

Become a

TOP NOTCH TRACKER

by

KATIE CALLAHAN

*Wild turkey tracks in the snow reveal
a touch-and-go landing in Bristol, N.H.*

WILDLIFE TRACK AND SIGN CERTIFICATION OFFERS A NEW WINDOW INTO OUR WILD WORLD

I stand amongst a group of nine other enthusiastic participants as the evaluator drags his boot through the snow, drawing a circle around a set of animal tracks. He pauses for a moment, looking along the line of tracks inside the circle, and reaches down to plant a wooden Popsicle stick in the snow next to one of the footprints.

“Okay,” says tracker evaluator George Leoniak, “Number 27 is who? For Number 28, what is the gait?”

He then points toward the track marked by the stick in the snow. “Which foot is Number 29?” Then he continues, “Let’s add a question about behavior: On Number 30, what happened in the circle? What was the animal doing?”

Silence. We all stand motionless for a moment. We’re halfway through a wildlife track and sign certification event that I’ve spent years preparing for. The field test I’m taking part in is offered through a tracker evaluation program introduced in North America in 2005 by Mark Elbroch. The system was originally developed by CyberTracker Conservation, an international nonprofit based in South Africa, to provide certification of practical tracking skills. The first event held in North America was used to test observer reliability of biologists recording tracks for wildlife population studies.

In New Hampshire, certified trackers can provide valuable assistance to wildlife research and monitoring and can help validate data collected for research. The first CyberTracker evaluation on the East Coast was hosted by White Pine Programs in Cape Neddick, Maine. Since 2005, these events have become an invaluable learning and assessment tool for citizen scientists, outdoor guides, researchers and schools. Today’s event is being held in central New Hampshire, with participants from throughout New England.

Who Goes There?

I take a moment to observe my surroundings. It’s mid-March and we’re standing in a mixed stand of young trees near a beaver pond. The ground is still covered in snow, but the temperature is rising. In the afternoon sun, the small stream flowing out of the pond is collecting a growing volume of water. The circled tracks look like nothing more than a line of indistinct round depressions in the snow, but I begin to see that they form a repeating pattern. In smaller groups of two or three people, to avoid disturbing the site, we take turns getting a closer look. I move slowly around the outside of the circle in the snow, studying the pattern of footprints from different angles, and finally crouch down to look for finer details in the track closest to the marker.

The process is challenging, both for the participants and the evaluator. Winter wildlife tracking is best during the 24-to-72 hour window following a fresh snowfall, but these tracker evaluations are scheduled months in advance. In fact, the events are held year-round, and thus on a variety of substrates. Participants must rely on observation alone – no guidebooks, rulers, cameras or smartphones are allowed – and there is no talking until everyone has submitted their answers to the set of questions.

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The evaluation is a two-day practical field test, done on an individual basis. Scoring is based on a point system, with one point awarded for correct identification of a clear and distinct sign or a complete track of a medium-to-large species, two points if the sign is of a small species or is indistinct or on difficult substrate, or three points if only a portion of the footprint is visible or it was made by an animal that is rare in the area.

The most helpful learning aspect for me is that questions may be asked about any type of spoor encountered, which can include tracks, scent, scat (droppings), rubs, scrapes, nests, dens or evidence of feeding. The list of species depends on location, but can be quite comprehensive, including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects. Occasionally, a question is asked about natural phenomena that might be mistaken for wildlife sign.

Tracking is about more than just paw prints in the snow. Author Katie Callahan examines a moose "incisor scrape" (top left), where a moose has peeled the bark off a tree with its front teeth. The seeds found in this scat (left) are a likely indication of a fox or raccoon foraging in the area. Classic tracks of the muskrat (bottom left) show the dragging of its tail as it walks through the snow. A fun-loving river otter leaves its mark after sliding down a snowy hill on its belly (below).



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Camaraderie Afield

The best part about wildlife tracking is that every day outside brings something new – different animals, habitats, sign, and different participants, as well. I'll admit, it has been a wonderful surprise to find like-minded people from a variety of backgrounds eager to stand around an animal track, discussing why it might be evidence of one animal species versus another, or trying to figure out the puzzle of a track pattern or other clues to animal behavior.

In fact, there are many tracking groups around the state, and all welcome new members of any skill level. Some days, we discover signs from many different species, or we may spend the entire day back-tracking an individual animal. Not everyone has formal training; some are opportunistic observers who participate in many types of outdoor activities. But many of the local tracking groups in New Hampshire began their training through Keeping Track® or similar nonprofit educational programs. Some trackers looking for more advanced training attend a long-term apprenticeship that involves intensive field tracking sessions in a diversity of habitats across New England. Regardless of individual interest levels, we all seem to recognize the importance tracking skills can provide for habitat stewardship, a shared concern of many who love the outdoors.

Quest for Answers

It's a beautiful day just to be outside, and I become distracted by a robin hopping across the snow through the shrubs at the edge of the beaver pond. Wetland edges can attract a wide variety of species. Turning my attention back to the questions, I stare down at the track. I can see the animal has pads, not hooves, with four toes on each foot; that helps narrow the list. The toes are arranged symmetrically and, when I look closely, faint nail marks are visible in front of the two middle toes. Standing back again, I compare the distance between each track, both the length and width between footprints. Also called the "stride" and "straddle," these measurements can help determine the size of the animal and its gait, or how it was moving. Looking



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Led by an instructor, students of the White Pine Programs in Cape Neddick, Maine, learn to identify bobcat tracks.

along the entire set of tracks within the circle, I mentally picture how my own hands and feet would land inside each track, if I were walking on four legs. I'm not sure all trackers do this, but it helps me figure out which foot is front or hind, right or left. I put all the clues together and conclude that these tracks were made by a red fox.

The last question, and the type that is my favorite, was to describe what happened. I notice a change in the arrangement of footprints at the far end of the circle, suggesting that the fox had paused to investigate a scent. Taking up my notepad, I write down answers to the four questions and show them to the evaluator. Once everyone submits an answer, we gather around the tracks. This is a chance, not just to hear if we have made a correct identification, but also to ask questions about what details of the wildlife sign are diagnostic for a particular species, or how similar species would differ.

Track and sign certification is a unique and challenging training opportunity that offers individual feedback for those looking to retain and develop traditional field skills. For me, it was well worth the effort. Being a certified tracker has given me an exciting new window on the world of wildlife.



LEARN TO TRACK:

- Tracker certification in North America – trackercertification.com
- Track and Sign Certification through White Pine Programs whitepineprograms.org/programs/for-adults
- Winter tracking workshops with UNH Cooperative Extension extension.unh.edu/wildlifetracking
- Tracking seminars – mindfultracker.com
- Keeping Track Program – keepingtrack.org
- Volunteer trackers for N.H. Fish and Game – wildnh.com/about/volunteers.html

Katie Callahan earned her first CyberTracker track and sign certificate in 2012. She is a volunteer for the New Hampshire Canada lynx/carnivore survey project and works as a GIS specialist at the N.H. Fish and Game Department.



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