

Tracking mysteries in Alberta



Pam Asheton
Listening to the Land

“Teaching children,” writes Tom Brown Jr. in his best-selling wilderness series for young people, “to track is like teaching children to read a book.” Individual tracks, he asserts, are letters and trails forming words, sentences describing in detail a portion on each animal’s life.

I remember watching tracking and survival experts Dave and Brenda Holder of Mahikan Trails (www.mahikan.ca) - Canmore based with easy access to wilderness areas - find deer, weasel, squirrel tracks one icily cold morning and describe exactly how each animal was standing, pausing, running (and what had startled that animal even) - using the difference from the depth of a deer’s hooves into lakeside mud if female or male, as weight differences imprinted more deeply.

That day years back, ah, I had that camera busy taking photographs as they talked and exclaimed and explained; at that stage frankly I was struggling to identify any track at all. Oops, eh?

So, it was pleasing, all these years later, snap-

ping off a photographic record down by the tacky holding silt-mud along the creekside to know what this animal’s footprint was! And, feeling decidedly smug, knowing that for a good reference it’s a cool idea to measure, either using a ruler or keys or something easily identifiable and where you get an accurate comparison to length and width.

The cat family (domestic and feral cats, cougar, lynx), all canine members and the same with deer are ‘diagonal walkers’ (right front moves forward as does the left rear). ‘Bound’ walkers primarily come out in the weasel clan (where they’ll push off with their back feet, landing on the fronts so the two feet are side by side, and bringing up the rear feet just behind the fronts) - so you have ‘clusters’ of four tracks.

‘Gallop walkers’ include the rodent family (ie, squirrels), and rabbits and hares, where the rear feet scamper and plant around and past the front feet - and, fast or slow, gallop walkers prefer to use this pattern most of the time; patterns are set in clusters of four, like ‘bounding’ patterns and the stride length measurement is taken between the clusters.

And then there are ‘pace walkers’ - the kind of lumbering walkers as with black and grizzly bears. These pacers (as do some horses, by the way) move the same side of the body (and legs) at the same time - so, right front/right back and then left front/left back, although when accelerating this stride pattern will change.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAM ASHETON

An overnight mystery visitor on Horse Creek - can you identify?

Tracking’s easier to photograph, easier to understand, period, when the sunlight is more angled and with more shadowing within the print, when they sort of come to life, show the

push off strides and digging down to bound forward, say. (An angled flashlight beam and overhead highlights the same deal, kinda fun this one!).

All along Horse Creek, the main road and then along the fields and fencelines are what’s called ‘game trails’. Animals inevitably follow the line of least resistance, the easiest lie of the land, conserving hard-won dinner calories. Along these game trails, if you stop even by a roadside, will be mule deer trackings, or coyotes that you may have noticed at quite precise road crossing markers.

Sticky just holding mud by favourite watering places work, and then too on grassed road allowances and trails in damp places by wetlands are mysteries to be solved. A scrap of fur or hide snagged on barbed wire, yet another clue, and real answers start to reveal themselves as wildlife moves right under our usually very unaware human noses.

A very popular children’s summer camps with survival and archery and tracking skills are on offer too with Brenda’s sister Tracy Klettl and her partner Tim Mearns, details at www.paintedwarriors.ca north of Cochrane.)