



Tracking—Part 3 What the Tracks Tell You

Tracks can provide an entire story to a skilled tracker. For a less experienced tracker they can impart some key information. Critical information you can immediately glean from any track includes the direction of travel, speed of that travel, size of the animal, species of the animal, and any identifying characteristic of the track or animal.

Direction: All species have some feature that identifies the forward portion of the foot / paw and the rear of it. For many species the toes or claws indicate the forward part of the foot. For animals this always indicates the direction of travel. The same is not always the case with man. In some cases a man will walk backwards to lay a false path.

Speed of Travel: An animal's rate of travel can be determined in by an evaluation of the animal's gait or length of stride. The stride is the measurement from one footprint to the next. When an animal is walking normally, there will be a regular stride. The length of this stride obviously alters by species. If the stride is shorter, then the animal is not hurried, which means it is relaxed, searching for food, or alternatively it is tired. If the stride is longer, the animal is in a hurry or running. When an animal runs, there is usually a reason. Most often it is fear, so check for other tracks of predators. It may also be that the animal is hurrying toward something, such as hurrying back to shelter before dark or before the sun comes up. Hurrying animals also can have a very different gait.



Rabbit - Hopping



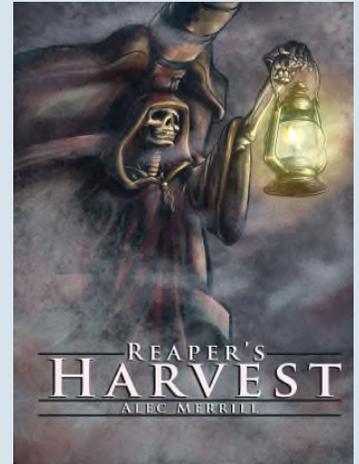
Rabbit - Walking

Size of the Animal: The size of the track is the primary indicator of the size of the animal. The larger the track, the larger the animal. Sometimes it is not possible to see all the track. In such a case, if the animal is travelling at a normal speed, the distance of the stride will provide an idea of the size. Taller animals will generally have a longer stride.

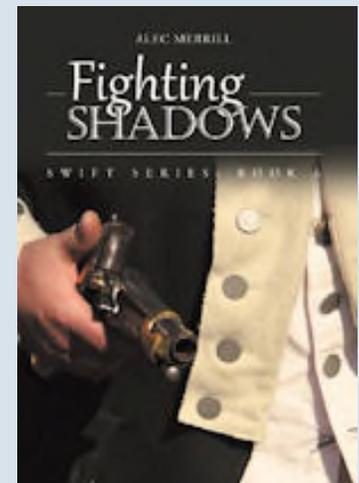
Species: All species have unique features, although sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between them. An example of this difficulty is in birds. There are literally dozens of species that are very similar. In such cases, identifying the exact species may not be necessary. For the colonial hunter, it was enough to identify whether the species had enough meat to justify the time needed to track and acquire.

Unique Identifying Marks: Sometimes an animal will have a unique identifying mark, such as a missing claw or deformity. More often this information is used when tracking men or horses. In colonial times, a moccasin print usually indicated an Indian or at least a woodsman, whereas a show with a heel indicated a settler or at least a non-native.

Age of the Track: A more experienced tracker can determine the age of the track using several factors. Moisture may help if the tracker knows when the last rain occurred. If the edges of the track have fallen, it usually denotes an older track.



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