

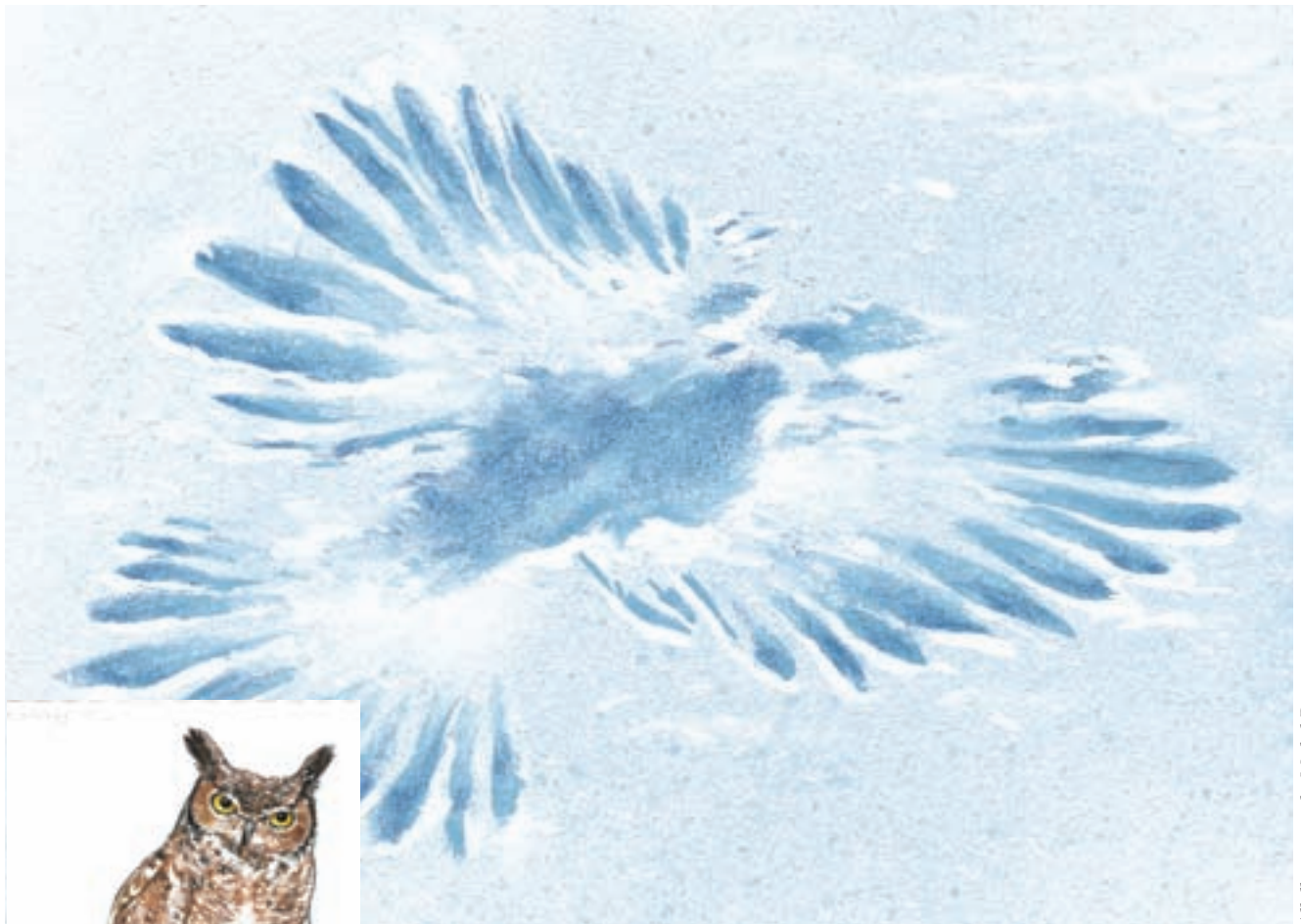
Tracking Down Winter Wildlife

The morning after a snowstorm is the best time to find your inner sleuth and go tracking in the backyard. Many animals are nocturnal and conduct their business under the protection of dense cover. But thanks to freshly fallen snow, we can garner clues as to how they live.

Many animals have a particular gait that may make identification

possible without looking at a single print. Rodents and rabbits, for example, hop, while foxes and other canids usually walk in a straight line. The distance between tracks also helps narrow down the list of choices. The straddle (width between prints) and the stride (distance between steps) can give you a rough estimate of the size of the maker of the tracks.

Then there is the actual print. If conditions are ideal (slightly wet, shallow snow that isn't melting), you can measure the length and width of the print, count the number of toes, and check for claw marks. Clear, well-formed prints are rare. But with a little patience and a lot of practice, you will find it easier to interpret these winter wildlife signs.



All illustrations by Michel Poirier



Great horned owl

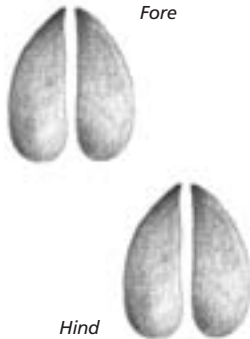
(Bubo virginianus)

If you find large tail and wing prints in snow, you have probably found a strike mark made by a great horned owl. Strike marks usually have a messy hole in the centre, made by the owl's talons as it seizes prey. The feather imprints can be quite sharp if the owl had to struggle to take flight with heavy prey such as a skunk.

Habitat



Fore and Hind Prints:
5.1–8.9 cm long
4.1–6.4 cm wide



White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)



The size and shape of white-tailed deer prints vary, depending on sex, age, and gait. Their hoofs are cloven, so prints are often heart-shaped. Dewclaws register as small dots behind the cleave prints. Walking deer barely lift their feet off the ground, so their cleaves make parallel drag marks in the snow. Drag marks and the heart-shape are absent in prints left after a gallop. Instead, cleave marks are widely splayed.



Fore Print:
2.0–3.8 cm long
1.3–2.5 cm wide
Hind Print:
3.8–5.8 cm long
2.0–3.3 cm wide



Red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*)



Red squirrels always leave a hopping track that starts and ends at the bottom of a tree. Paired hind prints always fall in front of paired fore prints. Hind prints are turned slightly outward. All four prints are usually visible, but in deep snow, they may merge to form two diamond-shaped prints, far left, or occasionally one large print. These snow-savvy rodents often leave behind drag marks from feet and tail.



Fore Print:
0.6–0.8 cm long
0.6–0.8 cm wide
Hind Print:
1.5–1.6 cm long
1 cm wide



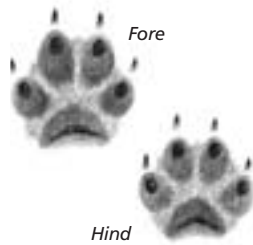
Deer mouse (*Peromyscus maniculatus*)



Deer mice are superb jumpers. Their trails commonly show a paired hopping pattern where hind prints always occur in front of closely paired fore prints. In soft or deep snow, the hind and fore prints on each side of the body merge to form two longer prints, far left. Tail drag marks are sometimes present, creating a narrow groove down the middle of the trail.



Fore Print:
5.3–7.6 cm long
4.1–5.8 cm wide
**Hind Print is
slightly smaller**



Red fox
(*Vulpes vulpes*)

Red fox prints show a large space between the toes and the main pads. The main pad resembles a stretched and inverted V, a shape unique to the species. The common gait, far left, is the C-shaped gallop, where the hind tracks register in front of the fore feet. The walking gait leaves a trail of open footprints in a nearly straight line.



Print:
3.8 cm long



Dark-eyed junco
(*Junco hyemalis*)

The tracks of the dark-eyed junco are typical of the small hopping birds that frequent backyard bird feeders in winter. Tracks are about 4 to 13 centimetres apart and show three forward-pointing toes and a longer rear toe. In deep snow, there are toe drag marks between hops.



Fore Print:
5.1–7.6 cm long
4.6–6.4 cm wide
Hind Print:
6.1–9.7 cm long
5.1–6.4 cm wide



Raccoon
(*Procyon lotor*)

Raccoons have five fingerlike, bulbous toes on all feet, and their hind feet frequently leave heel marks in snow. Therefore, their tracks often resemble human handprints and footprints. Claw marks may show as small dots. Their most common gait is a rolling walk, where tracks show hind prints next to the opposite fore print, far left. Raccoons are accomplished climbers, and their trails often lead to a tree. They den up during cold spells but come out on warmer days.



Fore Print:
3.8–5.6 cm long
2.5–3.8 cm wide

Hind Print:
6.1–9.7 cm long
5.1–6.4 cm wide



◀

Striped skunk
(*Mephitis mephitis*)

Because of their excellent defence system, skunks rarely run. Their prints are often erratically spaced but sometimes show an alternating pattern. Long digging claws on the front feet often register in tracks, and the toes point slightly inward. Like raccoons, skunks sleep for much of the winter but may wander out on warmer days.



Print:
6.4 to 7.6 cm long



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American crow
(*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

Crows have thick, sturdy toes that point inward when they walk. When bounding forward to take off, their stride gets longer. Crows may also leave a hopping track. Their long claws have a continual tendency to close and leave long grooves in deep snow, far left. Pads are sometimes visible on the individual toe segments.



Fore Print:
5.1–7.6 cm long
3.8–5.1 cm wide

Hind Print:
10–15 cm long
5.1–8.9 cm wide



◀

Snowshoe hare
(*Lepus americanus*)

Snowshoe hares leave hopping tracks with groups of four prints forming a triangular pattern in snow, far left. If a hare is bounding quickly, the distance between running groups (cluster of four prints at speed) may be as much as 130 centimetres. Snowshoe hares have thick, heavy fur on their feet, and the hind toes splay out to help distribute weight over a greater area. Hind footprints are usually much larger; however, hares walk on the toes of their hind feet, so prints made during this gait all look similar.