



Animal Tracks

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illustrations by
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Ever notice how difficult it is to see wildlife up close? Unless one has access to an observation blind, a tree stand, or a window overlooking a nature preserve, most of us can recount only fleeting glimpses of animals as they slither, hop or run away. A far easier way to discover wildlife is by learning to identify the tracks they leave behind.

However, in order to find and identify individual tracks, you will first need to become good at observing other forms of animal signs, because these can be a very useful kind of “roadmap” in your search for footprints. As you hike and explore a field, look for well-worn travel routes like trails and

runs where animals move in and out of various habitats on a regular basis. For example, a deer trail in the woods might lead you to a feeding area or watering area; a muskrat run in a marsh might connect to a bedding area or another trail.

Observe the vegetation as you move through these areas. Make a note of patches of leaves or stems that have been nibbled along the way, plants that have been pushed aside or trampled, small branches that have been broken

off, or telltale debris like the shells of acorns and hickories. Keep an eye out for rubbings on tree bark, bits of fur caught on twig ends or feathers on the ground, small holes dug in the leaf litter, and patches of bare earth where the leaf litter has been scratched away. Scan for animal droppings, called "scat," especially around fallen logs, near streambanks, and other places where wildlife might be feeding.

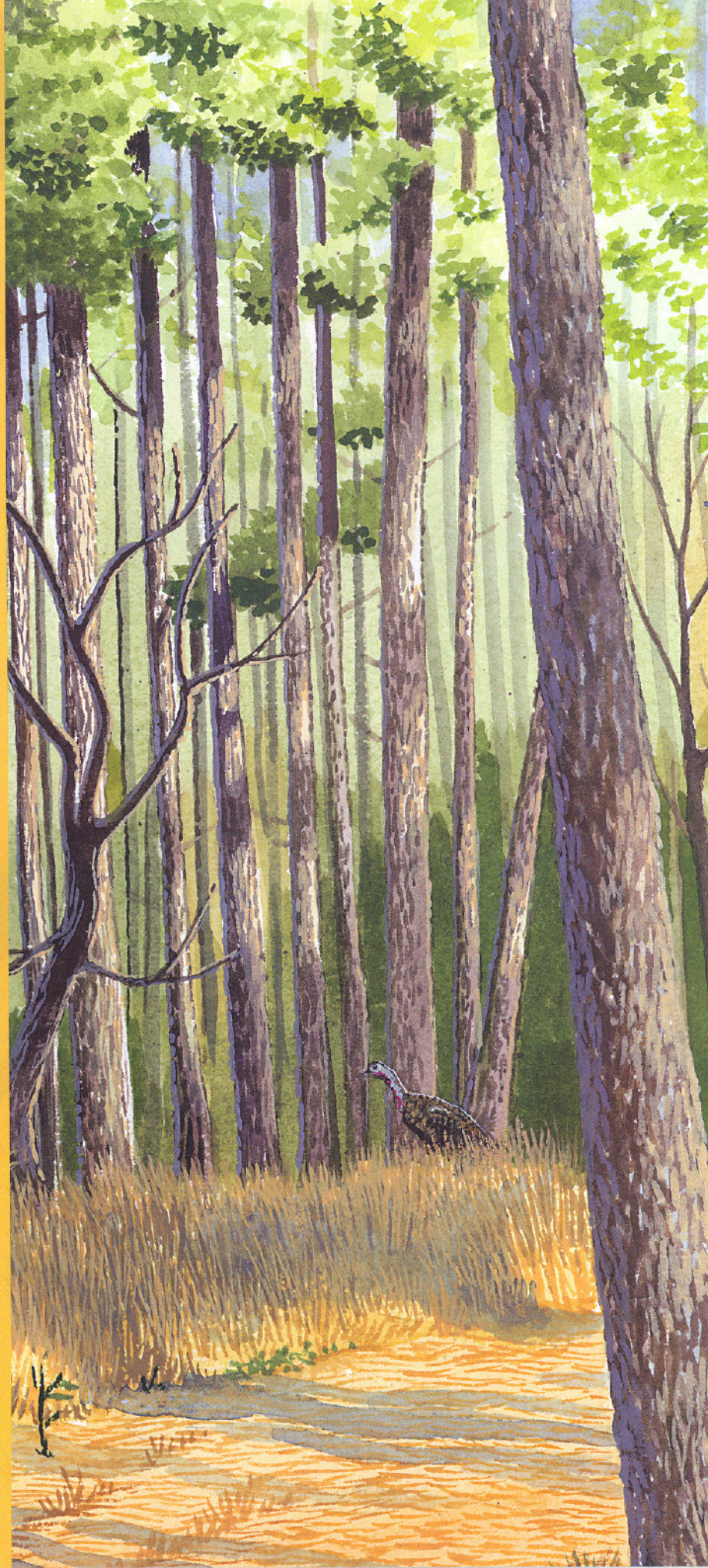
Wherever you find these animal signs, there are bound to be tracks in the immediate vicinity. As one might expect, the best places to observe signs of wildlife are in areas where habitat types overlap, such as where a forest opens onto a meadow or marsh, or a stream passes through fields and woodlands. These are places where wildlife diversity will be greatest and where you can expect mammals to leave tracks. When a habitat reveals the tracks of one species, use that clue as an indicator of other wildlife species that are also likely to be found in association there.

Hardwood Swamp Habitats

Virginia has a rich natural heritage graced with numerous ecological communities. These communities are assemblages of plants and animals that co-exist and interact in the unique context of the surrounding physical environment where they occur. How these communities are classified depends primarily on the type of vegetation found there and, to a lesser extent, on the wildlife species present. For example, "hardwood swamp" habitat in the Coastal Plain could refer to seasonally flooded deciduous forests comprised of bald cypress, swamp tupelo and red maple in the canopy, with red bay and sweet pepperbush predominant in the understory. In the Piedmont, however, a hardwood swamp habitat would be characterized by pin oak, willow oak, green ash, red maple and sweetgum. Shrubs might include deciduous hollies, common elderberry, silky dogwood and American hornbeam. But although the plant composition in these swampy habitats varies from one region of the state to another, there is nevertheless a wide variety of wildlife species that you can expect to find in these settings. Among the wildlife that frequents this area, you can probably expect to find the tracks of black bear, river otter, muskrat, beaver and the great blue heron.

Pinewoods Habitat

Similarly, "pinewoods" habitat is a broad grouping which could describe a loblolly pine savanna as well as longleaf pine or mixed pine flatwoods of the Coastal Plain. In this setting, we might find the tracks of common species like white-tailed deer, wild turkey, opossum, raccoon and woodchuck. Of course, this is not to say that the wildlife species illustrated in this publication couldn't be found in *both* hardwood and pinewood habitats, because the habitats are not exclusive. Rather, it is the key features *within* the habitat that helps us narrow down the possibilities of what tracks we might find.





Beaver

Castor canadensis

The beaver is a large rodent, with an adult reaching 4½ feet in length, and weighing from 26 to 90 pounds. Beavers are noted for building dams made of tree branches, vegetation and mud, forming impoundments on creeks or rivers. Here they build lodges of the same materials. Sometimes they will build a large lodge along a lake or pond shoreline. It has reached nuisance status in many areas.

Their large webbed hind feet are used for supporting the body when standing and are specialized for swimming. A large, horizontally flattened tail is used as a propeller and as a warning signal by slapping it on the water's surface. Beavers are able to stay underwater for up to 15 minutes. It can grasp food and construction material with its hand-like front feet. Beavers eat soft aquatic vegetation, aspen, alder, willow and others. They walk slowly and cautiously, but run with a slow galloping gait when disturbed on land.

Front foot is 2½ X 3½ inches, five toed. Hind foot is 5½ X 7 inches with five webbed toes, and 16 inch stride, and toes inward. The flat, scaly tail drags and this broad mark plus the wide, webbed feet make its track unmistakable.



illustrations by Willy Wilmoth

Canada Goose

Branta canadensis

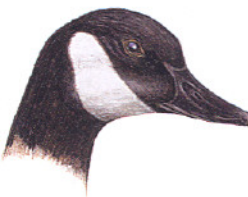
Migrating flocks of Canada geese have thrilled mankind for generations, signaling both the beginning of spring or fall. When the honking calls drift down from the skies, we strain to catch a glimpse of the vee-shaped flocks.

While this is true of migrant geese, geese that actually breed in Canada, we now have geese year round in the form of what we call resident Canada geese. Now we see geese in parks, farm or subdivision ponds, fish hatcheries, corporate landscapes and golf courses. Here they nest as well as loaf and feed. Their honking calls can be heard in all months of the year. Their white cheek patch is distinctive.

Geese are mainly grazers, favoring grasses as food, although they will feed on grains, especially corn, wheat in its grass stage, and aquatic vegetation. Unfortunately, it has become a pest by making a mess, leaving their droppings or stomping down lawns in the parks, ponds and golf courses.

However, the calls of resident and migrant geese alike still thrill us each year as one of the most recognizable sounds of the wild.

The big webbed feet, often pointed a little inward, are unmistakable.



Black Bear

Ursus americanus

Black bear populations have increased and their range has expanded in recent years. Bears are showing up in places they haven't been seen in years.

Black bears are omnivorous, meaning they will eat just about anything. Only a small portion of its diet consists of animal matter. Grasses, fruits, berries and nuts make up a large part of their diet, but they also like corn, orchard crops, insects and honey.

In fall, they can gain up to two pounds of body weight per day and will travel great distances in order to find food to store up fat reserves for winter.

Denning usually occurs between October and early January, depending on weather, food availability, sex and age. Warm spells will bring them out for brief periods.

They walk with a flat-footed shuffle or a bounding gallop. When running full speed they can reach up to 30 mph, and make 12 to 15 foot jumps.

The bear walks on the entire foot similar to man and the track resembles human footprints. Both front and hind feet show the marks of five claws. The front foot measures an average of 3 X 4 inches and the hind foot 4 X 7 inches.



Cardinal

Cardinalis cardinalis

When English settlers arrived on the shores of Jamestown, they gave it the names Virginia nightingale and carnation bird. Another common name is "redbird," and so popular did the bird become, that many states ultimately named it their state bird.

The cardinal ranges all over the eastern United States to the edge of the Great Plains and as far north as southern Ontario and the Great Lakes east.

While it is non-migratory, cardinals may wander extensively in winter, probably for the purpose of dispersal of the young, but possibly because of severe weather or food shortages. Anyone who stocks a feeder consistently in winter may be surprised to find a yard full of cardinals. They come to feeders regularly with a special liking for black oilseed sunflower seeds.

Cardinals are at home in a variety of habitats, including dense thickets and tangles near open areas, field edges, along streams, in open swamps and in park thickets.

Like all perching birds, cardinal foot prints will show three toes forward and one toe back, but there are so many birds with a similar print that it is unlikely they could be specifically identified.



Bobcat

Lynx rufus



The bobcat is named for its short, 5 to 5½ inch “bobbed” tail. Bobcats weigh from 18 to 30 pounds, the females being smaller. They live in early mid-succession growth timber that has clearings along with dense thickets, hollow trees and logs, and rocky hillsides. The southern Piedmont region of Virginia has a relatively high abundance of bobcats.

Bobcats are very secretive and nocturnal, going about their business without human residents nearby ever knowing it. An adult male bobcat may have a range that encompasses 60 square miles, the females staying within a 5 to 15 square mile area.

They feed on rabbits, squirrels, rodents, a variety of ground-nesting birds, and occasionally deer, but mostly as carrion. Bobcats hunt in typical cat-like fashion, and are able to sprint at speeds of up to 30 miles per hour.

Front foot 1½ X 2 inches, four-toed alternate. Hind foot, 1¼ X 1½ inches and four-toed. Fifth toes don't show. Neither do the nail marks show. Stride to 14 inches. Tracks appear as a straight or dotted line, although it meanders. As they walk, the hind foot is brought forward and placed in the spot where the front foot was removed on the same side.



Chipmunk

Tamias striatus



The chipmunk is a small ground-dwelling squirrel with conspicuous lengthwise stripes on its back, sides and cheeks. It's about 5 to 8 inches long with a 3 or 4 inch tail, and weighs 2 to 5 ounces.

Chipmunks feed on all manner of seeds and dried wild fruits, insects, mushrooms, grains, and a variety of animal matter. It has internal mouth pockets which it uses to carry and store large quantities of food prior to winter. They can climb trees to get nuts, dogwood berries, crab apples and the like, and will store up to a half bushel of food in its burrow.

Normally they dig their burrows underground amid rocks or stone fences, in rocky ridges, or wooded banks. Around humans, it will dig under house, garage or shed foundations, cement patio slabs, or woodpiles.

Chipmunks prefer timber borderland, especially rocky hillsides around hardwoods, but they are commonly found in parks and suburban and city backyards. It emits a harsh bird-like chirping call.

Front feet ½ X ¾ inches, five-toed, not together. Hind foot ¾ X 1¼ inches, five-toe, paired, spread to 2 inches.





Coyote

Canis latrans



The coyote is normally pictured as an animal of the western prairies. However, changes in the landscape have enabled it to move eastward to the point that they now occur in nearly all eastern states. Often it is described as the most cunning, tenacious and adaptable of all animals.

Coyotes resemble German shepherd dogs in looks, but with a bushy tail, and more pointed snout. They sometimes interbreed with dogs. The coyote weighs anywhere from 18 to 30 pounds. They walk, trot or gallop, running with tails down, which is a good identifying characteristic.

Their main foods are rabbits and rodents, but they will eat birds, insects, plant matter, carrion, pet food and will visit garbage dumps.

Front foot is 1 3/4 X 2 1/2 inches, four-toed. Hind foot is 2 X 2 5/8 inches, four-toed, with claws showing. Large outer toe prints on hind feet distinguish coyotes from other canines. Track is narrow and outside toes are more in line behind the inside toes than a dog. Walking steps are about 13 inches apart; 22 inches when it trots; and can leap up to 10 feet at a gallop.



Gray Fox

Urocyon cinereoargenteus



The gray fox weighs anywhere from 5 to 14 pounds, and measures 35 to 44 inches in length, with a bushy tail of 11 to 15 inches long. It has a preference for wooded and brushy areas as opposed to the red foxes liking for open country, and it is an excellent tree climber.

Gray foxes are shyer than the red fox and are mainly nocturnal, although they will venture forth in daylight at times. Males tend to travel more widely. When on the run, they have been clocked at up to 26 mph in short sprints. Their main food consists of rabbits and rodents with about a third being made up of birds, insects, plants, carrion, other mammals and occasionally poultry.

They walk, trot or gallop. When running at full speed they have a rocking-horse motion with its tail carried curved into an arch.

Front foot 1 1/2 X 2 inches, four-clawed. Hind foot 1 1/4 X 1 3/4 inches, four-clawed, alternate. Toe marks rounded like that of a dog, as contrasted to narrower toe marks of a red fox. Stride from 6 to 16 inches. Tracks appear as a dotted line in the snow



Dog

Canis familiaris



Dogs have been associated with man since the beginning of history in most parts of the world. Today there is a wide array of types and sizes all originally bred for different purposes. Some were bred for hunting, some as beasts of burden, some for tracking and some for protection.

Like cats, dogs that run wild can be destructive to other wildlife. Once loose even the most peaceful house dog will revert to its wild side and tend to run in packs. In northern areas with abundant snow they will "run" deer.

They also catch ground nesting birds and small mammals. In the wild, dogs will eat about anything including car-

Front foot 2 X 2½ inches, four-clawed. Hind foot 2½ X 2¾ inches, four-clawed, alternate (fox hound). The pattern of tracks is irregularly arranged.



Eastern Cottontail

Sylvia floridanus



The cottontail, is found everywhere in the state. Its home range is from one to five acres. It prefers open brushy fields, forest edges, hedgerows and fallow fields, but it is right at home in parks and suburban yards with suitable cover.

Easily recognized by their long ears, large hind legs and little "powder puff" tail, they weigh 2 to 3¼ pounds. During most of the year they reside in thick cover in what is called a "form," which is a hollow or depression in the ground vegetation, packed down from sitting in it.

They are mostly nocturnal, feeding on a wide array of herbaceous and young woody plants and vegetable crops in yards and in orchards. When running from danger they are quick and often zig-zag to elude a predator. They are prey for almost all carnivores.

The two long marks of the hind feet, placed well ahead of the rounded prints left by the front paws are the unmistakable sign of the cottontail. Front foot, 1 X 1 inch, paired or not. Hind foot 1¾ X 3½ inches, paired, but can appear as long as 4¾ inches long in snow. Spread of 5 inches and leap to 7 feet.



illustrations by Willy Wilmoth

Gray Squirrel

Sciurus carolinensis



The gray squirrel, Virginia's most common squirrel, is normally gray in color with a wash of yellow brown and whitish belly. There are sometimes different color phases from very light to almost black. It has a bushy tail, measuring 14 to 21 inches long, and weighs ¾ to 1½ pounds.

Squirrels nest in tree cavities or build nests out of twigs and leaves up in tree branches. They will seldom range farther than 200 yards from their home. Come winter when the trees lose their leaves the nests can be plainly seen high in the branches.

Nuts, seeds, wild fruit, tree flowers and corn are preferred foods. They will come to bird feeders, usually uninvited, where they feed on sunflowers seeds. Their habit of burying nuts and often neglecting to retrieve all of them, often results in reseeded of trees.

Front foot 1 X 1½ inches, five-toed, (4 clawed and one a knob-like thumb) paired. Hind foot, 1¼ inches X 2½ inches, five-toed, paired; 3¾ inch spread. It can leap 5 feet. The squirrel leaves clearly marked nail prints in his tracks. Being a tree-climber, it places its front feet side by side when it hops or jumps.



Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

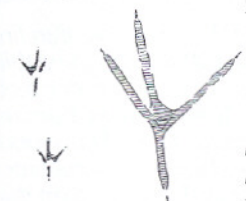


One of the most common and recognizable birds of our coasts, marshlands, swamps, rivers, lakes and ponds is the great-blue heron. It is often misnamed a blue "herring," or a blue "crane." A herring of course is a fish, and cranes fly with neck outstretched like swans. Herons draw in their necks, curling them back over their "shoulders," with legs stretched out behind. Its voice is a hoarse guttural "squawk."

They fly on wide wings with slow, graceful wing beats, almost as if in slow motion. They always appear larger than they really are, although they do stand up to 4 feet tall, and have a wingspan of up to 6 feet. It's just that there isn't much to them as far as body weight.

Great blue herons can be seen almost anywhere there is fresh or salt water that provides them with food such as fish, frogs, crabs, small birds and rodents. You may see them mornings and evenings as they fly to or from their feeding spots

They leave a large three-toed print in mud along creek banks, or mudflats at low tide as they stalk along the edge of the water for prey.



House Cat *Felis catus*

Cats are represented by many breeds. Their average length is about 2½ feet, including about a 7-inch tail. The average cat measure about 9 inches at the shoulders.

Many cats now roam freely and are blamed for catching and killing thousands of birds annually. However, they are also credited with keeping rodent populations in check. They catch their prey by surprise through stalking and ambushing.

Birds, rodents, squirrels, rabbits and insects make up a good part of their naturally caught diet. They are mostly nocturnal, and have excellent eye sight being able to see with little light.

Front foot 1¼ X 1 inch, four-toed, alternates. Hind foot 1 X 1, four-toed, alternate (a fifth toe is higher up on the leg and does not show in tracks); 6 inch stride. Tracks are similar to a bobcat except much smaller in size and seldom found in remote woodlands. They have sharp retractable claws.



illustrations by Willy Wilmoth

Muskrat

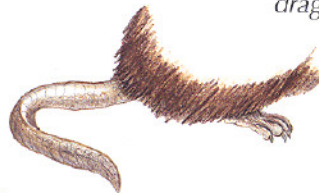
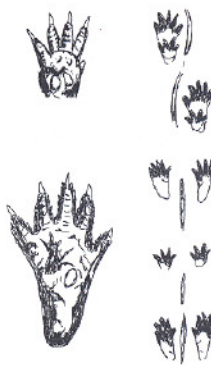
Ondatra zibethicus

The muskrat is a stocky rodent with short legs. It varies in length from 17 to 25 inches and weighs from 2 to 4 pounds. Its hind feet are designed for swimming, being longer than the front feet and partially webbed. The front feet are equipped with long claws for digging.

Muskrats favor slow-moving or still water, but will live in water with some current. It is most numerous along coastal and inland marshes, sluggish rivers, ponds and lakes. They build a bulky dome-shaped lodge of marsh vegetation or burrow into banks of rivers and ponds.

The muskrat will eat clams, frogs and fish, but will also feed on vegetation in the form of roots of cattails, water lilies, bulrushes and other aquatic and emergent vegetation. In winter it will store willow shoots and other vegetation for forage.

Front foot 1½ X 1¼ inches, four-toed. Hind foot, 3½ X 1½ inches, five-toed. Three-inch spread and 8 inch stride. Its dragging tail leaves a slender line and the toe print of the forefoot is characterized by widespread toes, similar to but smaller than an opossum. Tracks are conspicuous in mud showing a dragging tail.



Raccoon

Procyon lotor

The raccoon averages 15 to 24 pounds. Their masked face and bushy ringed tail are distinctive. Raccoons favorite haunts are along streams and rivers, at the edges of swamps and marshes, especially if bordered by large hardwood stands and near agricultural areas.

Raccoons are known for their habit of wetting its food, but not to wash it. Apparently they lack saliva plus wetting its feet makes them more sensitive and enables them to feel the food as they handle it.

They feed on crayfish, snails, insects, wild fruits, corn, other crops and can be a nuisance in uncovered garbage cans and dog food trays set outside. Most of its foraging and prowling is done at night.

They look hunch-backed when standing or moving about, because of its hind legs being longer than the front. As they walk they sway or roll from side to side.

Front foot 2½ X 3 inches, five thin fingers. Hind foot 2¼ X 4½ inches, five thin toes; 7 inch stride. Its long, slender feet, with naked soles, leave almost human, baby-like foot prints in mud. The woodchuck print, with which it is sometimes confused, is blunter and rounder than that of a raccoon.



Red Fox

Vulpes vulpes

Red foxes average about 8 to 15 pounds in weight. The north and European strain are stockier and larger than the native. The reddish-brown colors, along with pointed muzzle, long pointed ears and bushy white-tipped tails are distinctive.

The home range is about a mile when raising young, but it will range over wider areas if food is scarce. They favor fields, meadows and forest edges, especially adjacent to open lands. Burrows are dug in sunny hillsides, under logs or in open woods under brush.

Catlike in many ways, they feed mainly on rodents, rabbits, woodchucks, snakes, frogs, insects, earthworms, birds and wild fruits. Carrion is eaten in winter.

The "string-straight" characteristic of the fox's trail makes it easy to distinguish it from that of a small dog, which it otherwise resembles. Tracks in the snow look like a dotted line because hind foot placed directly over the tracks of the front foot. Front foot is 1¾ X 2 inches, four-clawed. Toe marks are elongated, narrow and rough. Hind foot is 1¼ X 2¼ inches, four-clawed. Its stride is from 8 to 18 inches in a straight line. Tracks are usually 12-14 inches apart when trotting.





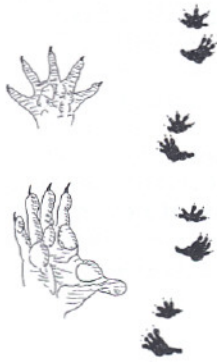
Opossum *Didelphis marsupialis*

Opossum are very rat-like in appearance. They live in woodland thickets, swamps, along streams, around farms and frequently in suburbs. Opossums live in tree cavities, fallen logs, rock piles, old squirrel nests, brush piles and old out buildings,

They are nomadic and nocturnal animals. Their hind feet are almost hand-like with a long flexible toe giving it the ability to grasp branches and can also use their tail for grasping. Opossums are excellent tree-climbers.

They'll eat a variety of vegetable and animal matter including insects, grubs, garbage, birds, small rodents, frogs, bird eggs and a wide variety of wild or cultivated fruits and berries. They will even visit the compost pile to feed on disposed of squash or melons.

Front foot measures 1¾ X 1½ inches with five toes and claw marks. Hind foot is 1½ X 2½ inches, with four toes and "opposing thumb." The opossum track is easy to recognize with its fan-shaped, widely-separated toes and tail mark. They walk with deliberate steps but tend to meander. If disturbed they move off at a fast walk using its tail to maintain balance by waving it in circles.



River Otter *Lutra canadensis*

The river otter is about 4 to 5 feet long and weighs 10 to 25 pounds. It lives along streams, rivers, swampy flowages, marshes and lakes, usually those bordered by woodlands. They feed mainly on fish, crayfish, frogs, clams, snails, turtles, snakes and aquatic insects.

Their legs are short and on land they travel with a loping or bounding gait, normally traveling along water courses. They also slide on snow, or muddy and grassy banks. During a season, a family of otters may remain in a range of only 3 to 10 miles, but otters have been known to range over 50 to 100 miles of shoreline. While mostly nocturnal, they will occasionally come out during the day.

Front foot 2½ X 3½ inches, five padded toes and claws conspicuous. Hind foot, 3 X 3 inches, hair-padded, paired. In snow or mud an otter's feet leave round tracks with distinct toe marks, almost in a straight line with a tail mark that undulates from side to side so that it is usually to the left and then to the right of those paw marks. Its front feet touch the ground first with the hind feet coming down into the same spots.



Striped Skunk *Mephitis mephitis*

The striped skunk has been tagged with the Greek name "mephitis," meaning "bad odor." Its name and reputation come from the smelly, acidic liquid, secreted by a pair of glands under its tail. They can spray 5 to 10 feet with great accuracy and as far as 20 feet. The pungent odor with gaseous-like qualities is a common smell on spring evenings when skunks roam, or late-summer evenings when mama skunk leads her young on feeding forays, and they come in contact with dogs, cats, other animals or humans.

They weigh 3 to 10 pounds and measure up to 30 inches long. Skunks are mainly nocturnal animals that tend to favor forest edges, brushy field corners and hedgerows, especially in agricultural areas. They make their homes in old rabbit or groundhog burrows, in or under old sheds, outbuildings or other similar structures. Their range is anywhere from 1 to 5 miles. The main foods of skunks are grubs, insects, mice and snakes,

Front foot, 1¾ X 1½ inches, five-toed, claws showing. Hind foot shaped like a baby's foot, 1⅞ X 2½ inches, five toes, with no claws showing. The distance between tracks while walking is 3 inches. Walks, canters or gallops.



illustrations by Willy Wilmoth

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*

The wild turkey is a bird of mixed hardwoods of oak, maple and beech, with a smattering of dogwood, laurel, holly, rhododendron and grape, as well as mixed stands of pine. During the fall and winter, turkeys travel and feed in family groups which are normally made up of the spring broods of one or more adult hens.

Young toms, called jakes, weigh 10 to 14 pounds and larger than an adult hen. Mature toms weigh 18 to 21 pounds, mature hens half that.

Their diet is about 95 percent vegetable matter including acorns, beech-nuts, grapes, berries, grasses, clovers and honeysuckle, with the remainder being insects such as grasshoppers.

Foot prints of toms are usually larger than 3 inches and toes are usually spread at a wider angle than the hens. Hens are usually smaller than 3 inches. The hind toe of the turkey is smaller and elevated so it doesn't normally show in its track. A gobbler's stride measures 12 to 14 inches while the hen's is only 8 to 10 inches.

The droppings of both sexes are greenish-white when fresh. Gobbler droppings are fairly straight with a hook at one end; hen droppings are looped, spiral or round.



White-footed Mouse *Peromyscus leucopus*

The white-footed mouse measures about 5½ to 8¾ inches long with the tail adding 2¼ to 4 inches. They weigh only ½ to 1 ounce. The white-footed mouse lives mainly in wooded areas, thickets, brushy edges of woodlands, fence rows and around old buildings. Like most rodents it is mainly nocturnal. Their range is about ½ to 1½ acres, only rarely up to 10 acres, with males being the roamers.

White-footed mice live in underground cavities, under tree roots, hollow logs, under stumps or boards, amid rocks or in the burrows of other mammals. Here they build a nest bed of shredded wood, grasses and animal hair. Main foods include insects, nuts, seeds, grains, fruits, berries, fungi and other vegetation, as well as worms, bird eggs and young birds.

They have four clawed toes and an inconspicuous nailed thumb on each front foot, and five clawed toes on each hind foot. Three inch spread between the prints when hopping. Hind foot ¾ inches.



Woodchuck *Marmota monax*

The woodchuck is a common sight sitting up on its hind legs and nibbling on some kind of plant material, close to the road's edge. Its normal gait is a slow walk, but it may lope or gallop when alarmed. They are somewhat solitary with their range covering only about a quarter to a half-mile. They measure 16 to 27 inches long and weigh 4 to 14 pounds. Their body is equipped with short powerful legs; a bushy, flattened tail and a broad head with gnawing teeth.

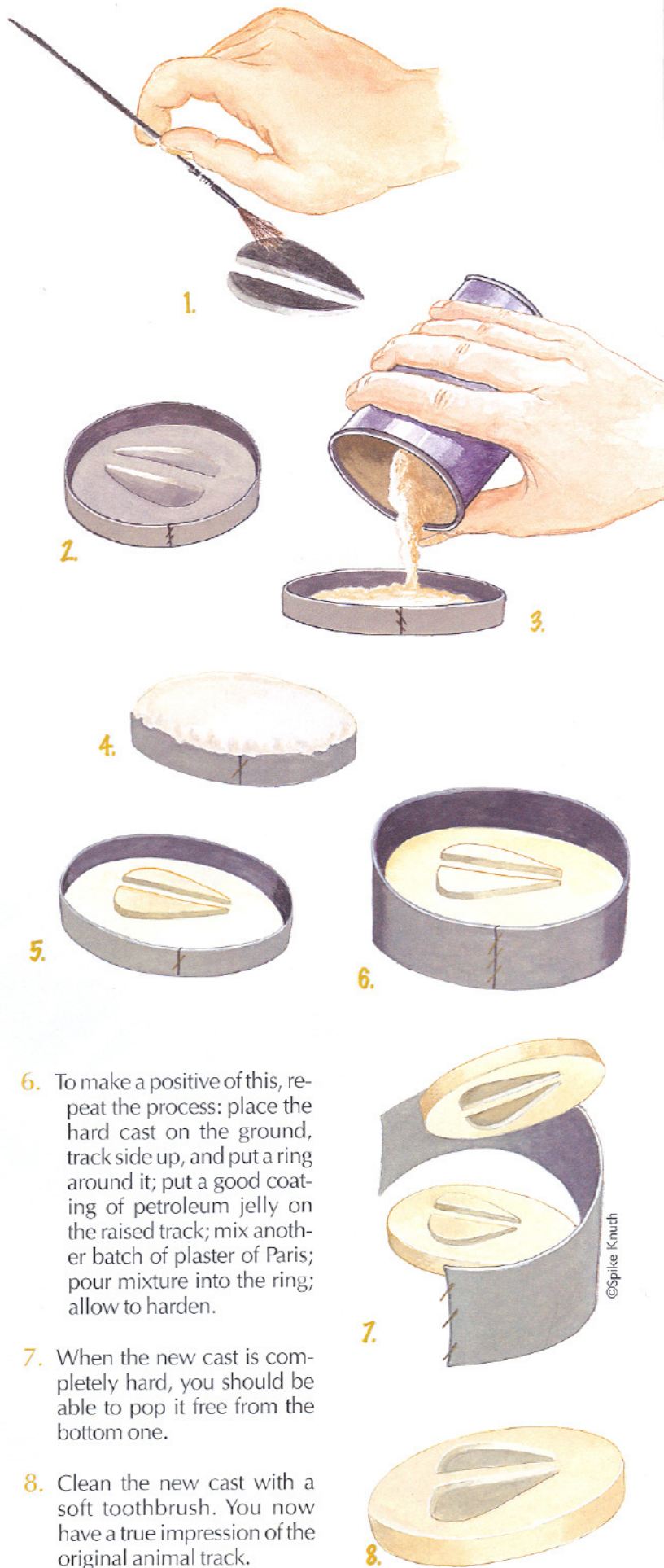
They are capable of digging and moving hundreds of pounds of rock and subsoil as they dig burrows in fields, gullies, fence rows or under large tree roots. These many burrows often serve as shelter and homes for other animals. Woodchucks eat roots, berries and all manner of herbaceous plants, including garden crops such as bush beans. When alarmed they emit a shrill whistle giving rise to another nickname—"whistle pig!"

Has four clawed toes and small thumb with a flat nail on each front foot, and five clawed toes on each hind foot, which is 2 inches long. When walking it puts one front foot just in line behind the other.



Make a Track Cast

- Carefully brush away any sand or debris from the track. Optional: spray the inside of the track with shellac or clear plastic.
- Make a ring that is open on both ends and will fit around the track as a form for the mold. The ring can be made of stiff cardboard, plastic, or even a tuna can with top and bottom removed. Place the ring over the track and firmly press into the ground.
- Mix plaster of Paris with water in a plastic cup or other container, according to package directions. A consistency of thick pancake batter works best for cast-making. Stir briskly and pour the "batter" quickly into the ring, as the plaster will begin to set in a couple of minutes.
- Fill the ring with the plaster mixture at least two-thirds of the way full, or all the way to the top if desired. Allow 12 to 24 hours for the cast to harden completely (time depends on weather and humidity). Cast may not harden properly if track is in very wet mud.
- When the cast is hard, remove the ring and clean away any dried mud or sand on the bottom of the cast with a soft toothbrush. The result is a raised negative of the track.



White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus*

Once a rare sighting, they are now common, even in suburban backyards. The whitetail population in Virginia is estimated to be about 900,000. The mixture of forest and cropland, lumbering and farming has created ideal habitat for deer.

A healthy adult buck will weigh 175 to 200 pounds. The size of the antlers is dependant on the buck's diet, not its age. Adequate browse containing the needed calcium and phosphorus help to produce a good rack.

Bucks are in top condition as the rutting season peaks about mid-November. Breeding takes place in November and December. As fall turns to winter, the deer acquire a thick coat of hair and turn darker brownish-gray.

Primarily nocturnal feeders, they come out at dusk, staying until dawn before going to bed down. Among its favored foods are leaves, acorns, apples, corn, soybeans, peanuts, strawberries, greens and other vegetable crops.

Deer prints are easily identifiable by two-parted hoof marks, roughly 2 X 2½ inches in size. The hoof prints of both sexes are indistinguishable when of the same size. Deer tracks are sharper pointed than those of domestic hoofed animals.

- To make a positive of this, repeat the process: place the hard cast on the ground, track side up, and put a ring around it; put a good coating of petroleum jelly on the raised track; mix another batch of plaster of Paris; pour mixture into the ring; allow to harden.

- When the new cast is completely hard, you should be able to pop it free from the bottom one.

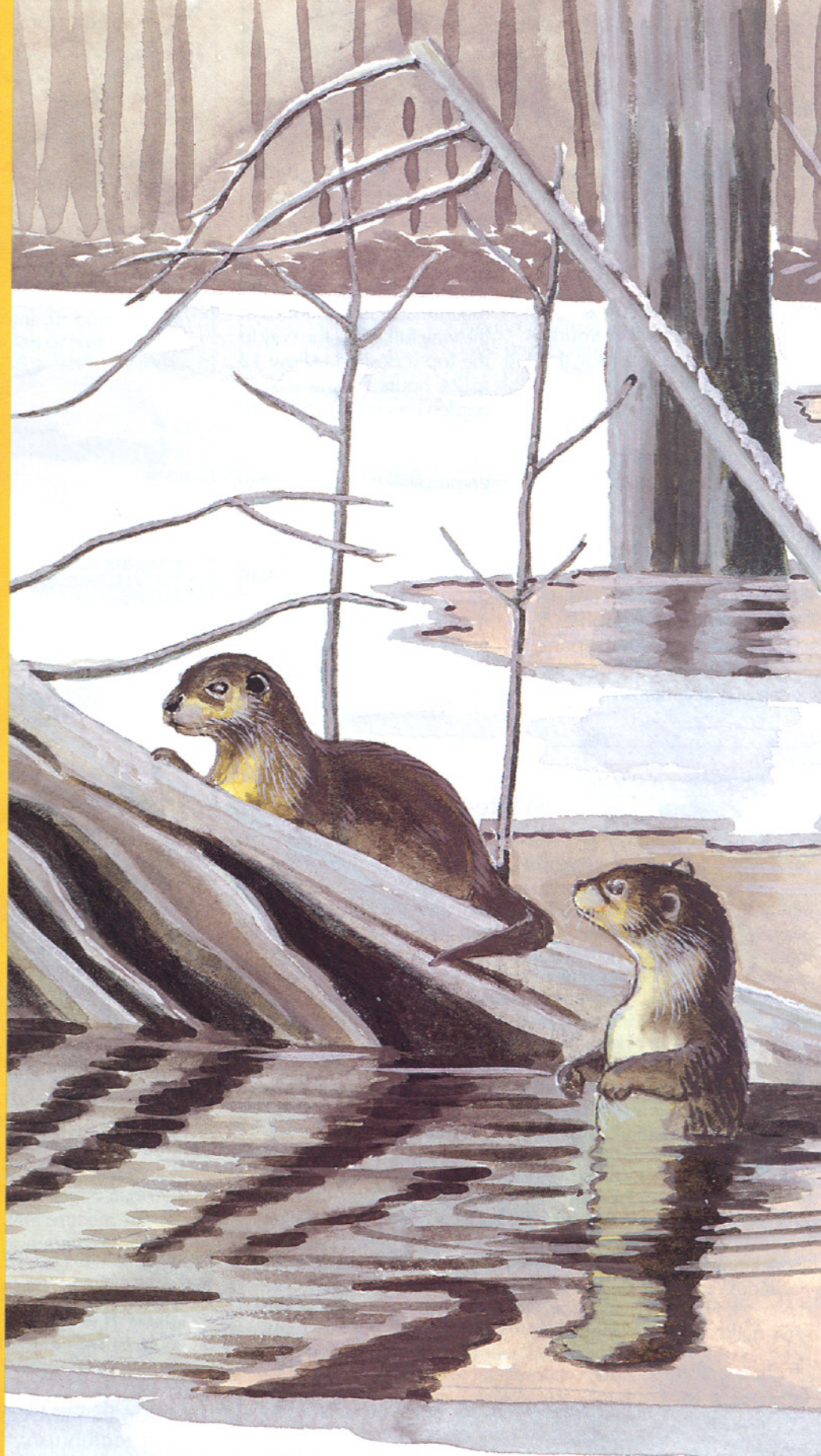
- Clean the new cast with a soft toothbrush. You now have a true impression of the original animal track.

Learning More...

- *The Encyclopedia of Tracks and Scat*, by Len McDougall; c. 2004, The Lyons Press, 448 pp. [very thorough and detailed, good for the more experienced outdoor enthusiast].
- *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks*, 3rd edition (Peterson Field Guide Series), by Olaus J. Murie; c. 2005, Houghton-Mifflin Books, New York; 448 pp. [a traditional but in-depth field guide with black-and-white track drawings that include measurements; entries are organized by animal families].
- *Mammal Tracks and Sign: a Guide to North American Species*, by Mark Elbroch; c. 2003, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg PA; 792 pp. [excellent and comprehensive].
- *National Audubon Society Pocket Guide to Familiar Animal Tracks* (The Audubon Society Pocket Guides), by National Audubon Society; c. 1993, Knopf Books; 192 pp. [a beginners' guide with nice animal photos but only basic track drawings].
- *Tracking and the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Sign*, 2nd edition, by Paul Rezendes; c. 1999, Harper-Collins Publishers Inc., New York [behavior and habitat of common mammals and birds, with information on the finer points of identifying tracks, trails, nests, droppings and other signs; excellent full-color photos].

The *Virginia Fish and Wildlife Information Service* is a great way to learn more about Virginia's wildlife species. This educational and informative database can be accessed through the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' Web site at: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/vawildlife/index.html>.

Note: *Animal Tracks* has been designed to be used as reference cards that can be cut out. Additional copies of this issue are available for \$2. Order by making check payable to *Treasurer of Virginia* and mail to Virginia Wildlife, P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, VA 23230-1104.



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