The Secret Life of Animals

Animal tracks can help us understand what is happening in the natural world. For instance, most of the activity that happens in the animal world happens away from our view. Animal tracks, however, provide us with a way of finding out more about the secretive lives of animals. Tracking is a universal activity that is done by people around the world including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people local to this land base.

Anishinaabe Knowledge Keeper Caleb Musgrave from Hiawatha First Nation has a YouTube Channel and podcast called *Canadian Bushcraft*. *Learning Nature's Language* with Chris Gilmour is also another excellent source.

In these sources, Anishinaabe Knowledge Keeper Caleb Musgrave shares that observation and curiosity are the two most important skills a tracker can have. For this reason, tracking should always be started with a period of quiet observation.

Practice sitting still and watching the environment around you. I.e.: what can you hear, feel, smell, and even taste? Tracking requires asking questions of the land and having the patience to listen to the answers.

Next, a tracker will look for SPOOR. SPOOR refers to the term for all of the signs left behind by animals.

SPOOR can include such things as:

- *Scat and urine:* Feces and urine can tell you a lot about an animal. For instance, it can help you determine the animal's diet and how long ago the animal was in the area.
- *Rubs, scratches and scrapes:* Territory markers can help a hunter and trapper identify not only the species but also the size or sex of the animal.
- *Feeding activity*: All animals leave food waste residues behind when they eat. (eg. Edible bone and plant fragments). This can help one ID the species. Learning to identify plants from their seeds, and pulp can also help with this process.
- *Dens and nesting sites:* Most animals make different dens. This can indicate the type of animal and how long ago the animal was in the area.
- *Trails:* While tracks may be hard to find, trails created by pushed down grass and worn-down spots are usually easier to spot.
- *Refuse*: Dropped feathers, antlers, eggshells etc. can help one to identify the type of animal they are following

- *Tracks:* This can include footprints, feather tips, and resting spots.

Interpreting *tracks* requires knowing to watch for a few things including: the size of the track, the number of toes, the shape of the track and the track pattern.

Size of track:
First a tracker should start off by asking what type of animal would make the size of the track.
Human- medium size
Wolf- medium size
Mink- small size
Squirrel- very small size
Bear- large size

Shape of the Track:
Furthermore, groups of animals have characteristic shapes to their tracks. For instance:
The Deer Family (eg. White-tailed deer, and moose tracks are heart shaped. Deer in particular have a pair of side-by-side crescents.
Dog family (eg. Wolf, red fox)- egg shaped
Rodent family (eg. Squirrel)- cross pattern
Weasel family (eg. Fisher, mink)- box shaped
Bear family (black bear)- human shaped

Pattern of Tracks:
Diagonal walkers- (cat, dog and deer family) These animals move opposite limbs together, right foreleg with the left back leg.
Bounders- (weasels) These animals hop in steady series of jumps, forelegs first and back legs pulling right behind them
Gallopers- (most rodents and rabbits) These animals hunch down and bring hind legs in front of back legs
Pacers- (wide-bodied animals such as racoons, bears, beavers, porcupines, and skunks). These animals shuffle along, but move from pacing to bounding as they go faster

Number of Toes
Counting the number of toes can be helpful in identifying the family of the animal.

With your knowledge, next, work with your teacher to put your tracking skills to the test!