

# ANIMAL TRACKS TELL A WILD STORY

— BEAVER CREEK —

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**W**atching a silver fox slink across a snow-covered mountain slope might seem like such a magical thing that you'd only expect to see it happen on a movie screen. But rare wildlife encounters such as these are possible at Beaver Creek Resort, and once you begin seeking them out, don't be surprised that the frequency of sighting animals in their natural habitats will actually increase as you hone your skills.

Spotting wildlife at Beaver Creek in winter and summer seasons alike sometimes simply requires luck. You might finally be relaxed enough as you're skiing through Jack Rabbit Alley to catch the sight of a mule deer bounding out of sight. But more often than not, viewing mountain animals requires patience, knowledge and experience. Understanding how to interpret animal tracks, scats and signs can help give you clues about wildlife in the area, and even if you don't see the actual animal, you'll at least gain a heightened sense of awareness that could lead to a greater overall appreciation of the natural world around you.

"One of the coolest things about animal tracks is that they tell a story," says Peter Suneson, Adult Programs Instructor at Walking Mountains Science Center in Avon. "Sure, tracks can give you clues about which animals are in the area, but it's even more exciting when track patterns can help you see how animals forage for food or how a predator might be tracking its prey."

In his current role, Suneson is developing a new partnership between Walking Mountains Science Center and Beaver Creek hotels and property management groups set to launch in December of 2014. The new adult community program will connect adults with opportunities to learn more about local wildlife on guided snowshoe trips and hikes in areas where they can take the time to explore, ask questions, and otherwise just enjoy the animal stories they discover along the way. Walking Mountains Science Center also offers ongoing opportunities for locals and visitors of all ages to become engaged in learning about nature and wildlife.

If you plan on sharpening your wildlife viewing skills, then Walking Mountains Science Center is a great place to begin before going out in Beaver Creek Resort and seeing what you can find. Inside the facility's state-of-the-art nature center in Avon, you'll find one area that's particularly useful. It's a set of drawers full of rubbery molded animal tracks and scats, based on their originals and reproduced in actual size. You can hold your hand up next to a mountain lion's paw, for example, and contemplate this local big cat's power and mystique. Touching even fake scat might make you shudder, but identifying scats in addition to tracks can help you decipher more details in a wildlife story.

"When you find hoof tracks, you might not immediately know if they belong to deer, elk, or a moose," Suneson says. "But if you find scat near those tracks, there's an easy way to tell. If it's a size that will fit inside of your nose, you're probably tracking a deer. If that scat would get stuck in your nose, you're probably on the track of an elk. But if it's too big to fit in your nose, then you're likely on the track of a moose." Of course, Suneson doesn't expect people to try fitting scat into their noses, but his identification hint is an easy one to remember.

Once you've added to your background knowledge, then begin testing your abilities by going outside and looking for animal tracks. Suneson advises that the best place to find animal tracks is on an established trail, where wildlife tends to travel especially in the winter when it's important for them to conserve energy during a time when food is scarce. Plus, their tracks are easier to identify on a packed trail than in deep snow. Early morning or early evening are the best times of the day to search for wildlife, and you'll have better luck if you choose a quiet location and remain quiet yourself.

If you do find yourself within eyeshot of wildlife, view from a distance. You're too close if an animal changes its behavior in response to your presence. Animals might be on edge during the winter months, and frightening them into a response at this time of the year can cause them to expend precious energy reserves unnecessarily. Startling or encountering some animals can also put you at risk of injury or even death, so always proceed cautiously as you track wildlife.

Begin learning more about local wildlife and their tracks by reviewing the following field notes, and then spend some time exploring in the upcoming seasons to experience the thrill of seeing these majestic animals in their natural settings.



## FIELD NOTES

### BEAR

Black bears have been around since long before the valley's first explorers, and they're often seen in the summer season. Contrary to their name, they can also have blonde, reddish or brown coloring. Black bears aren't naturally aggressive and will often run away from a perceived threat, but they can be dangerous if startled or if cubs are in the area.

#### TRACKS

Black bears have short, non-retractable claws, and they walk on their whole foot, heel to toe. The hind foot track resembles a human foot, and the round front heel pad doesn't always show up in tracks.

#### HABITAT

Dense forests with thick ground vegetation.

#### EATING HABITS

Most bears hibernate during the winter months but are active in the summer, when they feed on plants, grasses, berries, fruits, nuts, insects and carrion.



## MOUNTAIN LION

The largest wildcat in North America, the mountain lion has powerful limbs and can jump as high as 15 feet and as far as 40 feet. Mountain lions are active hunters and attack prey from behind, but they're quiet, elusive, and rarely seen. Be aware that mountain country is mountain lion country, and while humans are not among their natural prey, a mountain lion encounter is always a possibility.

### TRACKS

Mountain lions have retractable claws that don't show in their tracks and have a distinctive "M"-shaped pad with three lobes on the rear of the heel. Four toe prints and a central pad print will show up in their front and hind foot tracks, which can be greater than four inches in length.

### HABITAT

Mountain lions favor Colorado's rocky, mountainous areas protected with dense brush. Colorado's Department of Wildlife deems 57 percent of the state suitable mountain lion habit, from the Front Range westward to the Utah border.

### EATING HABITS

Mountain lions are carnivores that primarily feed on deer and smaller animals including rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, porcupines and mice.

## DEER, ELK AND MOOSE

Mule deer, elk and moose are the area's most common hoofed mammals, and while deer are frequently sighted on Beaver Creek Mountain all year, elk can be seen in summer and winter as well. Moose are more of a rare sight, but they're impressive to behold. Don't be tempted to approach moose, as they can become aggressive and charge unexpectedly if startled or threatened.

### TRACKS

Deer, elk, and moose basically walk on their toenails, or hooves, and have similar track shapes, though they differ in size. Look for a heart-shaped hoof pattern that has a split down the middle; the narrower heart tip points in the animal's direction of travel.

### HABITAT

Mountain forests and alpine meadows.

### EATING HABITS

Herbivores, these animals primarily feed on grasses, shrubs, bark, leaves and twigs.

# SKI WITH A RANGER

Beaver Creek's Ski With a Ranger Program is a unique partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and Beaver Creek Mountain. Mid-December through the first week in April, forest service rangers offer complimentary 45-minute ski tours on beginner and intermediate trails. The tour includes an exploration of Beaver Creek's nature center and a ski expedition into wooded areas, where guests learn more about the mountain forest habitat and the animals that live there.

"The Ski With a Ranger Program is a great adventure for kids," says Beaver Creek Environmental Manager Fritz Bratschie, but more importantly, it provides an opportunity for kids and adults to learn about the public land they're skiing on, as well as the importance of protecting it for years to come."

The Ski With a Ranger Program will give you some practice in applying your animal tracking skills, and you'll no doubt gain appreciation for the wildlife that make Beaver Creek Resort their home.

## PORCUPINE

The porcupine is a medium-sized rodent known for its ability to dislodge barbed quills into attackers.

They're naturally shy animals that will flee when threatened, and — contrary to popular belief — they can't launch their quills in defense. Porcupines are active on Beaver Creek Mountain in the summer and winter months, but they're more likely to be seen in the evening, as they like to search for food at night.

### TRACKS

Porcupine tracks usually display a central foot pad with four toes on the front foot and five toes on the rear. Porcupines have claws that usually show up in their tracks, and sometimes it's possible to see the swoosh of a dragging tail.

### HABITAT

Porcupines usually live on the ground in forested areas and can sometimes be seen high in pine and aspen trees.

### EATING HABITS

Porcupines have a healthy appetite for wood, and they also eat bark, twigs, fruit, leaves, buds and stems.





## FOX

Red-tailed foxes are commonly seen on Beaver Creek Mountain, but silver and black foxes are known to have dens in the area as well. Foxes are resourceful animals admired for their intelligence, beauty and free-flowing ability to move over mountain terrain.

### TRACKS

Foxes have four toes on their front and hind feet, and their tracks often show the presence of claws. Foxes have fur on their feet, so toes don't always appear distinctly.

### HABITAT

Foxes dig and live in dens in mountain areas; they're active all year but are more often sighted in the summer.

### EATING HABITS

Omnivores, foxes eat small animals such as mice, rabbits, and birds, but they can also eat fruits, berries and grasses.