

From Second Nature, January 2010

When in Doubt... Follow them Out!

The cold has settled in, a blanket of snow covers any remnants of the summer toys that did not make their way to the garage. Winter hides all evidence that children reside here. As you begin to wonder how you will survive the remaining weekends indoors with the kids, a squirrel scampers along the fence leaving his tiny footprints behind. Closer examination reveals many little prints in the snow of varying shapes and sizes.

This discovery illustrates why winter can be the best time of year for embarking on a quest to learn more about the animals that live in your backyard. Birds, squirrels, rabbits, raccoon, deer; they are all out there waiting to be discovered. It is up to you and your young companions to uncover their signs. Like so many outdoor learning experiences, tracking can be as simple or as complex as you make it.

Invite your children outdoors to look for signs that animals are living nearby. Rediscover your sense of adventure and follow their lead. They have so much to teach us with their curiosity and sharp senses. Remember, wild animals are wary of humans. They possess incredible skills of flight and camouflage. If these creatures hear, smell, or see us coming they will be long gone before we get near. However, we don't need to see them to know they are there. We can look for some of the many signs these animals leave behind... tracks, scat, hair, tree markings. When you come upon animal tracks in the snow and are unsure of whose they are remember, when in doubt, follow them out! Pursue the trail to see where it takes you. Perhaps it will lead you to a den, or maybe you will discover fur along the way. And if you find a really wonderful track, you can actually make a track cast. Making track casts is an activity that can be fun for the whole family. Materials you will need are:

- Strips of waxed cardboard (cut from milk carton) to make a collar 2 1/2 inches wide by 12 to 15 inches long
 - Plaster of paris purchased at hardware stores, drug stores, or hobby shops
 - A mixing stick
 - Two tin cans (one for water and one for mixing)
 - Water and Snow
 - Paper clips
 - Knife
- First find a suitable track. Remove all sticks and debris around the track. Make a circle around the print with the strip of cardboard; attach the ends with paper clips. Press the cardboard about 1/2 inch into the ground/snow. The cardboard serves as an outer mold for the plaster. Pack some snow behind the cardboard for reinforcement.
- Next, in the tin can mix the plaster of paris with water and some snow while stirring with a stick until the mixture is cold and the consistency of pancake batter. A very thick plaster paste begins to set almost immediately. A thinner mixture gives you more time.

- Now fill the track with the plaster, covering the inside mold to a depth of 1 inch below the top of the cardboard. Wait for 10 minutes to allow the plaster to set hard.
- To pick up the cast after it is hard, cut around it with a knife lift out the piece from a point well underneath the track. Allow the cast to dry for a day or more to completely harden.

Here are some other resources that could make your explorations more successful:

- **Camera** – to photograph all signs of animals in your backyard.
- **Ruler** – to measure the size of the tracks... put the ruler next to the track when you take the picture so you have something to reference the size later on.
- **Flashlight** - Shine the light on the track, at an angle. This casts shadows inside the track and highlights its features. Sometimes, it's the only way to see whether there are claw marks.
- **Tracking Journal** – take some time to make a journal to record your tracking adventures in.

“Stokes Guide to Animal Tracking and Behavior” by: Donald and Lillian Stokes

“Mammal Tracks and Scat: Life-Size Tracking Guide” by: Lynn Levine and Martha Mitchell

<http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/caer/ce/eek/nature/track.htm>

<http://www.bear-tracker.com/mammals.html>