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Eye on the Environment

Making Tracks In The Valentine Month

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Cross-country skiers are enamored of February. The daytime temperatures hang in the 20s; there is enough daylight for a trek after work; the snow has settled into a firm base; and the animal tracks weave stories of hunger and propagation in the new fluff on top.

I've kept track of wildlife sign I've seen within a mile of my house during 26 Februarys, with the goal of learning what each species is up to in this mid-winter month.

The white-tailed deer weren't always around in February where I typically ski. In the 1980s the split hooves would leave around Christmastime and not return until the snow melted.

Purportedly the deer crossed the valley to join their kind on the lower slopes of the Swan Range, which has always provided good winter foraging. But during the last decade more deer have wintered west of the Swan River in my neighborhood. The warmer temperatures and lower snow depths apparently have enabled them to remain in their summer territory, where they browse the Douglas-fir saplings and juniper shrubs to nubs.

We had a steady snowfall during the holidays that left a deep downy layer on the

valley floor. Then the January thaw was rainier than most, reducing the snow depth by at least a third. When the rain finally stopped and freezing nights returned, we were left with a thick concrete crust too dense for deer to paw through. Their sharp hooves punched deep holes, but they couldn't scrape the snow aside to forage beneath.

Old deer tracks held their shapes for two or three weeks. But after a late January snowstorm, there was little new sign to be found in the open. The deer were constrained to the dense forest cover where the snow depth was lower.

Elk tracks have become more prevalent west of my house. The wapiti follow the same paths they used 20 years ago, but more frequently and in larger numbers. I know the ridges and hollows to check on for elk, despite the fact the area has been logged three times altering the landscape in a quarter century.

It seems the predators also use the same paths year after year. I can count on a lion to prowl the high banks of Glacier Creek, where years ago I spotted drag marks and blood smears, left by a cougar that had killed a deer from a perch above the creek. It may be a descendant of that feline who recently left tracks all along the high bank.

The wolves are new in the neighborhood. But they have already established a pattern. For the last three to four years, I've spotted wolf tracks at a particular junction of two logging roads, and I've followed their tracks for some distance in and out of forest cover as they wend their way on extensive hunting trips. I make it a habit now to check these trails every couple of weeks for fresh signs of these large predators.

One mystery I'm trying to solve is the cause of three white-tail deaths, one each year, in the same location on my property. Each time I've arrived at the scene after a heavy snowfall has obliterated all evidence. What remains are bones, pieces of hide and signs of scavengers—coyotes, eagles, ravens and jays—that have been digging the carcasses out of the snow.

I investigate the surrounding area, trying to determine what makes this such a good place for deer to become sustenance for so many others. But this little bit of forest isn't much different than anywhere else under the tree canopy.

Coyotes' wanderings seem more random than wolves and lions. Their tracks might be found anywhere, as their prey is so diverse—from mice to hares to winter-starved deer to the occasional uninitiated family cat or dog. But coyotes in February have more than hunger on their minds; they mate during the Valentine month.

Coyotes are monogamous, meaning they pair for life, and the females are monestrous, which means they breed only once each year. Lifetime pairing apparently helps coyotes defend their territory and support their offspring.

Snowshoe hares are common animals leaving tracks in February. They like thickets of young trees, where they can forage on the low branches. The snowshoes can sometimes outsmart coyotes by sitting still, their white fur blending with the snow. Or lickety split outpace the predators, their large feet holding them atop, while the smaller canine feet sink in.

Skunks are February romantics. Their tracks are easy to identify, once you learn the diagonal pattern of their stride. Their paw

prints, if you find a clear impression, are like the hind feet of a tiny bear, only two inches long. Skunk activity increases around my neighborhood in mid-winter as they foray to find mates as well as food.

Ravens are amorous in February. These corvids make a commitment and stick to it. Ravens, like coyotes, mate for life and share in the raising of their young. Raven tracks are often associated with winter-killed animals, distinguishable from eagle prints by their smaller size and because they hop as often as walk. Eagles hop, but not as frequently or as far. Smaller still, Stellers and gray jays (frequent hoppers) are found at carcasses. Look for their paired tracks about two inches long.

Ruffed grouse string a long necklace of prints that connect tree wells in open forests where kinnikinnick berries can be found. These large birds can be found in service berry bushes where they might be foraging for dried fruit or knocking snow on your head if you glide beneath.

Mice leave winding strings of prints, when they dare to venture on top of the snow. I occasionally find wingtip tracks where a raptor has swooped down to snag a mouse.

Ermine prints are fun to follow. These small members of the weasel family bound, their front and back feet landing in almost the same spot. They disappear down little round holes and reappear farther on. It might seem a crowd of ermines has made a spaghetti design on the snow. But one of the little predators can cover a lot of circular territory hunting for mice.

I saw my first marten track over 20 years ago in an old-growth stand, since logged. Now if I want to find marten sign I head for the high slopes of the Mission Mountains.

Martens and weasels leave tracks like an ermine's, but about twice as large and far apart. Weasels are found down by the creek where it's tough to ski through the dogwood and willow brush. But that's where to go for beaver and river.

The otters play in family groups and leave slide marks on the ice. Beavers are February lovers and good family members. They may venture from their lodges during thaws, but they spend much of February beneath the ice, cuddling and chewing on stored food in the form of willow, aspen and cottonwood branches—relying on reserves during tough economic times.