

Stories in the Snow

Winter is a good time for learning about local mammal species, and a trip to our local National Forest or BLM Public Lands can be like a rewarding book of open pages of wildlife in winter. We may not actually see them, but if snow conditions are right and we are quiet and observant enough, one soon realizes that there are many different wildlife species out and about. And once we learn to see rather than just look, winter actually provides us with chapters of information about their daily lives that we cannot observe at other times.

A winter such as the one we are experiencing is an excellent opportunity to open the book of wildlife tracking. An example in lower elevations may occur along the Valley edge where semi-desert shrubland meets pinyon-juniper woodland. Here, we see the tracks of mountain cottontail and black-tailed jack rabbit scurrying from the base of one shrub to another. We notice that the number and pattern of tracks vary depending upon the density, type, and condition of shrubs present. In some locations, trails seem to form but are absent elsewhere. Do we feel safety in a certain density or composition of shrubs?

A pair of larger tracks leads down the ravine and overlap the rabbit trail. We notice that coyote is in the area. First one, then another, overlaps the rabbit tracks. They separate, then come together, then separate again. We notice rabbit tracks that have strayed a little farther from the shrub cover. There is a splash of fresh snow crusted on top of the ice layer where the stride suddenly becomes longer. One set of coyote tracks appear to explode as they tell the story of the predator pursuing its prey. Farther down the trail, the second coyote's tracks intersect the trail and we find impressions in the snow where this particular story ends. Here, we also discover an array of new impressions that depict the flight feathers and tracks of raven and magpie as they turn and clean up the last pages.

Similar stories can be read throughout BLM and National Forest lands during the winter period. The seemingly aimless wandering of the ermine as it bounces above and tunnels below the snow, hunting for small mammals. The distinct double-track pattern of an American marten exploring a pile of large logs for a subnivean den. The tell-tale "ski tracks" of the red squirrel as it spills the secret of its cache of cones. The hind tracks of a snowshoe hare that fools us for a moment because of the awkwardly large size, which land just in front of the normal-sized front feet, indicating an animal at full stride. And if we're lucky enough, the large non-distinct hole-like tracks left by a Canada lynx as it pursues the hare.

The stories left by all these species portray life history secrets that are difficult to detect during summer. Just by being observant, we can learn about their territories, hunting grounds, safety zones, and other habitat preferences. We can see where they walk, hop, feed, stand on hind feet to sniff a scent, or suddenly scatter to elude the other tracks that enter the area. And we only need to get out there to be part of the story, and slow down long enough to see.

Randy Ghormley

*Randy is a wildlife biologist for the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. When he is not outdoors interpreting wildlife stories, he can be found in the office **wishing** he was outdoors interpreting wildlife stories.*