunks eat a variety of foods. Sometimes grubs become a favored target. Sod that is turned over in a pattern like the one shown is a good indication a skunk has been in the area. Raccoons are also known to similarly dig for grubs.

Porcupine Scat – Porcupine scat is slightly more than ¼-inch in diameter and up to an inch in length. It is slightly pointed on the ends. The color is light brown, which is a result of the digestion of tree bark, the animal's favorite food. Porcupine scat is often found in large piles at the mouth of an underground den or under a tree in which it has been feeding. Bark stripped from high in a tree is a sign a porcupine has been at work.

Coyote Scat – Scat is usually in a single cord and pointed at the ends. It often contains hair, which is more identifiable as the scat ages. Scat varies in size up to five inches long.

Moose Scat – Moose scat is larger than elk and deer and is oblong and rounded on both ends. It is about ¾-inch in diameter and an inch to an inch and a half long. Scat is generally found in piles in good moose habitat.

Woodpecker Sign – Woodpeckers build nest cavities in dead or dying trees. Holes in the side of trees are an indication woodpeckers have been in the area. Woodpeckers also feed by burrowing into trees for insects. These smaller holes are less visible than nesting cavities, but can occur on wood siding.

Pocket Gopher Sign – Pocket gophers are small mammals that make their living mostly underground. They are seldom seen, but a telltale sign of their presence are fresh, fine mounds of black soil pushed onto the surface. Another sign in spring are round tubes of black earth in ditches and fields. These were created under the snow in winter when gophers were busy excavating tunnels and pushing dirt into tunnels in snow.

Snake Sign – Snakes often do not leave large amounts of sign. In fine soil such as sand, a snake "track" can be located. The other indication of a snake may be a shed skin.

Beaver Lodge, Den and Cache – This photo shows three signs that a beaver frequents the area. First, a lodge on the far side of the bank where a beaver family will live all year. Second, a cache of sticks stored in the water for a winter food source. Finally, a dam in the foreground which likely created the water habitat for the beaver to survive. These water habitats also provide places for many other wildlife species, such as river otters.