

Neighborhood Wildlife Stewards

Teaching our Highlands neighbors how to live safely with wildlife and keeping the wildlife wild.

Winter Animal Tracks and Signs

If this winter is anything like last winter when we had a few snow days to slow us down, it's the perfect time to walk in the snow and look for animal tracks. It may surprise you to know what animals live in Issaquah Highlands.

The day after a snowfall, head out to one of the wooded trails in Issaquah Highlands, such as Kathy's Trail or Grand Ridge. Often animals will use human trails in an attempt to conserve energy. As you walk to the trail, begin to look for tracks in the snow and think about what kinds of animals live here. Most likely you will see tracks from people and dogs and possibly deer, rabbit, raccoon or bobcat too.

When you see a track, first determine the number of toes in the track. If it is a two-toed track it is likely a deer. Four toes on the front and hind foot indicate a track from the dog family or the cat family. On the other hand, four toes on the front foot and five toes on the hind foot identify it as a rodent track such as a mouse, vole or chipmunk. If the track has five toes each on the front and back foot, it is a member of the weasel family or a bear, raccoon or opossum.

The following are four mammals whose tracks and scat you may find on the trails. If you decide to dissect any animal scat, use a stick and not your hands and be sure to keep a good distance. Some animal scat contains parasites that are harmful if inhaled.

Deer have hooves with two-toes in front and back, a very distinct print. The front toe of the track is pointed with the overall track in the shape of an inverted heart. Deer are vegetarian and eat only plants. If you come across deer scat it looks like a pile of jelly beans, slightly oblong, small and compact.

The Eastern cottontail is the most common rabbit in urban areas. It was introduced to Washington in the 1930s as a game animal. Its four-toed track is distinct and easy to identify in the snow. There are two parallel prints in front: these are the back feet. The rabbit's back feet are about two and a half times longer than the two smaller prints that follow. Overall, the track is the shape of a triangle. Like deer, rabbits are vegetarian. Rabbit droppings are found in groups of five to ten that resemble a pile of M&M candy, flatter and rounder than deer scat.



Rabbit track photo by: Heather Swift of www.cohabitats.com



Coyote track photo by: Heather Swift of www.cohabitats.com

Coyote tracks have four toes in front and back. If the print has small triangular marks in front, those are claw marks. The coyote track is oval in shape, more compact and tight, with little space between the toes and a nose shaped heel pad. It often resembles a dog track, though a dog track is wider overall with splayed toes. If you can follow the coyote track, it will be a fairly straight line, versus a dog track which goes all over, with little focused direction. Coyotes are opportunistic feeders, eating garbage, berries and small animals. The scat is often twisted, sharp tipped and full of hair. Coyotes will often leave their scat in the middle of a trail to inform others they are present.

The track of a bobcat is similar in size to a coyote, with four toes in front and back. Unlike coyotes, cats retract their claws when they walk or run, so often you do not see claw marks in the track. The overall shape of a bobcat track is circular versus oval like the coyote. The heel pad is M shaped, with a lead toe on each foot. Bobcats are carnivores; they eat small mammals which can include domesticated cats. The scat looks like segmented logs with blunt ends, similar in size to coyote scat.

If you are interested in learning more about tracking the Wilderness Awareness School in Duvall, Washington has classes. <http://www.wildernessawareness.org/>

If you care about the welfare of the wildlife in our community, want to learn more about living safely with the wildlife, and would enjoy meeting your neighbors, join us for our monthly meeting January 11th from 7-8PM at Blakely Hall.

Written by: Catherine Macchio