

Diaries in Snow

A friend tells me that this was mid-winter week, the lowest point on the average temperature curve. The polar temperatures that pushed south this week were right on schedule. If passing this point makes you happy, you are in good company; I suspect that nearly every wild creature that lives in this frigid world would be pleased to know that the tilt toward spring has begun. I feel a bit guilty for wishing the cold and snow would stay. High on my list of reasons for loving winter is the opportunity to learn about the lives of our shy neighbors; snow is the blank page upon which their activities are recorded.

Even if you haven't studied the alphabet used to write these diaries in snow, if you follow any trail far enough a picture of the maker and its life will begin to emerge. For some sets of tracks, this takes less than a minute. If the maker bounded in a straight line from one tree to another, you know that the squirrel is most at home in the trees. The porcupine's trail will lead from a hemlock tree, the ground littered with nip twigs, to its nearby den in a hollow tree or in a tumble of rock.

Let's follow some tracks that go farther, a line of footprints, evenly spaced, that I encountered on a midwinter afternoon. As we set off, we find the track maker moved steadily along the base of a steep hill. When logs bridge depressions, the track maker walked along the log. Small obstacles were vaulted over. At one such obstacle, a fallen branch next to a fir thicket, the pattern changes. A pair of clear prints, glazed by ice, can be seen on one side of the branch. Behind them, on the branch, are the impressions left by hind legs. The track maker waited here, perfectly still, long enough for its paws to melt the snow. The next tracks are not a continuation of the regular gait but show a large bound. There is no mystery about what happened for a few dots of blood and the tail of a red squirrel remain on the packed snow.

The footprints next lead us to a rock that juts above the snow about a foot. The prints show that their maker paused before starting off on a more easterly path. In two hundred feet we come to a stump a couple of feet tall. The tracks vary here too, and on a hunch, we squat down and inhale. The pungent aroma is one familiar to any cat owner. While smelling pee is not glamorous, this evidence clinches the trail maker's identity. As the trail continues to zig-zag from one scent-post to the next, we suspect that it is mating time for bobcats. The setting sun casts a warm glow on this west-facing slope and the cat's tracks lead to a ledge above a small wetland. Here we find a small shelf of rock where the leaves have been compressed by a resting furry body.

We enjoy the scene and reflect on what we have read. We have learned that bobcats, or at least this one, like to use log bridges. We have learned that this one hunted by hiding and pouncing. We have learned about the sort of marking posts he uses, and suspect that he is advertising for a mate. We have been with the bobcat napping on the leafy bed in the afternoon sun.

One hundred years ago, when I taught tracking classes for sixth graders, I used the mnemonic of the three P's— Print, Pattern, Place—to get kids to begin to think like detectives when they encountered tracks. A clear footprint contains a wealth of diagnostic information— the number of toes, size, shape, claw marks Any tracking book will have good descriptive information on footprints. Pattern refers to the arrangement of prints on the snow. This pattern reveals the size of the animal, the gaits it uses, how fast it is moving, and even its state of mind. The spacing of bobcat prints showed that the cat's gait alternated between a walk and a trot. In some places his walk speed increased to an overstep walk, leaving a pattern of paired prints that is characteristic of bobcats. The best book I have found for interpreting gait patterns is Mark Elbroch's *Mammal Tracks and Sign*. The third P, Place, involves knowing something about who lives where. Tracks that lope along rivers and go in and out of the water were made by mink or otter. Rabbit tracks in a thicket in Brattleboro were made by a cottontail; in higher elevation Marlboro, they would be the tracks of a snowshoe hare. The best way to bulk up your detective skill is to get out with an experienced tracker (check www.beec.org for upcoming opportunities).

By the time you read this, the polar cold will have departed and a wonderful, wintry weekend will lie before you. I hope you will have a chance to strap on some snowshoes, get out into this beautiful season, and read the diaries written by feet on snow.

