

## Footprints in the snow

Last evening there was a fall of fresh snow on top of old, and this morning I was sure it would be worth a walk up into the woods to look for mammal tracks. When I pulled back the bedroom curtains at dawn, I saw that the stoat that lives in our roof had already crossed the snowy deck, within five metres of where we had still been sleeping. She'd returned, in her beautiful white ermine coat, in mid-December and remembered from last year the small hole allowing her to scramble up behind the cladding and sleep in the roof space above our dining table.

After breakfast I set off for my local walk. There were red squirrel tracks across the lawn, for they are regular visitors to the bird feeders in the garden. At the bottom of the brae I turned right, up the farm road, and noted the first of many distinctive tracks of brown hares, interspersed with the local traffic of pheasants. The farm tractor had been as far as the junction and then turned back to feed the bull, while last week's ruts from a forestry vehicle were still visible but covered in snow.

After going through the forest gate, my normal route takes me up a short hill beside a small river tributary, which finally makes its way to Findhorn Bay. I followed a fox up this track, its footprints telling me that last night it had been down in the fields and then headed back up into the forest. The snow lay three or four inches deep: it was very frosty and the snow that had fallen last night was soft and powdery, not the best for tracking mammals because the prints are sometimes indistinct. I had no difficulty in identifying the next animal, though: an otter had come over the bank, travelled a short distance along the road and then dropped back down into the burn. I wasn't expecting to find one of those

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this morning, and only a quarter of a mile from my house.

There's a choice of roads at the top of this slope and I decided to take the one straight ahead, the middle forest road that heads upwards into a mature larch wood. There were more hare tracks, as well as the neat slots of roe deer criss-crossing my route. The local red squirrels had been doing the same, bounding across the track from the woods on one side to the trees on the other. It was already pretty clear that the three most common mammals were roe deer, red squirrels and brown hares.

When my wife, Moira, and I walk this way in normal times, as we often do, we are very lucky to see any of these animals. They, of course, may see us. That's why I have always loved to see virgin snow ahead of me when walking or skiing; it's like opening the pages of a book, each creature telling you: 'I've been here, but where I came from and where am I going is not yours to know.'

Next up was a pine marten, meaning a double-back for me to see where it had come from; I followed the tracks down through the first bit of wood. My hunch was that it may have come from a den box that a forest ranger and I erected in a tree nearly ten years ago, in the hope of providing a safe home for the last of the wild-cats in this area. Alas, we built it too late and no cat ever used it. I couldn't find the box during a quick search in the thick bit of the woods, but it would not surprise me if the marten had found it. In those years in which I'd put up trail cameras at these boxes along with dead pheasant bait, it would be martens that found it immediately, and there would often be an image of a badger trying to climb the tree to get at the food.

Climbing back up onto the forest road, I followed the marten's footprints for about a hundred yards, and for the last bit of that stretch they were landing on top of fox tracks. The fox had moved from side to side on the road, clearly not in a hurry, while brown hares and squirrels did the same. When I got to the top of the hill I

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turned down through the big larches, where three or four red deer had been scraping the snow from the vegetation. I followed their path, for I knew that they would know the best place to scramble over the big ditch on the top side of the lower forest road. It was an easy climb out of the hollow onto my return route, and I was still less than a mile from my home.

By now the sun was shining strongly, so splotches of snow were falling out of the larch trees and creating their own tracks in the snow. On this lower and sunny side of the woods there were new tracks to be seen, very small, in short runs and disappearing under the snow. These were wood mice dashing across the dangerous open space that always left them vulnerable to owl attack. I counted about twenty tracks of mice, interspersed with both red and roe deer, in the next couple of hundred yards before I entered the darker wood.

Here were the prints of a much larger pine marten. I tracked it down the road, before it peeled off into a thicket, the trail almost immediately replaced by that of a fox. And then came a brown hare, emphasising how many animals had been padding through these woods during the previous few hours of darkness.

As I walked, I thought of the history of tracking animals in the snows of this bit of forest. If I had walked here twenty years ago, I would almost certainly have seen the prints of a wildcat or the tracks of a capercaillie; both species are now extinct near my home. Forty years ago I would not have found the tracks of pine marten, for then they were only just starting to spread out from the Western Highlands. Red deer would also have been absent then, before the big new conifer plantations allowed them to colonise this lower ground. Living on such fertile land, they are much larger than those in the mountains, and more fertile, with nearly every hind followed by a calf; and it's a joy now to hear the stags roaring in the autumn.

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A wet patch on the side of the track gave rise to a short trail of woodcock tracks and then the hares and squirrels again became more frequent as I reached the junction where I had started. And then I saw new human tracks beside mine: someone else had walked up the hill behind me. I would say it was a man, the size of his boot probably eight, smaller than my size tens. I had a sudden flash of history: what if I had been walking here 5,000 years ago and had found an unknown human following my track? I would have wondered who he was. Which tribe did he come from? Should I be frightened? Should I try to find him, with or without my spear raised? For then, early humans' lives were much closer to the mammals that I had tracked this morning. They would have been more worried by the track of an unknown human than they would have been by the original big fauna in these woods – brown bear, wolf, lynx and aurochs.

Before going home, I cut below the back of our garden to a place where the badgers live, but I couldn't find a badger pad to add to my list. With my binoculars I looked across the river to the badger sett on its sandy bank, but it looked very much as though none had come out last evening, for it was really frosty. I squeezed through the fence and into the field near my house where the snow had been scuffed by brown hares and roe deer, the dark soil of a fresh molehill standing stark in the white field. Beside the fence were the signs of a single rabbit. They used to be so common that the previous owners of our house had needed to rabbit-fence the garden, but disease decimated them in 2009 and they are struggling to return.

My walk this morning, from my home, was just less than two miles, yet I had found evidence of ten mammals and two birds. I felt, turning on the kettle for a cup of tea, that I had been reading an absorbing detective tale, one to which I can return again and again when the snow is right.