

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1978)
Heft: 1742

Artikel: Animal tracks in the snow
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688427>

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ANIMAL TRACKS IN THE SNOW

By Kathleen Watts

Every winter in the mountains in Switzerland many wild creatures lose their lives through frailty or hunger; only the strongest survive. After a heavy fall of snow it is not at all unusual to see deer absolutely bogged down and unable to free themselves and unless someone alerts the gamekeeper or he happens to find them himself they die. Every day these men work extremely hard filling up hay boxes which are attached to the trees in the woods and these boxes are quickly emptied. Happily with so many skiers passing the deer are rescued more often than not and are taken into shelter and looked after for the rest of the winter. They are freed the following spring.

The search for food brings many animals around the house as soon as it is dark and it is fascinating in the morning to look at the tracks and try to guess who the night visitors have been.

Easiest of all to recognise is the hare with the two front feet wide apart and the two back feet close together. It cannot be said that hares ever become tame but they do become very regular visitors if the right food is put down for them and if they are encouraged. They like all vegetable peelings and especially salad leaves if they get them before they become frozen.

Rather similar but of course much smaller are the tracks of the squirrel as squirrels spring in the same way as hares with the back legs first followed by the front legs. In good clear snow tracks the marks of the claws can be seen quite distinctly (four claws to the front foot and five to the back). The track is usually strewn with a quantity of chewed pine cones.

Foxes and domestic cats walk in a similar way — that is to say almost in a straight line. Other animals do not bring their right and left legs into line, and so the tracks become zigzag. The cat retracts its claws when it walks and so no mark remains.



The distinctive tracks of a roe deer.



Not easily mistaken — a hare has passed by.



The tracks of a domestic cat.



The tracks of a cat and a deer.



A fox's brush leaves a clearly identifiable print.

The fox's track is easily recognizable as the large pad can be seen clearly and between the foot marks the tail brushes the snow lightly and as it is in a straight line it cannot be a dog. Also in the print of the dog's pad the side toes reach almost as far forward as the centre of the middle toes, while in that of the fox the side toes do not reach the line of the middle toes.

Unmistakable

The track of the roe deer is the smallest of the hooved animals and can hardly be confused with any other. When moving quietly and undisturbed the track is zigzag and both halves of the hoof are clearly seen close together. In fright the roe deer springs in long leaps and the pattern of the hooves can be very varied but in general it corresponds to the "hare's leap" and the two halves of the hoof are widely separated. The length of the leap and the distance between the hoof marks can be as much as four metres.

It is rare for chamoix to come near enough to human habitation for their tracks to be seen. The weather conditions have to be extremely bad for them to come low enough down in search of food. Even then it is difficult to find their tracks as they have soft hooves like rubber which leave an indistinct print rather larger than that of roe deer.

Though the badger does not hibernate like the marmot it does spend most of the winter in its set. It is therefore very rare to find the mark of its

five claws which strongly resemble the print of a human hand.

But perhaps the most charming sight of all in winter if you are lucky enough to see one is the ermine. This little creature of the weasel family will suddenly appear in the snow, standing bolt upright on two feet and then leap as far as 50-70 cm. (with two feet together) leaving only the lightest track. Equally suddenly as it has appeared it will dart back into the snow and disappear. In summer its fur is brown but in winter it becomes white with only a black tip at the end of the tail.



Perhaps Sherlock Holmes could tell us what these are?

SNOWTIME IN CANTON FRIBOURG

From Zürich and Basle a motorway runs to the foot of the Gruyère region, which is located at an altitude of between 2,300 and 2,950 ft. In the medieval township of Gruyères the castle is open; in the town visitors can also go round a model cheese dairy to find out how the famous Gruyères cheese is made. For skiers, too, there are plenty of facilities.

The schwarzsee (3,450 ft.) is the starting point for rewarding ski excursions, from La Roche the La Berra station (5,653 ft.) can be reached, Les Paccots and Châtel-St.-Denis offer several hotels and guesthouses while the holiday centre of Moléson-Village (3,640 ft.) has a full network of transportation facilities. And then there is the resort of Charmey, with its up-to-date tourist facilities, on the Jaun Pass road leading to the Simmental. Information is available from the Gruyères Tourist Office in Bulle or the Fribourg Tourist Union in the city of Fribourg.

MOTELS IN SWITZERLAND

The Swiss National Tourist Office (SNTU) has published its updated four-language brochure "Motels 1978". The list is divided into ten tourist regions. It gives details about location, hours of opening, number of beds, prices, covered parking facilities, petrol sales points and repair services. The brochure is obtainable from the SNTU.

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