



Nature Guides

Track This!

Mid-February

Featured Process: Tracks and Tracking

As temperatures begin to moderate and animal activity picks up, now is probably the best time to get out and search for, identify and interpret animal tracks and signs in the snow or mud. Even a trip to the dumpster can turn a class into a CSI unit piecing together clues of events that may have occurred only hours before. Did the early bird get the worm, or was it nailed by a cat, or perhaps a hawk or an owl? Here's a good [guide](#) for kids to tracks and signs, including a simple key, and here are some [photos](#) of common Ontario tracks.

A good place to start is with our good friend, the squirrel. As you might expect, squirrels leave veritable [highways](#) that generally run from tree to tree. That's one of the best ways of telling them from [Eastern Cottontail Rabbit prints](#), which are quite similar, but tend not to go from tree to tree. Both animals gallop, which means that they move both front feet together, and then both back feet, often landing with the back feet in front of the front feet, as in the rabbit track above. The rabbit's back feet are somewhat larger, but the best way to tell isolated prints apart is that the rabbit almost always lands with its front paws in line with the direction of travel (one before the other), while the squirrel [never does](#). [Deer Mice also gallop, while voles walk or trot along](#).

[Dogs, coyotes and wolves](#) can be hard to tell apart, but behaviour plays a role. Coyotes and wolves almost always register. That is, the rear paw is placed exactly in the print left by the front paw (saves energy), leaving a [single line of tracks](#). Dogs often miss, leaving a [double track](#) here and there. Also, unless following a scent, coyotes and wolves want to get from here to there with the least amount of energy, which is a [straight line](#). Dogs, knowing that the next meal will be there, will tend to wander all over the place. Members of the [dog](#) family tend to have oval prints that show claw marks, while [cat](#) family prints are more round, and don't show claws.

Deer may or may not register, and tend to [drag their feet](#) like teenagers. The prints are heart-shaped, with the deer traveling in the [direction of the point](#). In soft snow or mud, or if the animal is moving quickly, the track may [splay out](#), and [dew claw marks](#) seen at the rear of the track. Moose tracks are [larger, more oval](#), and moose [pick up their feet](#) more. Of course, in [this kind of snow](#), no one picks up their feet! Note also that as the snow melts, tracks will enlarge and look bigger.

But the most fun is piecing together the action. Whether it's [obvious](#), or [not quite so obvious](#), you can picture in your mind's eye what we almost never get to [see](#). Here is a [CSI: Critter Scene Investigation lesson](#) to try out.

Other Happenings:

- Monarch butterfly [newsletters](#) have begun on the Journey North website, and will continue throughout the spring migration. Tune in and prepare for the journey north beginning in March. Consider joining so that you can report your sightings. Other species you can track and report on include the [American Robin](#) and two [hummingbirds](#),

Top R4R Picks

Resources for extending the learning

- ▶ [The Boreal Forest: Vol. 7- A Global Legacy](#)
Elementary, Middle, Secondary
See Lesson 8- Boreal Footprints
- ▶ [Get to Know Your Wild Neighbours](#)
Elementary, Middle
See Lesson 8- Mammals

including our [Ruby-throated](#).

- Valentine's Day is upon us, and all thoughts turn to ...bird songs. Love is in the air, and on mild, sunny mornings you will hear more and more birds as pair bonds are established or renewed. The "[Hi, Sweetie!](#)" of the [Black-capped Chickadee](#) is joined by the enthusiastic calls of [White-](#) and [Red-breasted Nuthatches](#), [Mourning Doves](#), [Northern Cardinals](#), [House Finches](#) and [Purple Finches](#), to mention a few (songs and/or calls are available on all of these sites).
- Continuing with the mating theme, woodpeckers [drum](#) to mark their territory, and [Common Goldeneye court](#) each other ([video](#)) on open water. Also watch for [Red-tailed Hawks](#) soaring together in wide circles.
- [Horned Larks](#) are one of the first birds to return from the south, and can be found hanging out with [Snow Buntings](#) along roadsides and on fields. They will [sing](#) in flight.
- A [Northern Hawk Owl](#) has been seen in [Bailieboro](#). These owls are boreal residents that occasionally venture south. Its diurnal habits and tameness can afford [good looks](#). And the looks of this owl are a bit different than most owls. As their name suggests, they have a [hawk-like body with short wings and a long tail](#).
- Don't forget to get out and count some birds during the [Great Backyard Bird Count](#) occurring February 12th-15th. Here are some [tips for educators](#), as well as some free (until Feb. 15th) [bird e-books](#) for the students.
- Male [skunks](#) are starting to look for mates. A whiff of skunk on a damp winter's night is one of the first smells of spring - one spray can be smelled over 6 square kilometres, and contains chemicals used to make WW I mustard gas!
- [Burbot](#), a freshwater member of the cod family, are mating under the ice, moving across the bottom in a writhing mass of about a dozen fish. Fertilized eggs are left behind to fend for themselves.
- The increase in daylight is very noticeable now. We've gained more than an hour since [Winter Solstice](#). Shadows are getting shorter, and the sun's just a bit closer. More importantly, it has to cut through [less atmosphere](#), and it's rays are spread over less area. So you will see snow melting on sunny days, even in below-zero temperatures.
- The second [new moon](#) after Winter Solstice will occur on February 14th, which marks the Chinese New Year - the [Year of the Tiger](#) (grrrr!!). The [Chinese calendar](#) is a lunisolar calendar, incorporating both moon phases and time of solar year. The lunar cycle sets the dates, while the solar cycle is used to number the months and identify seasons. Twelve lunar cycles, each 29.5 days long, makes a year only 354 days and 8 hours long. In order to keep the calendar following both the moon phases and seasons, a thirteenth month ([intercalary month](#)) is inserted ever second or third year. Our calendar ([Gregorian](#)) doesn't match the Chinese calendar so Chinese New Year falls on a different date from year to year. [Here](#) are some ideas to celebrate (watch out, the [tangram puzzles](#) are addictive).
- Of course February 14th is also Valentine's Day, so here is a bit of an [interspecies love story for you](#).