

Newport Forest

Wednesday February 15 2012

2:00 - 5:10 pm

Weather: prec. n/a; RH 80%; BP 102.4 kPa; ovcst; S 5-15 kmh; +T 3° C

Purpose: Tracking, with an emphasis on Raccoons & Coyotes

Participants: Kee

At last the property has some snow on it (90% coverage @ 2-4 cm), so I could get back to one of my favorite winter sports. The temperature cooperated by softening the snow and making paw prints register more detail. The beauty of snow tracking is that you get to see what animals have been out and about, where they have been going and what they've been up to. Can you count them? Not easily. A half-dozen Wild Turkeys can look like a hundred if they walk enough of the property.

I set out today under a thick overcast, noting that a deer had come to inspect the trailer and that a squirrel or two had been active in the Gallery Forest nearby. As I got into the Blind Creek Forest, the tracks became more numerous: Wild Turkey tracks virtually everywhere, Virginia Deer, Coyote, and (a few) Raccoon. I saw no Cottontail tracks anywhere during my time on site. This is somewhat unusual, since they are often the most commonly seen tracks under these conditions.

What I call "tracking" involves three phases, ID; behaviour; & following: Identifying the animal that made a particular set of tracks is easy in most cases. Canid and felid tracks are troublesome for people who don't know their tracks. For example, I was called in many years ago by a farm family that claimed to have cougar tracks on their property. The tracks were large, but clearly those of a coyote, at a guess. Domestic dogs, with few exceptions (even Rotweilers) have rather dainty tracks usually 2" or less across. Coyotes get up to 2.75" and Gray Wolves up to 4". I pointed out that the prints in question showed nails, which you never see in a cat track, domestic or larger. Also, the divisions between the toe-pads make a clear X-shape, which cat tracks never do.

Behaviour is one of the fun parts. What was this squirrel up to, with so many tracks concentrated in a small area? Then you spot the digs. As for following (tracking in the normal sense), that's even more interesting. Today I picked up raccoon tracks that crossed my trail, so I diverted, determined to see it through. The tracks led up the Hogsback, frequently following logs and sometimes disappearing in a snow-free zone, where the trail had to be picked up all over again. Up on the summit, they seemed to be headed across the Hogsback, making for the Riverside Forest on the other side. They led under a growth of approximately a million Prickly Ash and I had to crawl on my hands and knees

for a while. I gasped to myself: “Are we having fun yet?”

On the other side of the bushes, the tracks followed the top of a log and, at the end, abruptly terminated near the base of a White Ash (about 1’ dbh). I looked up but couldn’t see any Raccoon, when I should have; the tree was too young to have hollows inside and I could see no characteristic tail overhanging a fork above me. Ho-lee! The base of the tree was surrounded by snow far enough out to betray any trespassers. No tracks. I circled the area, but couldn’t pick up the trail again. Must have been up there -- somehow. (I have a lot to learn yet.)

Coyotes have a habit of (sometimes) double-registering their tracks in snow; the hind paw being planted in the depression made by the fore paw (which is slightly larger). The net effect is that a Coyote is walking on its hind legs and taking enormous strides, as well.

Why no rabbit tracks?. Under the same conditions in past years, they were always numerous. Richard Janik, who owns the tract next to Newport Forest, reports a similar experience in recent walks. Are Coyotes predated the Cottontails?

Birds (6):

American Crow (EW); Canada Goose (LM); Red-bellied Woodpecker (RSF); Red-tailed Hawk (RSF); (BCF); White-breasted Nuthatch; Wild Turkey (BCF)

Moraviantown Report (Darren Jacobs): A colleague of his at work (Rondeau Park) spotted a Turkey Vulture recently and Darren mentions the Pickerel: “Some pickerel have been caught in the last few days, the river is pretty clear, and the pickerel were caught at dusk and into the night.”

Culls: We had some email discussions recently with Richard Janik and Jane Bowles (Thames Talbot Land Trust) about when it is advisable to cull deer or other animals. This painful choice of “reducing” a threatening population has resulted from the conversion of what was once nearly continuous forest cover into 90% agricultural land. We concluded that no local culls are called for, as yet. But the widespread belief that Coyotes threaten livestock (or *might* threaten humans) has resulted in Coyote culls. (See below.)

Next Issue: Raccoons as an invasive species in Europe.

IMAGES:



FinePix

Raccoons habitually prefer logs to open ground whenever the opportunity arises. These tracks are visible in the snow atop an old Bitternut log on the flank of the Hogsback. This habit can make them difficult to track if there happens to be no snow on the log.



FinePix

Double-registered coyote paw prints (above), trail made by a coyote walking in its own tracks (below), gives a two-legged effect.



via Richard Janik

Grim scene: Recent coyote cull took place in a block of land near Hwy 52 and Fields Road, presumably at request of owner. Dogs (Beagles or Beagle crosses, by the look of them) were used to drive coyotes into the open, where hunters picked them off with high-powered rifles. This is the reality of one kind of “cull”, just so everyone knows.

Jane Bowles wonders if a large predator might be a better way to keep deer populations in check. Cougars have been little help yet, as far as we know. They seem to prefer hanging around settlements to snack on house pets. One story from Moraviantown, during the cougar flap of 2004 tells of the distraught owner of a Rotweiler that (apparently) took exception to a cougar eating from its dog dish. The owner found his dog dead in a pool of blood, with numerous deep bloody scratch marks along its back, the spine dislocated in two places. Cougars, whatever you think of them, are immensely strong.