

Because furbearing animals are primarily nocturnal and are naturally secretive, often the only signs of their presence are tracks left on their nightly travels.

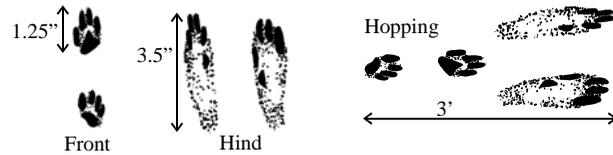
An ability to identify animal tracks greatly increases our enjoyment and knowledge of animal activity. Unfortunately, there are no precise formulas or laws to follow in track identification.

Always take into account the type and the condition of the material in which the track is found. Such varying conditions as mud, hard dirt, sand, or deep, drifting, or thawing snow make it difficult to find a distinct track. A track from the same animal is much larger in mud than in dry, hard dirt. Do not rely only on track size for positive identification. A small coyote may leave the same size print as a large fox. An animal also will leave a different pattern of tracks when it walks than when it runs or bounds.

A good tracker is constantly on the alert for such clues as hair, droppings, and other signs of animal activity.

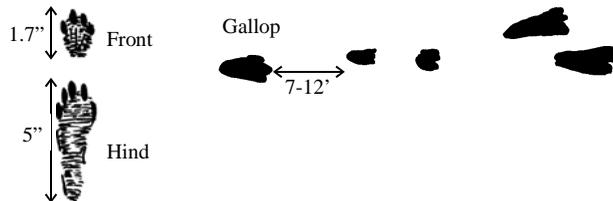
COTTONTAIL RABBIT

Cottontail tracks reflect the hopping gait of these species—about 3 feet in length—with the hind tracks usually landing in front of the front tracks. Foot pads and claws are usually indistinct as the feet are completely haired.



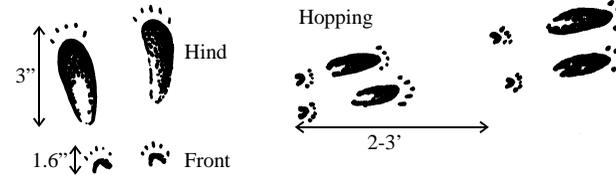
JACKRABBIT

Jackrabbit tracks are usually longer than they are wide, with impressions from the hair on their feet visible. A running jackrabbit leaves tracks of its hind feet ahead of the front feet because jackrabbits are primarily hoppers.



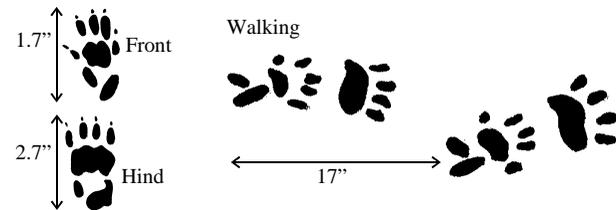
SQUIRREL

Squirrel tracks are very similar to rabbit tracks as they both hop, with the hind tracks landing ahead of the front tracks. A squirrel places its front paws side-by-side, while a rabbit's front paws are in a line.



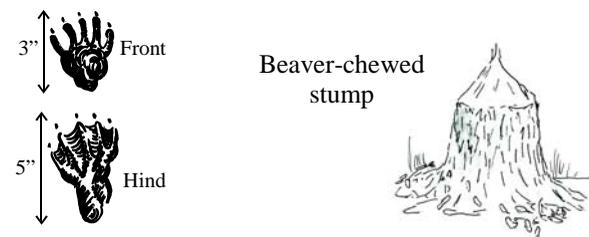
PORCUPINE

The tracks of a porcupine are usually accompanied by a distinct scuff mark caused by dragging the tail. Toe pads are usually not seen in tracks, though claw marks are common. The tracks often appear rough in texture.



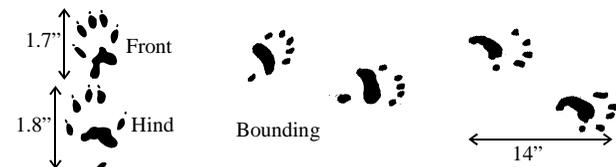
BEAVER

Beaver tracks show a large, webbed hind foot that usually covers the smaller front footprint. Marks from the tail being dragged are also common.



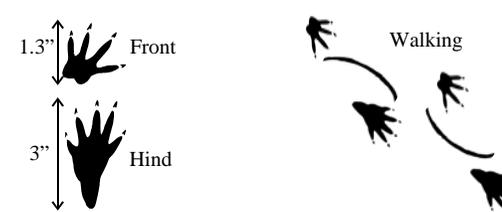
MINK

Mink tracks are round and often appear fuzzy. They usually show five toe and claw imprints, although the inner toe will not always show.



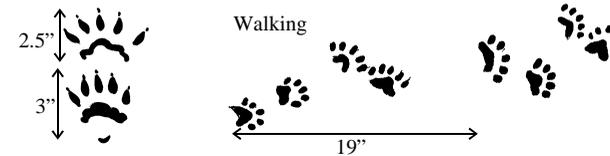
MUSKRAT

Muskrat tracks show long, slender toes on front and hind feet. Five toes appear on the hind imprint but generally only four on the front. The fifth toe is present but is generally too small to show. The muskrat often drags its tail, leaving a mark.



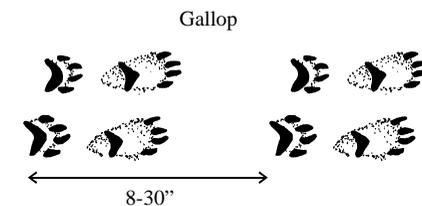
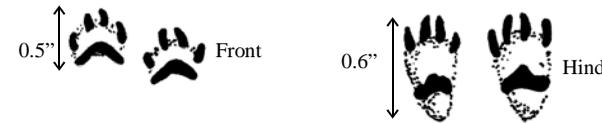
RIVER OTTER

River otters have large webbed feet, though sometimes the webbing is hard to see in a track. Other common track features include a tail drag or smoothed path caused by sliding down stream banks and through snow.



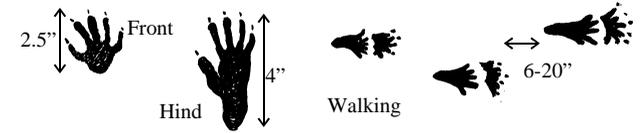
WEASEL

Weasel tracks resemble mink tracks but are generally smaller. A running weasel leaves a line of twin prints. Both weasel and mink prints may show irregular spacing because of the animals' habit of jumping—one short jump, followed by a long jump, and so forth.



RACCOON

Probably the easiest tracks to identify are those of a raccoon. The front footprints show the long finger-like toes that resemble a miniature human handprint. Because the raccoon walks flat-footed, the large sole on its hind feet often shows clearly.



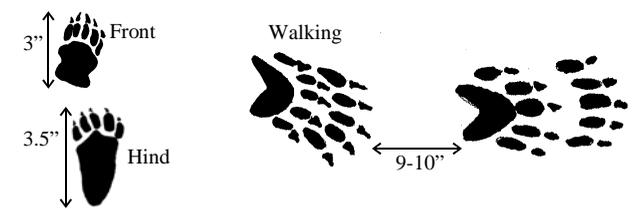
STRIPED SKUNK

Skunks walk flat-footed. Their hind footprints resemble tracks of a barefooted human being. Skunks often travel in short, shuffling steps.



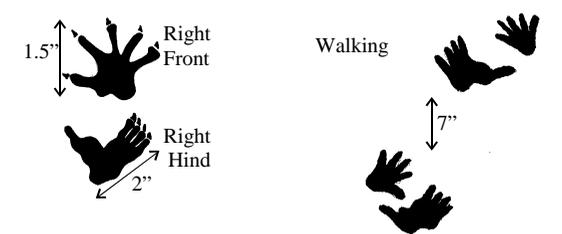
BADGER

Badger tracks are wide and appear blocky. The long front claws often leave indentations about three quarters of an inch in front of the toe imprints. The front footprints turn in slightly because badgers walk pigeon-toed.

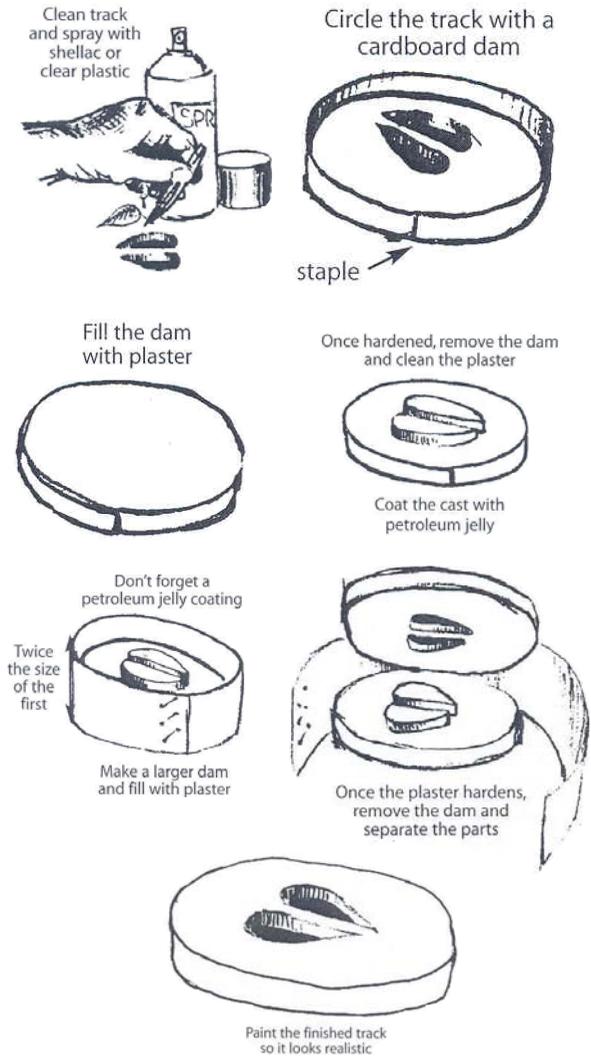


OPOSSUM

The hind tracks of an opossum show "big toes" that slant inward or backward. The three middle toes tend to stay in a tight group.



Make your own tracks!

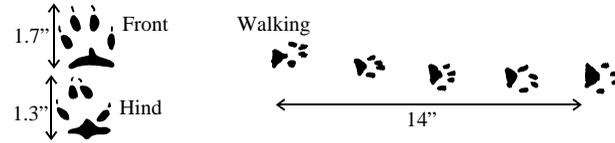


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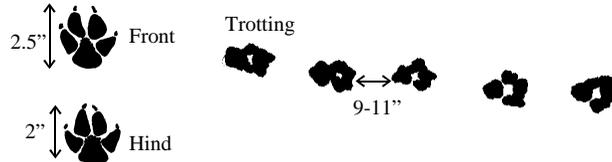
SWIFT FOX

Swift fox tracks usually appear in a line and may be confused with cat tracks. Smaller than coyote tracks and lacks the raised transverse bar seen on the heel pads of red foxes.



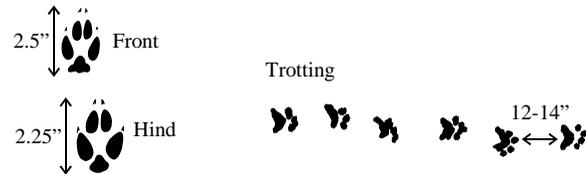
RED FOX

Red fox tracks usually appear in a line. Individual footprints are oval with tiny toe pads. Under some conditions, marks are left by the hair between the toes. Red fox possess a raised transverse bar on the heel pads, often the only part of the heel that leaves an imprint. Because of this, the pad appears as a narrow bar.



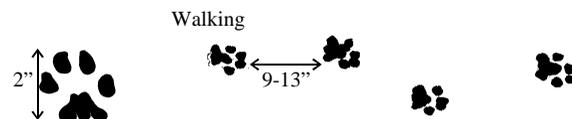
COYOTE

Coyote tracks show the two outer toes of the hind feet being longer than the inner toes. The two inner toes on the front imprint slant toward each other. Toenail marks may show but are not as pronounced as those in dog tracks. Individual tracks are longer than they are wide.



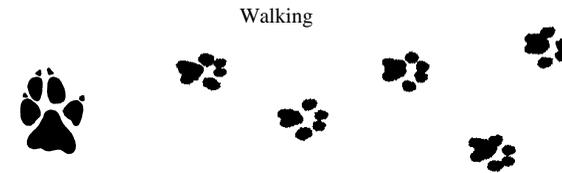
BOBCAT

Bobcat tracks resemble domestic cats' tracks, but are larger with a greater distance between tracks. The bobcat has a three-lobed pattern on the rear of the heel pads. Like all cats, the bobcat walks with its claws retracted, leaving no claw marks.



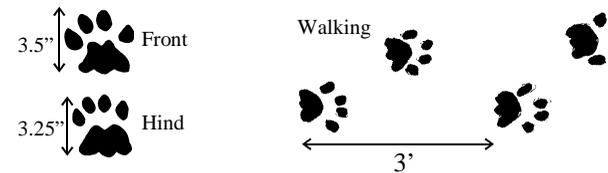
DOMESTIC DOG

Dog tracks are often confused with those of fox and coyote, but dog tracks are round. Often a perfect circle is formed inside the imprint around the rear edges of the toes and the front edge of the heel pad. Four claws generally show in the imprint. The dog's front footprint is wider than it is long. Unlike the fox and coyotes, dogs have a slanted gait when running, so the tracks do not appear in a straight line. Larger dog tracks are also sometimes confused with those of a mountain lion. However, mountain lions have retractable claws and claw marks are very rarely seen in their tracks, unlike dog tracks.



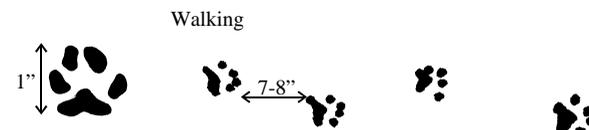
MOUNTAIN LION

When walking, lions usually put their hind paw in the imprint made by their front paw. They have four toes. Claw marks are not normally visible since their claws are retractable. A distinctive characteristic of mountain lion tracks is the "tri-lobed" pad. Some call this the "m" shape. Also, the third toe of a lion seems to extend out slightly longer than the others.



DOMESTIC CAT

Domestic cat tracks may be confused with those of the mink. Cats, however, have four toes. Cats walk with their claws retracted, leaving no claw marks. All cats are considered "precise walkers" in that their hind feet step into the tracks left by their front feet.



TRACK IDENTIFICATION OF COMMON SOUTH DAKOTA FURBEARERS



SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF GAME, FISH AND PARKS