

On the Right

Reading the daily dramas of Montana wildlife By Ben Long

The scene was Shakespearean, written with blood on snow rather than ink on paper. Or maybe it was more like a backwoods version of a TV detective program. Except the corpses and killers were four-legged. And it was fact, not fiction.

It was February. My wife, Karen, and I were skiing down a snowed-in road in northwestern Montana. The world was white, so the dead doe stood out. The carcass was minus a foreleg but so fresh it steamed, with no trace of rigor mortis. What had we stumbled across?

When Montanans are in the mood to brag, they make claim to the best fishing, the best hunting, and the best wildlife watching in the United States. Maybe they're right. I would also wager that Big Sky Country offers the best wildlife tracking anywhere. We have a combination of abundant and diverse wildlife unparalleled in the Lower 48 states and plentiful snow. Whether you hike armed with a rifle or simply a healthy curiosity, Montana is a library of mystery and drama, writ large over the landscape. The stories are both ancient and new, refreshed by each snowfall and rainstorm.

Trailcraft is the ancient skill of interpreting animal sign to tell the stories of nature. "It's like being a detective," says Brian Giddings, who coordinates the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Furbearer Program. "You have to look at all the clues: track size, trail pattern, stride length, and scat [animal

droppings]." The sum total is part data, part imagination. The reward comes when the puzzle pieces click into place and the picture takes form. Because it reveals so much about wildlife we rarely see, tracking adds an exciting dimension to any nature outing.

Why track?

By tracking, we enter secret worlds where humans rarely venture. I have briefly glimpsed only two lynx and two wolverines during my 39 years, but I have followed the tracks of several for miles at a time. I have



BEAR HERE Wildlife leave all types of clues indicating their presence, such as claw marks on an aspen.

actually seen only one live northern flying squirrel, but I have often found their flat tails and other remains under owl roosts. The pugmark of a bobcat adds interest to an empty dirt road, and it's thrilling to see the territorial claw marks that male grizzlies scratch into the boles of lodgepole pines.

Though some of my best tracking has been in wilderness areas, I don't need to venture far from home to locate animal sign. My family and I live not far from downtown Kalispell. In the past year, I have followed split valentine tracks left by fawns devouring our flower beds, the foot path of a skunk leading under the boat shed, and mud-smear paw prints on the front sidewalk that led to a ruined bird feeder surrounded by bear scat loaded with chokecherry pits.

Part of tracking's appeal is that clues are rarely complete, leaving much to the imagination. What looks like a large dog print could be a wolf's. *You've heard that wolves are now living in the area; was this one of them? Are you the first to see its tracks?* Another track trail indicates an animal loping through the snow. *Is it a wolverine? A fisher? What was it doing here? If you follow the track, will you actually see it?*

Tracking also has practical applications. For hunters, a track is often the shortest route between a game animal and a full freezer. For biologists and naturalists, every track is a piece of data adding to the body of knowledge

Track



COYOTE TRACKS IN A SNOWFIELD AT SUNRISE BY JEFF HENRY

used to understand and manage wildlife.

FWP wildlife managers rely on track surveys to help them understand how various wildlife populations are faring from year to year. Giddings oversees 29 track survey routes in the forested, deep-snow mountains of Montana. Each year, 18 biologists stationed across western Montana cover routes from 9 to 36 miles long, usually three times each winter as snowpack allows. The surveyors count the track trails of snowshoe hares, pine squirrels, and other prey species, as well as furbearers such as bobcats and American martens. The biologists conduct all the surveys on snowmobiles except for one inside the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area, which they do on skis.

"It's hard to get information on live fishers and wolverines," Giddings says. "You can't count them from the air, like with deer and elk, because most furbearers tend to be nocturnal and solitary. Snow track surveys

Ben Long is a freelance writer in Kalispell.

I could even tell where the herd bull had passed, because his tall antlers had knocked frost off higher branches.

are one of the few tools we have to monitor these populations."

How to track

Good trailcraft comes from developing the habit of looking for and identifying sign, and then puzzling it out. Truly observant trackers learn to maintain an uncanny balance between looking underfoot for sign while looking around for the animals themselves.

Obtaining such skills takes time, but it's something anyone can learn. Getting started

in tracking is as easy as buying a second-hand field guide and heading into the woods. If you happen to know an experienced tracker who might be willing to teach you firsthand, cultivate that friendship.

Tracks are easiest to find and follow in snow or mud. The best conditions are an inch or two of fresh snow over a firm base. Tracking is usually ideal roughly three days after a snowfall, when animals have had plenty of time to move about, but not so long that the snow melts or the tracks become buried under wind-blown snow. Once, in the Cabinet Mountains under ideal snow conditions, I followed the trails of seven large mammals—elk, mule and white-tailed deer, moose, black bear, mountain lion, and wolf—in a single November day. (Is it any wonder I consider Montana the nation's top tracking state?)

During a snowfall, you might not see as many tracks (because falling snow can cover tracks even a few minutes old), but those you do see will certainly be fresh. Snow that's

Solving the trail's secrets

TOES AND CLAWS

Paw prints can be puzzling. Wild dogs (foxes, coyotes, wolves) tend to have diamond-shaped paws that are longer than they are wide, while wild cats (bobcats, lynx, cougars) leave pugmarks that are more circular. Wild dogs have four toes with claw marks, while the cats have four toes with no claw marks (because they retract their claws when walking). Members of the weasel family (martens, fishers, wolverines) have five toes and claw marks.



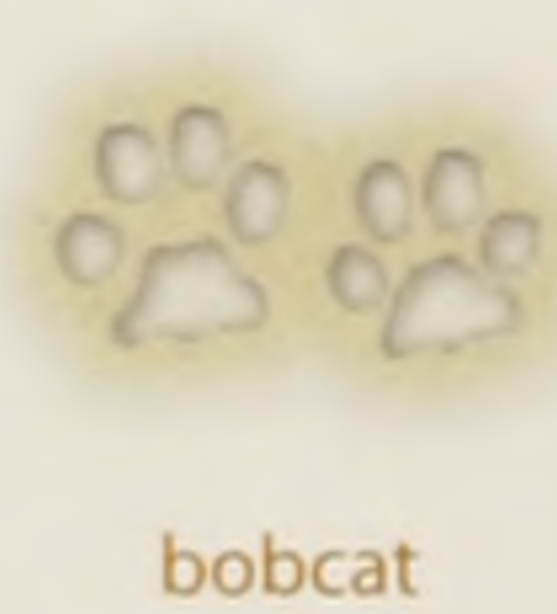
wolf



cougar



coyote



bobcat



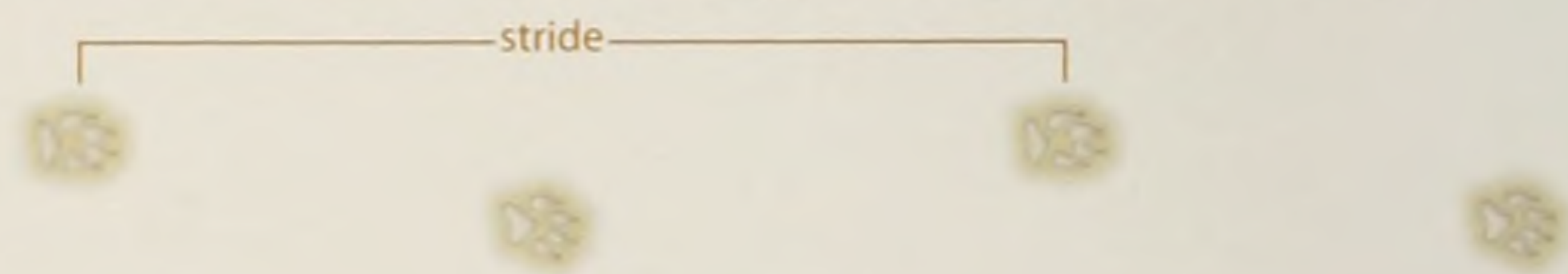
fox



fisher

STRIDE

When tracking, note the distance between the first and third track in a four-track pattern. This measure (the stride) gives a good sense of the animal's body length, a very handy clue. For example, a mountain lion and lynx have the same size track, but the lion's stride is much longer. (Note: Many tracks are actually two tracks—the back foot stepping onto the front foot track.)



LUPUS OR LABRADOR?

Wolf and domestic dog prints may appear similar, but wolf tracks are particularly robust and generally larger than the largest dog track. Wolves also tend to travel in a direct path; they don't have time to dilly-dally and smell every tree like dogs do.



slightly wet but not melting clearly records details of the print, such as the number of toes. Powdery snow shows trail patterns but often hides footprint details.

Occasionally, tracking conditions are so good you don't even have to look at the ground. One of my most enjoyable elk hunts was through a lodgepole pine forest cloaked in heavy hoarfrost. The herd I was pursuing had knocked all the frost off the lower boughs as it passed, so I simply followed a tunnel of green through an otherwise white forest. I could even tell where the herd bull had passed, because his tall antlers had knocked frost off higher branches.

Hunters attempt to follow a track to its maker. Scientists, often more interested in learning an animal's behavior than actually seeing the critter, usually backtrack. That's because a pursued animal may try to avoid detection by fleeing as quickly and directly as possible. By following a backtrack, you get a more accurate picture of the animal's natural behavior. Either way, the trail will proba-



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COMING OR GOING? Hunters and trappers are especially skilled at reading animal sign. Fresh, wet snow makes tracking easier.

bly take you far and deep, well off the trails and roads most people prefer.

"Most important in becoming a nature detective is for you to learn to think like an animal—more specifically like a wild animal," writes tracking expert and University of Colorado wildlife research associate

James Halfpenny in *A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America*. "Once you know the natural history of the animals you are working with, the easier it is to think like them."

As you begin to track, you'll soon learn that nature can be brutal. Rabbit or mouse tracks frequently disappear under the sweeping brush strokes of a raptor's wings. Blood or a dragging limb may indicate the animal was injured by a predator or in an accident. Once, I followed a set of coyote tracks up a frozen creek until I found the carcass of a deer that had broken through the ice and died. Below the ice, the deer was frozen in perfect condition; above the ice, coyotes had gnawed the skull and neck vertebrae clean to the bone.

The poop on scatology

Scatology, the study of animal droppings, is another type of tracking, though not one for the squeamish. It's easy to get started: My two-year old rides on my shoulders in the

MIND THE MUD

To see tracks others miss in the summer, make a habit of checking the mud around puddles or along stream banks when you cross a creek or beach a canoe.



LOOK OVER HAIR

In powdery snow, it can be difficult to distinguish a moose track from that of an elk. Look closely in animal beds for strands of long, dark moose hair, which is looser than elk hair and pulls out more easily when the animal beds down.



elk

moose

OTHER CLUES

Look for marks in addition to footprints. Otters slide along on their bellies; porcupines brush the snow with their quills. A carnivore carrying prey will often drag it along one side or put it down for a rest.



otter

TRAIL PATTERN

You can often identify an animal by the trail pattern it leaves in the snow. For example, members of the weasel family tend to leave a bounding gait pattern. "I look for a trail pattern that is different or stands out in the landscape," says FWP Furbearer Program coordinator Brian Giddings. "From there, I look for more sign, like an intact footprint, that tells me more about the animal."



weasel family

rabbit or mouse family

BLACK CURVED, GRIZZLY STRAIGHT

Since both black and grizzly bears vary in size, track size alone won't tell you which species you've come across. Instead, focus on the toes and claws. Black bear toes tend to fall in a curved line, while grizzly toes run more straight across. Both grizzly and black bear prints can have claw marks. The grizzly's can be up to 3 inches long.



black bear
(front paw)

grizzly
(front paw)



1



2



3



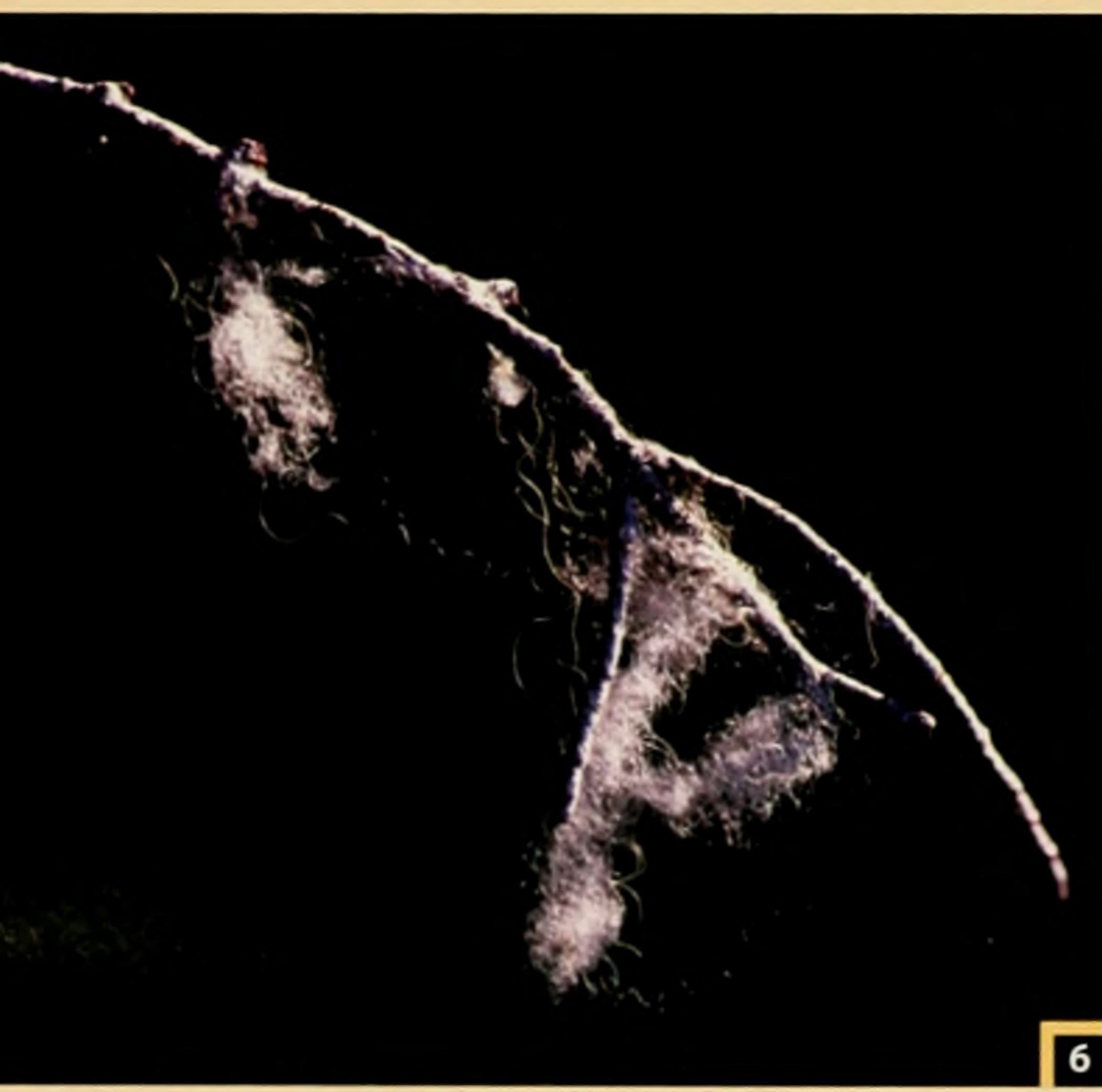
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WHAT CAME THIS WAY?

1. Ring-necked pheasant flying off snow (Brent & Della Lonner); 2. raccoon tracks (Michael H. Francis); 3. pronghorn crossing beneath a fence (Michael H. Francis); 4. river otter tracks (John Lambing); 5. wild turkey feathers and droppings beneath a roosting tree (donaldmjones.com); 6. mountain goat hair on a twig (donaldmjones.com); 7. deer rub on saplings (Steven Akre); 8. grizzly track (Judy Wantulok); 9. bear scat containing chokecherry pits (Craig & Liz Larcom); 10. mountain lion tracks (Andy Long); 11. snake tracks in mud (D. Linnell Blank).



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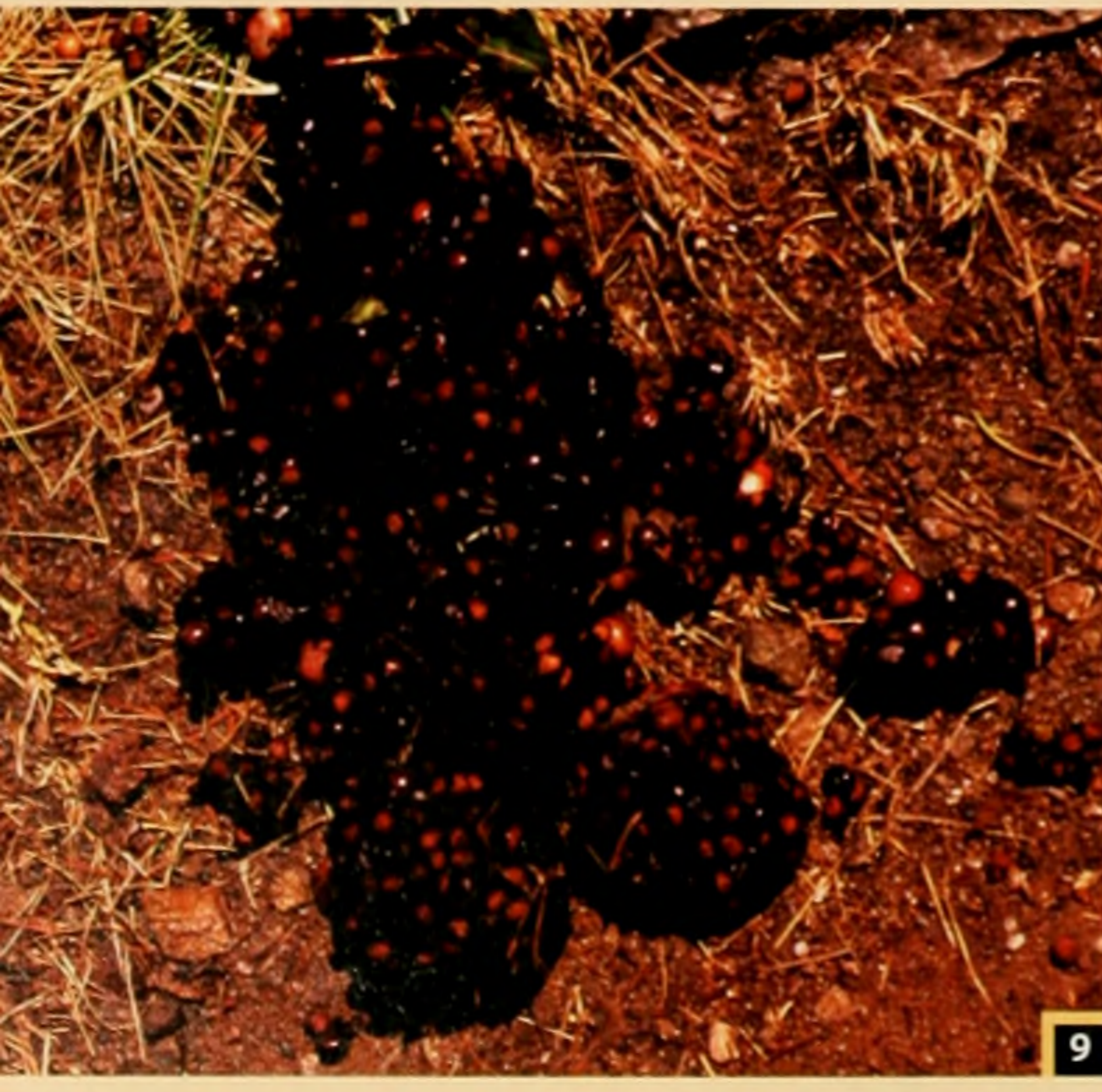
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7



8



9



10



11

woods, and whenever we see dark pellets on the ground, he points and shouts, "Moose poop!" He's often right.

Studying scat often requires poking into the droppings. Kick apart a pile of bear scat and you'll most likely see huckleberries and cow parsnip—and occasionally the crunched bones and hooves of some creature the bear devoured. Coyote scat is often laced with hair from carcass scavenging, while domestic dog poop rarely contains hair. If deer and elk were recently in the area, any pellets you find will be soft, dark, and even warm.

Sometimes you'll find scat and tracks together in a single sighting. One spring day along the North Fork of the Flathead River, I found the track of a wolf, pressed perfectly into a pile of grizzly dung. Another time, on the northern range of Yellowstone National Park, I stepped over a fresh bison flop and noticed the even fresher print of a grizzly bear, squished perfectly into the brown matrix.

Seeing scat may be the best way to know grizzlies are present. Missoula-based bear expert Chuck Jonkel urges folks to "put on their bear glasses" when in grizzly country, keeping an eye peeled for signals the Great Bear is nearby. Except in winter, scat is much more common than tracks, as are overturned rocks and busted logs that show where bears have hunted ants. Grizzlies act like furry rototillers in alpine areas, uprooting the sod to nibble roots of glacier lilies and other plants. Train your eye to identify likely rubbing trees and signposts that bears use as backscratchers. Look closely, and some will be bristling with silver-tipped hairs.

One time at a campground, I noticed a trashcan next to my tent site with its lid ajar and a muddy smear on the side. I followed a trail of chicken bones, napkins, and an empty plastic bucket that culminated in a pile of



BACK TRACK Following tracks, like these of a marten (bounding toward the peak in the left track trail and then turning and bounding back in the right track trail), can provide a glimpse into the secretive lives of wildlife that most people only see on TV.

PATRICK KOLAR

bear dung. Black or grizzly, I'm not sure, but even without a track, those clues convinced me to sleep in the car that night.

And what of that freshly killed white-tailed doe in the snow my wife and I found while skiing? The list of suspects was long, because Montana forests are full of deer eaters. We quickly narrowed it down, however, when we spied the large, round, four-toed tracks. The adult female cougar had ambushed the doe from under a fir, leapt twice before landing on the deer's back, and broke her neck so the doe crumpled with nary a kick.

How do I know the cat was a female? Further investigation under the fir tree showed where two kittens had waited and watched while their mother caught dinner.

Karen and I weren't the only ones getting a lesson that day. 🐾



CLUELESS

Photographer Ron Boggs says his son had long enjoyed the award-winning Nickelodeon children's show *Blue's Clues*. But the boy noticed that the show used a cat print (no claws) as its logo and a running theme throughout the show. "Unfortunately, Blue is a dog," says Boggs, who lives near Helena. "This baffled my five-year-old son, who by that age could tell a bobcat track from a coyote track. He kept asking me why

Blue's Clues continued to use the wrong paw print. I guess that's something only a rural kid would notice."



FURTHER READING

Tracking field guides are indispensable to beginners and experts alike. The venerable *Field Guide to Animal Tracks* by Olaus Murie is a classic, and James Halfpenny's *A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America* takes lessons further, with notes and diagrams of trail patterns and even a photo key of scat. FalconGuide publishes a handy guide called *Scats and Tracks of the Rocky Mountains* (also written by Halfpenny) as well as the comprehensive *The Tracker's Field Guide*, by James C. Lowrey.

