

Tracking on the Trail

While it was good paying work taking the cattle up to market along one of the trails used by the cowboys, it was also incredibly dangerous work. The cowboys had to constantly be on alert for the various problems that could arise on the trail and threaten not only the lives of the cattle, but of the cowboys themselves. Whether it was floods, lightning storms, stampedes, or raids by outlaws or Native American parties, the cowboy had to be ready. One common danger that required a careful eye was keeping track of the wild animals that lived in the area and determining if they posed a threat to the cattle or the men. Learning to track an animal was a skill that many individuals on the Texas frontier would learn at some point in their life. Whether they used these skills for hunting or just to keep safe while taking a walk in nature, the art of tracking proved invaluable to many a cowboy on the trail. Join us today as we go over some of the basics on tracking the animals that might be in your own backyard.

Basics of Tracking: What you don't see

When you are outside whether it's playing at a park or going for a walk, how often do you see wild animals? We will see them occasionally, sometimes we may even see a few at a time. However, the majority of the time the animals that live around us are able to stay hidden and prefer not to be seen by us. So how do we know that they're there? To answer that, we need to look at the clues that the animals leave behind by exploring what's around us and paying attention to the details.

Evidence an animal has been in your area:

- Tracks: these are the prints that are left by the animals' feet
- Scat: droppings that are left by the animal. Each animal has its own unique scat
- Claw marks: is sometimes a sign of an animal marking their territory, but can also tell you what the animal that left these marks was
- Hair/Feathers: as an animal moves through the environment, sometimes its hair will get caught
- Odor: many animals are able to produce an odor that is used for marking territory, these odors act as a "stay away from my space" warning to both humans and other animals

While the evidence may seem hard to find, there are certain places you can look where you'll have a better chance of finding the marks left by animals. The best places to look are trails where the ground is soft or muddy, and in the branches for pieces of fur. One of the best pieces of evidence though is the track left by the animals' feet. By using the tracks, a cowboy could tell right away if they needed to be worried about the animals nearby.

Tracks:

Animal tracks can be split up into 3 groups depending on the shape of the foot of the animal. By reading these prints, you'll have a good chance of finding out what the animal is.

Plantigrade: These are terrestrial (land mammals) that walk by "planting" the full soles of their feet on the ground. This means you'll be able to see a full outline of their foot including the soles and the toes. The most common animals to walk this way in North America are humans and bears.

Digitigrade: These animals walk on the length of their fingers/toes (digits) but not on the soles. This results in prints that appear smaller than those of plantigrade animals. Digitigrade animals include coyotes, foxes, dogs, cats, squirrels, hares, and rabbits.

Unguligrade: Animals that walk on hooves such as horses, cows, deer, moose, and elk. What separates an unguligrade from a digitigrade is that an unguligrade only walks on its tiptoes.

Other signs of identifying a track is seeing if the track has claws or not. Dogs and other canines (wolves, coyotes) keep their claws out constantly to help with running. Cats on the other hand (housecats, lynxes, bobcats, mountain lions) have retractable claws (claws which can be hidden in the paw) that are only used when hunting. If you see a track with a claw, it's a good bet that it is a canine.

Claw marks can also tell you what the animal eats and whether it is dangerous or not. Herbivores (animals that only eat plants) do not traditionally have claws (especially in North America though there are some exceptions). However, carnivores (meat eaters) and omnivores (eats both plants and meat) will have claw marks in their tracks. An example of a omnivores track is that of a bear.

Who left the Print? Animals on the Trail:



White Tailed Deer

Description – A small to medium hoofed mammal found throughout the state of Texas. Underside of tail is white and produces a white “flag” when raised.

Antlers found on males.

Habitat – forests, swamps, open brushy areas, foothills, plains, and river bottoms.

Herbivorous – eats forbs, twigs, shrubs, acorns, fungi, and some grasses.

Pronghorn Antelope

Description – A medium sized reddish to tan hoofed mammal. Has two broad white bands across neck. Males have larger slightly curved horns each with a single prong growing forward. Females have smaller horns.

Habitat – Found primarily in West Texas and Panhandle in open prairies, plains, and bushlands.

Herbivorous – eats forbs, sagebrush, some grasses, and shrubs.





Coyote

Description – A medium sized to larger mammal that resembles a medium sized dog. Has gray to reddish-gray fur with more reddish fur on legs.

Habitat – Found throughout Texas, coyotes live in prairies, open woodlands, and shrub lands.

Carnivorous – Feeds primarily on rabbits and small mammals.

Raccoon

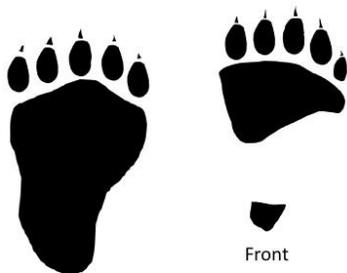
Description – A medium sized mammal with dark and light mixed fur with a distinctive large black mask across the face. Size is similar to a large house cat.

Habitat – Found throughout Texas, raccoons live in a wide range of environments near bodies of water.

Omnivore – Feeds on nuts, fruits, fish, insects, frogs, crayfish, birds, and eggs.



Black Bear



Hind

Hind Print
Length: 6 – 7 inches
Width: 3.5 – 5.5 inches

Front

Front Print:
Length: 4 – 6.3 inches
Width: 3.8 – 5.5 inches

Black Bear

Description – A large and stocky mammal, black bears are one of the largest mammals in North America. Adults can reach a length of 5 to 6 feet.

Habitat – Found throughout North America in swamps, forests, and desert scrub. While historically found in West Texas, black bears are now considered extinct in much of their former habitat in the state.

Omnivore – Feeds on insects, fresh leaves, fruits, berries, nuts, roots, tubers, and small mammals.

Duck(s)

Description – Multiple species of this water fowl (bird) are native to Texas and come in a wide varieties of colors and sizes. Males of the species tend to be more colorful than females.

Habitat – Found in marshes, ponds, lakes, slow rivers, and sometimes bays.

Omnivore – Feeds on fish, shellfish, aquatic plants, and mollusks.



Bobcat

Description – A medium sized mammal with reddish spotted fur and black on the top and tip of its short tail.

Habitat – Found throughout Texas, primarily in chaparrals, swamplands, woodlands, and rocky prairies.

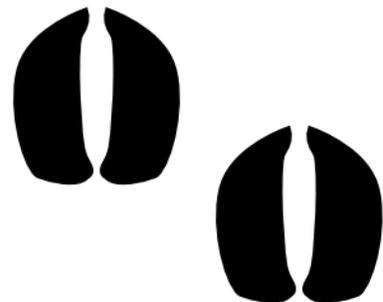
Carnivore – Small mammals and birds.

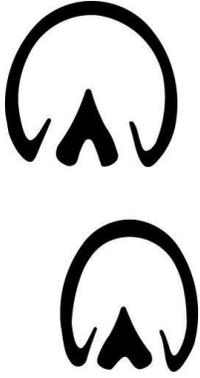
Bison (Buffalo)

Description – A large hoofed mammal, bison's stand 5 to 6.5 feet tall at the shoulder. Bison are primarily brown with shaggy fur especially at around the shoulders.

Habitat – Once roaming throughout North America and Northern Texas, bison were hunted to near extinction. Primarily found in open grasslands and prairies. There is one herd in Texas introduced by the Texas Park Service.

Herbivore – Primarily feeds on plains grasses, herbs, shrubs,





Horse

Description – A large hoofed mammal that come in a wide variety of colors and coats.

Habitat – Horses are not native to North America and were introduced by the Spanish. Wild horses were once found throughout much of the American West and throughout Texas in open grasslands and prairies.

Herbivore – Primarily feeds on grasses, herbs, and shrubs.

Put your Tracking Skills to the Test:

It's now time for you to test your skills at tracking and see if you can identify the animals from the list you know. If they are ones that you would want to avoid while on the trail, make sure to circle them in red.

Animal Tracks

While walking in the woods, you might not see many wild animals, but you can see the tracks they leave behind. It's fun to look for tracks and discover what animal were there. Mammals of the dog and cat families walk on four toes. You can see the claws in dog's prints, but not in cats. Bears, raccoons, and rodents walk on five toes. Some animals have human-like hands, and others have hooves.

Can you guess which animal left which tracks? Write the name of the animal next to its tracks.

1.





Bobcat

2.





Deer

3.





Duck

4.





Coyote

5.





Black Bear

6.





Raccoon