

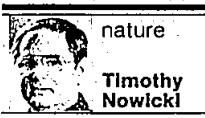
# Following animal tracks in winter often tells a tale

Snow allows us to see where animals in our backyards, forests and meadows travel. If there is snow on the ground, an animal is going to make a track. Even if we do not see the animal, we know it was there by the tracks it left behind.

Wildlife biologists take advantage of this time of year to census animals in different habitats. They erect two stakes and identify the tracks and count how many of each track that cross an imaginary line between the two stakes. This technique can only be used in winter.

Following tracks in winter's snow can often tell a story. Consider the fresh snow as the blank pages of a book, tracks as the words, and following the tracks as the sentences and paragraphs of the story. I remember following well-trodden paths of a fox to its den one winter season. Several main pathways radiated from the den in different directions.

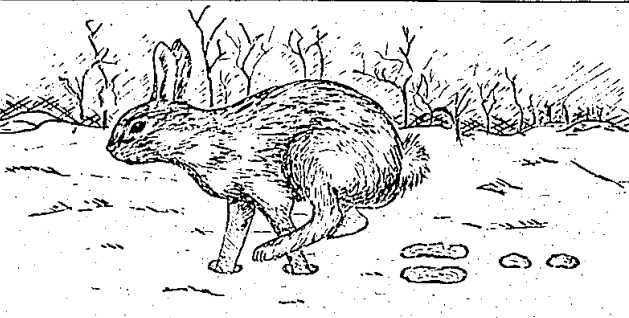
IF YOU follow tracks in the proper direction it may lead you to the animal. But sometimes following a



nature  
**Timothy Nowicki**

track in the proper direction can be tricky. For instance, two common tracks that can be found in backyards are squirrels and rabbits. When the snow is not too deep the impressions of each toe can be seen. This is particularly true with a squirrel. Which ever way the toes are pointing is the direction the animal is traveling. But in soft, deep fluffy snow toe impressions are not very distinct. Under these conditions the direction of travel is determined by the basic pattern of the track.

When either the squirrel or rabbit is running fast, the front feet are put down first and the back feet swing in front of the front feet. Squirrels generally keep their two front feet directly across from each other. Rab-



bits align their front feet one in front of the other, or slightly askew.

This pattern is just opposite of what one would think. Large back feet impressions do not mean that

they are always the trailing track. Some animals like the fox walk in their own tracks. A single file pattern of tracks in the meadow is generally that of a fox. Both front and

back feet register in the same impression. If you have a cat, watch how they make their tracks in the snow, its the same method as the fox.

Next time you walk the trails, see if you can identify the animal that

made a track, and see if you can identify which direction it was traveling.

Tim Nowicki is a naturalist at Independence Oaks County Park in Oakland County. He lives in Livonia.

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