



STORIES IN THE SNOW

By Abi Fergus, for Mazina'igan

Winter's here; I am dreaming of tracking in the snow. Following an animal's tracks teaches us about their lifeways. Like people, animals have cultures too, and we can learn about them through the traditional practice of tracking.

Tracking is a pursuit traditional to all humans. It has helped humans to hunt and taught us about ecosystems through the observation of other species like makwa (black bear) or ma'iingan (gray wolf). Tracking can increase our connectedness to ecosystems despite the modern trend of tracking knowledge being "lost" across cultures.

Ma'iingan

Tracking through the seasons teaches us about the phenology of other animals' lives. One winter, I found wolf tracks on the Bad River Reservation that were full of energy yet contained to one area instead of forming a trail typical to wolves of direct, intentional movement. Thanks to my familiarity with animosh (domestic dog), I recognized that the wolf paws all over the fresh snow reflected that they were playing. Wolf packs travel and hunt together more in the winter than the summer.

By late winter, you can find signs of the mating pair in the pack reproducing. Both the male and female will urinate in prominent places to mark territory and the female will leave some blood in her urine while she's in estrus or heat. In the late summer when the pups become more mobile, you might find small tracks along with full-size wolf tracks.

During this time, wolves are also marking their territorial boundaries by depositing scat on country roads and other clearings with a greater concentration around their pack territories. The wolf scats grow in mass during the deer hunting season as the pack scavenges gut piles or finds wounded deer. Ma'iinganag and their prominent tracks and scat remind us of how much we can learn about our ecosystems by tracking changes through the seasons.

Makwa

In the late spring, when the ferns unfurl and turn floodplains into jungle-like mazes, I have tracked makwa. Black bears clear a path through the fern fronds—unlike the other animals that glide under and through these prehistoric plants. I have found a bear bed in the ferns fresh enough that engorged ticks still remained in the depression the bear's body made in the vegetation.

Bears maintain long-used trails by grinding their feet into the earth as they walk, leaving their imprint on the land. Bears maintain and pass down their stomping grounds in matriarchal lines shaped by knowledge of where there are berries and roots to eat or fawns and crickets to hunt. It's rare to see makwa's tracks in the snow due to their winter sleep. In the growing season, they remind us that we can still track by paying attention to the ways that vegetation is damaged whether it's the ferns they stomp on or the trees they climb.

Ajidamoo

When you're in the woods, you are being observed by many other animals. The birds and squirrels are especially alert and will call out to warn each other of any suspicious behavior, so it's important to move through the forest with intention. In part, this means wearing colors that blend in with the natural environment and materials that will remain quiet as you move. It's also important to move with relaxed body language.

The loud cries of ajidamoo (red squirrel) or aandeg (crow) are more likely to give away your presence if you're tense or crouched like a stalking predator. If you move with a sense of casual belonging, you can avoid birds and squirrels announcing your presence to the rest of the forest.

Once when I was tracking two waawaashkeshiwag (white-tailed deer), two red squirrels came running along a log and froze when they noticed me. We looked at one another for a while after they scaled nearby trees. They didn't alarm call to warn everyone else in the woods. They just carried on their way, leaving me with a wonder-spurred grin. Ajidamoo reminds us to move with calmness and stealth.



A russula mushroom perched on a balsam bough by a squirrel. Squirrels dehydrate mushrooms in the fall to cache for winter food. (A. Fergus photo)



Bear tracks in the snow are an uncommon sight due to makwa's overwinter slumbering period. (CO Rasmussen photo)

Getting out tracking

You don't have to be rural to track. Sit outside and track what the squirrels and birds do. How do they respond to your presence? What do they eat? How do they move? There's a growing base of resources for identifying and recognizing tracks based on measurements and morphology (shape). Some resources include:

- Tracking books like *Mammal Track & Sign* by March Elbroch
- Apps like *iTrack*
- Websites like originalwisdom.com and queernature.org
- Online communities like "Animals Don't Cover Their Tracks" on Facebook

I am always happy to discuss tracking, get out tracking together, or to help identify tracks. When taking pictures of tracks, take the photo from directly above the track and include a sense of scale—ideally a ruler. I can be reached through my website at beacanhollow.gracenovie.com. I hope you learn and connect with your wild kin through tracking this year.

Looking after coastal plant relatives –a guidebook

Ganawenindiwig (they take care of each other) empowers users to grow, promote, and use plants adapted to coastal areas of Gichigami (Lake Superior) to heal and protect shorelines.

Focused on the Wisconsin coast, Ganawenindiwig is designed for use by coastal-land caretakers, resource managers, and anyone who interacts with the Gichigami shoreline.

Users are introduced to plants that have thrived on this landscape, and with whom Ojibwe people have developed long-standing relationships.

The guide was developed by a team from the Lake Superior Reserve, GLIFWC, the Lake Superior Research Institute, and UW-Madison Division of Extension Natural Resources Institute.

The title describes the plant-human relationship from the Ojibwe perspective. According to the Ojibwe creation story, our plant relatives agreed to care for humans by giving what we need to survive.

Our responsibility is to treat them with respect, use their gifts in a good way, and speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Investing in our relationship with plants, rather than in concrete, is one way for humans to live up to our responsibilities to our plant relatives.

—R. Croll

