

Tracing the Path of the Animals: Tracking in Algonquin Park

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I took up tracking a couple of years ago. One thing led to another, in this new phase of life where I go towards whatever draws me like a magnet—homeschooling two children and other life commitments permitting—and one weekend a month for ten months I was out in the woods, fields, and swamps. Following the paths of animals across the land, I read the clues they'd left behind of movement, rest, refueling, and reproduction.

I'd spent the previous year focused on plants, living things in no apparent hurry to get anywhere. I examined leaf structures, pored over field guides, sketched, harvested and tasted, breathing in the quiet and abundant energy of green matter.

After the initial set-up of clear print identification, tracking was a different pace entirely; especially once snow covered the green and brown with whiteness, the landscape transformed into blank sheets for creatures to write their movements on. Instead of a single track or a puzzling handful, each clear snowy trail stretched ahead of us like a string. If we just pulled hard enough, walked long and fast enough, it held the possibility of an animal at its end.

One day I stood in a forest with coyote, deer and raccoon trails crisscrossing each other at odd angles. In my mind's eye I saw animals sweeping across each other's paths, like one of those high-speed videos of pedestrians on city streets. If, as a child, I had fervently hoped for my toys to come alive at night, here was the secret I had been looking for in those years: the still and silent daytime forest marked with evidence of the night's activity.

Each set of tracks, each trail, caught the residual energy of a creature, like letters on a page telling a story in a secret language. If I worked hard enough, I could learn to decipher them.

We walked and stopped, walked and stopped, questioning each new set of tracks, each turn and break. Acting out the movements with our bodies was the only way to draw them into our brains: trying out which leg came first, which foot stepped over the print of another, which trail in an intersecting set was freshest and why.

Each new track or sign, especially the surprising ones, shifted the energy of the forest with the spirit of movement. The clues imprinted the patterns of motion in my brain. In the back of my eyes, I saw each animal travelling through the place I was now in. They charged the air around me with their presence: the trough left by a porcupine with its short legs and pebbly soles, the careful tread of a black bear, the lanky walk of a moose, the slinking lope of a mink, the delicate bound of a white-footed mouse, the sharp turn of a startled deer, a pack of wolves trotting lightly into each other's tracks in an unbroken line.

In February, when others were heading south to take the edge off the coldest winter in years and my kids were headed east to my parents' house for a week, I went north. With a group of ten others, I snowshoed over the deep snow and frozen lakes of Algonquin

Park, tracing again and again the stories of movement: of wolves, moose, foxes, fishers, martens, otters, porcupines, flying squirrels, and the tiniest of shrews.

On the third day of the course we split in two, and our small sub-group found a fresh moose trail. In the quietest way we could—communicating with gestures, whispers, and symbols drawn in the snow—we followed. Trailing moose in deep snow is humbling. We stumbled in our snowshoes, tripped over shrubs and roots, strained and flailed to climb up steep slopes. Even at our quietest and fastest we were no match for the silent grace and agility of the long-legged animal.

Fresh scat and fresh browse on shrubs, fresh beds where the moose had chewed its cud, all showed us that we weren't far behind. But as the hours passed, the game of hide-and-seek played on. The moose looped—silently and at ease, without picking up its gait—in circles over the trails we'd left earlier. It bounded up hills as we struggled to follow. We were filled with respect and awe for the grace of a creature so deeply at home.

I never saw that moose and I didn't catch up to the others we trailed for hours the next day with the same intensity and joy. I would have liked to, but I also would have come back to do the same thing day after day just to feel my body trace the path of the animals ahead of me, to push myself to my limit to cover the distance, to move in the footsteps of a non-human creature and attempt to see the world through its eyes. Each track, sign and moment of connection was a string spinning the web of life closer around me. I was part of the whole.

It was like a child's game; it was like a detective story; it was like a dance; but it was also something sacred.