



How to Identify Animal Tracks

Two Parts: [Identifying Basic Information](#) [Classifying Mammal Prints](#)

Identifying animal prints is a process of elimination. You can learn to recognize and categorize the most important information about a particular set of prints to make an informed estimate, based on the likely animals in your area at any given time. While a trusty local field guide is always the best way to recognize the animal prints in your area, you can learn the basics of the process to better inform yourself and use those guides accurately.

Part
1

Identifying Basic Information

1 Distinguish between mammal, bird, and reptile prints. The animal kingdom is enormous, and one resource isn't enough for even scratching the surface of the different varieties of tracks left by the members of it. Generally speaking, people are interested in identifying the prints of mammals, but you can learn to quickly distinguish between prints left by mammals, reptiles, and birds, to make a quick generalization. In the next section, you can learn to more accurately identify mammals based on their prints.

- Mammals will often leave more topographical prints, meaning that the prints sink to various depths in the surface of the earth. You'll notice claws, individual toes, and foot pads in the prints of mammals.
- Reptile tracks will generally be found around water, meaning they're usually quite smudged and obscured. Most reptiles leave five-toed prints and usually evenly pressed into the earth.
- Birds generally leave three-toed prints, which are usually quite straight and bony, but may also be webbed in some species, like ducks. It's usually difficult to identify birds based on their tracks.

2 Isolate the cleanest prints to identify. If you're out and you find a mess of prints in the mud or the snow, make sure you find the cleanest and the most easy to examine prints to work with, or you might make a mistake. The smallest details can be the difference between identifying a print correctly or not.

- Identify front prints and back prints as best you can, based on the orientation of the feet and the weight distribution shown in the depth of the prints. Most "rear" prints should be somewhat larger and wider than the front prints of four-legged animals.

3 Use a tape measure for precise estimates. If you're going out tracking, carry a tape measure with you so you can make accurate measurements for later, if necessary. You can get pretty close with estimating, but it's always best to have the most accurate measurement possible if you want to get the correct species.

4 Look for information about the size of the animal. The first thing you'll likely notice is the size of the print and the number of toes, which can tell you something about the size of the animal itself, but the depth of the print can also tell you a lot about the direction of travel, the speed of travel, and the size of the animal you're dealing with.

5 Record the prints. For the most accurate identification possible, it's best to take a picture or a [cast of the print](#) for later, for comparison purposes. Use your own powers of observation, but also carry a cellphone camera around with you for the best results.

6 Find the print in an Animal Print Field Guide. Once you catalog the various features of a particular print, a field guide will help you make the most specific identification based upon the criteria discovered in the observation steps. These books are generally limited by region, meaning you won't have to sift through the tracks of animals that couldn't possibly be there. You should also include specific illustrations and track information to help narrow down your findings.

Part
2

Classifying Mammal Prints

1 Count the number of toes. The first step in mammal print identification is to count the number of toes in the prints. This is the quickest way to get yourself in the ballpark and in many cases is enough to identify the likeliest candidate.^[1]

- **Hooved animals** will have two near-symmetrical imprints, sometimes rounded and sometimes tapered. Deer, horses, goats, and caribou all leave hoofed prints.
- **Animals with four toes** will often have another small pad behind the toes, and may also display claws. These are the tracks of canines, felines, and some species of rodents.
- **Animals with five toes** should always leave claw prints as well and come in a variety of sizes. Raccoons, weasels, bears, marmots, and beavers should leave five-toed prints.
- **Animals with a different number of toes** may seem tricky, but are actually relatively simple. All rodents have five toes on the front paws and four toes on the back. Gophers, woodchucks, squirrel, prairie dogs, and other rodents will leave two different tracks, like these.

2 Examine the length and width of the print. Once you know the number of toes, the size of the print can tell you a lot about the likely animal. For the best results, you can use a tape measure, or you can estimate in a pinch. For our purposes, "large" may refer to any prints roughly bigger than 2 x 2 inches, and "small" will refer to anything smaller.

- **Hooved animals** all leave fairly large prints, so the shape of the print can tell you more about the likely animal who left it. Skip to the next step.
- **Animals with four toes** who leave smaller prints include house cats, small toy dogs, rabbits, and weasels. Larger four-toed prints include all variety of canine and larger predatory felines. The presence of claws and the shape of the print can help you determine the animal more closely.^[2]
- **Animals with five toes** that leave small prints are almost always shrews or weasels. Medium-sized (2-4 in.) prints may be opossum, raccoon, otter, wolverine, beaver, marmot, or various other large rodents. Five-toed prints larger than 5 or 6 in. likely belong to a bear.
- **Animals with a different number of toes** on front and back paws that leave large prints are usually porcupines, armadillos, or woodchucks. Smaller prints usually belong to squirrels, rats, gophers, chipmunk, and some mice. Very small prints (less than 3/4 in.) are almost always mice, pika, or vole.^[3]

3 Examine the shape of the print. For some varieties of print, the shape of it can tell you a lot about distinguishing one species from another, even if the prints look very similar. Based on the size and number of toes, you should already be somewhat close to narrowing down the options, based on your region, but the shape can hammer it home.

- **Hooved prints** will either be rounded or narrow and tapered in the front. Rounded prints generally belong to horses, but may also belong to muskox, caribou, or bison, if you're in the right area. Tapered prints most often belong to deer, sheep, moose, elk, or pigs.
- **Four-toed prints** that are quite small and rounded usually belong to pika. If there are no foot pads, four-toed prints are always rabbits. If the back foot is longer than the front foot, the tracks are a variety of weasel.
- **Five-toed prints** vary widely in shape. Bears all leave a very large foot pad behind the toes, while raccoon will leave a very flat print with no pad at all, like a rabbit. Shrews have very small prints, in which the toes are spread far out and quite bony. Weasel, skunk, otter, and badger have rounded foot pads and tapered toes, while beaver, marmot, and nutria have very straight toes.
- **Variable-toed prints** with no foot pads are gopher or mice. Other varieties may be more easily determined from the size of the print and the likely candidates based on the region.

4 Look for the presence of claws. Almost all mammal prints have claws, except feline. If the prints are four-toed, small, and you can't find any claws in the print, it's likely just a house cat. If it's larger and there are no claws, it might be a big cat or some variety of predatory feline, like a bobcat, jaguar, or even a lion, depending on the area you're exploring.

- Cats always retract their claws while walking, so even though cats do have claws, you'll never see them in prints.

Research the animals active in the region during this season. It's easier to narrow it down if you have some sense

5 of the likely candidates, based on the region you're exploring. You don't need to dig through the archives of large jungle cats for possibilities if you're in rural Illinois. Get a field guide of animal tracks in your area for the most accurate information available.

Can you answer these readers' questions?

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On **How to Place Electrodes for a Tens Unit**, a reader asks:

Where should the electrodes be placed for calf pain?

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On **How to Get California Unemployment Benefits**, a reader asks:

Can you apply for unemployment if you are receiving severance pay from another state?

[Reply](#)

On **How to Contact the IRS**, a reader asks:

Where do I write to request that a tax refund greater than 5 years old be reissued?

[Reply](#)

Tips

- For animals who have more toes on their hind feet than their front feet, it is possible that a misidentification can be made if the print of only the back or front foot are visible. For this reason, photographing or drawing the print can aide in proper analysis.

Things You'll Need

- Camera
- Notebook and pencil
- Field Guide

Sources and Citations

1. http://www.enature.com/mammal_tracks/tracks_wizard01.asp?
2. <http://www3.ag.purdue.edu/entm/wildlifeline/pages/TrackID.aspx>
3. http://www.biokids.umich.edu/guides/tracks_and_sign/

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