

Tracking the Park



Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area Pennsylvania & New Jersey



Identifying an animal by its tracks is quite a skill. In addition to the footprint itself, an expert tracker looks at the distance between prints (the *leap*), the distance apart the left and right feet are (the *straddle*), and the pattern of the feet on the ground. Do the back feet land in front of the front feet (called *overlapping*) or do the back feet fall exactly into the print of the front?

A tracker also looks at other things around the footprints... Did the animal stop and chew on something? Did it leave droppings? Did it jump up into a tree? Did it go somewhere or just run around in circles? (Lots of dogs do that -- but they don't have to go hunting for food.) Some animals, like beaver and possum, even bring their own "eraser" -- by dragging their tails, they wipe

out most of their prints!

Begin by trying to figure out what KIND of an animal would leave a track like you see in the photograph above. This is an animal that leaps and hops. You can't see the print of its small front feet because its back feet land on top of the tracks of the front feet. The animal ran straight up into a tree. And this track was very easy to find --- it's all over the woods, and even in cities and backyards.

If you are thinking SQUIRREL, you are on your way to "tracking the park"!

Tracks are either in the mud or the snow -- not in bright colors like this. But you are just starting out. Think hard about the size of the animal and the way it is moving, then take a guess. (Answers are at the bottom, but don't peek!)

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Actual size: 4 1/2 to 7 inches long and 3 1/2 to 4 inches wide

1. That's a big foot! If you guessed that it was the ranger going barefoot, you would not be too far off. This is a big heavy animal that walks slowly and leaves a deep full print with its back legs and a shorter print with its front legs. It has 5 toes right out in front like human toes, but which is the biggest toe on YOUR foot?

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Actual size: 2 1/2 inches long and 2 inches wide

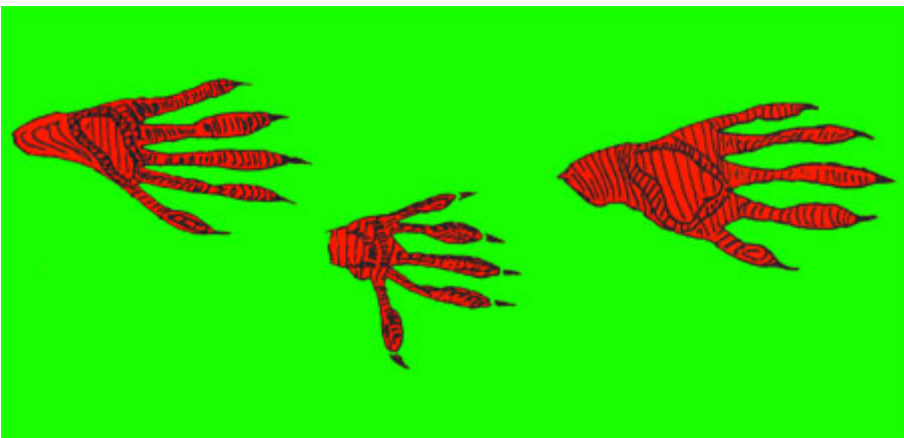
2. Look familiar? Almost like a four-footed member of your family? If you guessed a dog, you are close. This animal looks like a dog but is smaller than most dogs and its tracks look a lot like its bigger relatives, the coyote and wolf. You won't see its tracks going playfully in circles like those of your family dog, though. Its tracks go straight through the forest or even up a tree on serious business: finding food.

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Actual size: 3 1/2 inches long and 2 1/2 inches wide

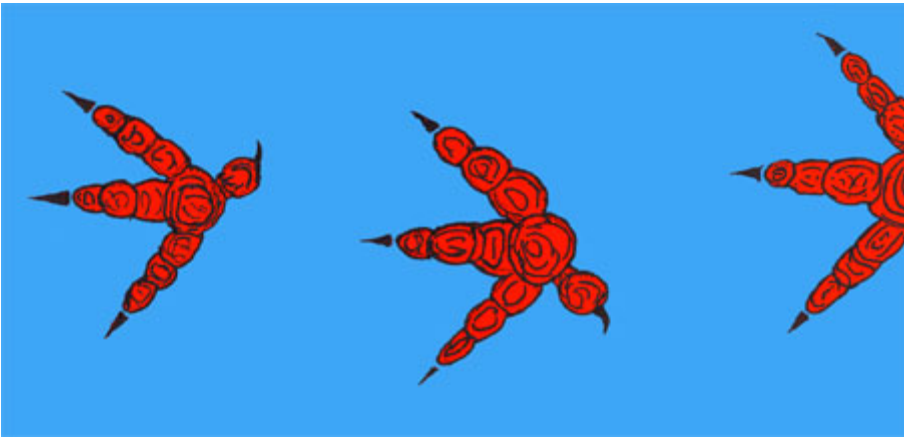
3. Not a paw, but a hoof -- with two toes? There aren't many animals with feet like that in this forest. Actually this animal has other toes, but they are high up on its lower leg, and won't show unless the animal is in deep snow. Are you sure which way the animal is heading? If the tracks go up to a barrier like a fence or a downed tree, and then leap right over it, it shouldn't be hard to guess!



Actual size: 2 1/2 to 4 inches long and 2 1/2 inches wide

4. Back feet and front "hands" are really different and the "hand" looks a lot like a person's -- look at that thumb sticking out sideways! This little fellow can grab and open up anything that you do, and he does! If someone has ever gotten into your peanut-butter and jam jars at night at the campground, this might be your "burglar".

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5. No fair! This is a really tricky one, as this animal won't spend much time on the ground at all. It's a very, very big bird, and its claws are well made for grabbing little animals, or fish right out of the river. Its sharp eyes can spot a dinner from an amazing distance away.

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1.BEAR 2.FOX 3.DEER 4.RACCOON 5.EAGLE

NPS sketches by Ranger Dan Tenerowicz.