

Guidelines for Tracking and Observing Mammals

Most mammals are very secretive. You won't often see them roaming around in broad daylight. Instead, they prefer the early morning and late evening to do their roaming. However, mammals do show signs. Listed below is a small list of key language used when referring to tracking and observing mammals, that is helpful to know before diving into further specifics.

Finding signs and tracks in the forest is about learning how to read the small details an animal leaves behind and relating that sign to the bigger picture. Another key lesson we gain from observing and tracking is about respecting the space. Be aware you are in another home, which they rely on for survival, and take care not to damage animals' homes or food sources. Lastly, tracking and observing connects us with the ecology of an area, teaching us not to fear what we do not know or understand, but to be curious about it.

Learning Language: animal signs

Track - The footprint of an animal. Tracks are often the most difficult and subtle sign to follow. There is an entire science and methodology for determining species, direction of travel and more. It is most important when you find a track to look carefully, do your best to think about what might have made the track and then look to the immediate surroundings for clues. Winter is a fantastic time to look for tracks.

Gate - Different animals have different track patterns, depending on how fast they are moving. Common gates are walk, trot, lope and gallop. These patterns will be different for each species. Because there is a relatively small number of mammals, they are relatively easy to identify. However, it is always better to describe.

Trails - A variety of animals use trails. They are like highways in the woods. The constant use creates a trough and the width of the trail is typically the shoulder width of the largest animal that uses the trail.

Run - A run is used by one species. Runs usually branch off trails and will lead to feeding areas, middens, dens, tunnels or nests.

Feeding Areas - A feeding area is where an animal eats. Depending on their diet these will look different. Hares browse living plants. Their feeding area will have the new growth of young plants snipped off or twigs with the tips chewed off at a 45° angle. Squirrels like to feast on seeds and cones from a high vantage point, helping them see an approaching predator. Beneath their perch will be an obvious pile of shells, called a midden. Mink catch fish, which they will eat on the bank of a river.

Escape Route - A one-time use trail. Characterized by a zig-zag or circular pattern of direction.

Lay - A resting place. Grass, moss or leaves will be gently pressed down.

Bedding Area - A sleeping place. Grass, moss and leaves will be pushed down and show signs of damage and wear.

Midden - A small pile of seeds, bones or leaves.

Fur - Fur has many jobs. It insulates, camouflages and sheds water. Consider what colour the fur is; does it match its surroundings, is it oily and looks like it will shed water well, or is it puffy and thick?

Mammal Characteristics:

Ears - When I watch a wild animal like a fox or hare, I am always amazed at how acute their hearing is. Ears are of great importance, both to alert a prey to danger or a predator to the location of food. Good questions include; how big are the ears relative to the animal, where are they positioned and can they move?

Eyes - Where eyes are positioned on a mammal indicates much about the animal. Forward-facing eyes usually indicate the need for accurate stereoscopic vision, useful in capturing prey. Sidefacing eyes indicate that a large field of vision is needed to avoid predators.

Tails - Tails help balance, swim, communicate, insulate and warn. A flying squirrel tail is like a rudder, a beaver tail is a huge paddle and a raised skunk tail warns predators of an impending spray. Consider the size, shape and whether or not it is smooth or furry.

Legs - Legs are for movement. They are designed for getting from here to there, how animals move once again tells us much about their life. Ermine's legs are short and stubby so that they can fit in tunnels and cavities. Coyote legs are long and lean for speed and ease of travel over long distances. Consider if forelegs and hind legs are the same and if not then why?

Paws - Fore limbs with paws that have great dexterity or don't is also a useful observation. A raccoon can pretty much do everything that we can with our hands, while a fox certainly cannot. Consider how an animal interacts with its environment.

Teeth - Rodent's teeth never stop growing because of their constant need for chewing of tough material. Shrews have a tiny set of sharp predator teeth for capturing and killing insects. While it is not always easy to

observe mammals and their mouths, there are times when you can. For example, watching a squirrel eating a nut illustrates its nibbling feeding pattern.

1) **Area:** When tracking and observing mammals we must first begin with an ecologically diverse area. You can do this anytime, but during winter is especially helpful for looking at specific tracks, because snow offers a blank canvas for us to observe tracks and trails.

2) **Open your senses:** we often sleepwalk through an area. Even without any experience, we can be expert observers. As you move upland in a forest, notice how the tree species and ground cover shift. Be open to smells, sounds, and sights near you.

3) **Go off-trail:** follow natural landmarks to help guide you in your tracking, but make sure you (and any company joining you) feel comfortable with the area, so if you end up going far out of the way, you can always lead back to where you came from.

4) **When you see one sign it is often followed by another.** One squirrel feeding sign will indicate there are squirrels in an area- this means there is a food source for foxes and coyotes! It also means there might be a nest nearby, tracks, or catches in your area of view. When we know what to look for, it helps us find it. As we add clues together, we can start to make better and better guesses as to the species in an environment and find more and more signs. If you find a likely animal **highway**, it might give you the next clue- a feeding area, or a **trail** left by an animal.

5) **Consider the entire forest.** Exploring the forest initially to see where there are certain things like open areas, big trees, or water sources, will help you figure out where the main pathways would be. For example, if you know there is a field on the edge of the forest, it is likely there are **highways** close to that transition area; so that foxes and coyotes can efficiently get to and from the field to hunt, and then come back to the safety of the forest to be close to their den, watch their pups etc.