

What is Animal tracking?

It is the Finding, Following, and Interpreting of evidence left behind by wildlife.

Why do people track animals?

Tracking animals helps us understand how individual animals and groups of animals move within local areas, migrate across oceans and continents and evolve across generations. This information helps scientists in many ways. It is also fun to know which animals are moving around in certain areas.

Tracking isn't just about looking for animal tracks, which are the footprints left behind by an animal. Tracking also involves looking for sign, which is any clue other than footprints that are left behind. These include scat (poop), trails worn into the ground, and things that have been scraped, chewed or rubbed by an animal.

Elk track and sign:

Below are examples of elk tracks and sign. Elk are like very large deer that migrate up to the mountains in warmer months to have babies. Elk can weigh 325 to 1,100 pounds and grow to 4-5 feet (height measured at shoulder). Elk are herbivores, meaning they only eat plants.

The photos below were all taken on the south side of Mt. St. Helens. It is common to find elk tracks and sign in this area since elk find protection from hunting inside the volcanic monument. There is also lots of plant food and privacy for having babies. Much of the area is hard to access due to the volcanic eruption in 1980.



These are elk rubs. The scratches on the tree are caused by elk rubbing their antlers up against the tree. Antlers grow on and fall off of male elk every year and males rub their antlers to strengthen their neck muscles and mark trees with their scent to show dominance to other males.



The photo on the left is of a pile of elk scat. The photo on the right is of an elk track. Elk tracks are rounded and the front tracks of an adult elk are about 4 inches long and wide.

The Core Routine of Tracking

Animal tracking is all about asking the questions: **WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHY, WHERE, and HOW.**

When looking at track or sign, ask yourself:

1. Who left the sign? (Was it a mammal? What is a canine? Was it my neighbor's dog?)
2. What did the animal do? (Was it sitting, running, walking, or lying down?)
3. When did the animal leave the track? (Was the sign left an hour ago or a week ago? Has it rained or been very hot and dry, which could affect what the sign looks like?)
4. Why did the animal do what it did? (Why did the animal leave tracks here instead of somewhere else? What are the basic needs of an animal that would cause it to be here?)
5. Where did the animal come from and where did it go from here? (Can I follow the track and sign left by the animal from here? If not, can I guess where it went based on the sign?)
6. How do we think the animal felt? (Was it startled, comfortable, or hungry?)

Tracking Activity:

The easiest place to find tracks is near the water's edge in mud (or in snow). Bringing your journal and a measuring tape or ruler along, go to a place like this (like a creek or river bank) and stand on the edge of the bank without walking on it. Are there any tracks? If so, make observations:

- Pull out the measuring tape you brought with you and measure it.
- Bring your nature journal out and draw it.
- Think about what kind of animals live in this habitat.
- What do you find interesting about this track?
- What animal do you think made this track? Give a reason why you think so.
- What do you think it was doing? Give a reason why you think so.
- What direction was it going? Give a reason why you think so.
- When do you think this track was made? Give a reason why you think so.

Further reading:

<http://rainorshinemamma.com/animal-tracking-with-child-beginners-guide/>

<https://mothernatured.com/animal-exploration/fauna-footprint-find-make-an-animal-track-plot/>

<https://www.amazon.com/Animal-Tracks-Familiar-American-Naturalist/dp/1583550720>

<https://www.amazon.com/Tracks-Scats-Signs-Along-Guides/dp/1559715995/>

<https://www.amazon.com/Who-Was-Here-Discovering-Millbrook-ebook/dp/B00MBXUH8Y>

<https://www.amazon.com/Animal-Tracks-Activity-Color-Learn/dp/1591935385>

www.amazon.com/The-Young-Scientists-Club-WH-925-1135/dp/B0039YWFN4/

Sources:

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Photos by Jessica Becker

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/e/elk/>

<https://baynature.org/article/tule-elk-drop-antlers-every-year/>