

**Weylin Field Guide:**  
**Tracks of West**  
**European Animals**



The tracks of more than 100 mammals,  
invertebrates, reptiles and birds.



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# Foreword

It was a Friday afternoon, a few years ago. I travelled from the Netherlands to central Germany with my animal tracking buddy Tom Dekker, to meet three other trackers who we met on-line. We arrived around eight in the evening, just in time to order dinner and meet our friends. Schnitzel and a good-sized beer, what else could it be in Germany?

We chose to meet here for a reason: raccoons had been spreading throughout Europe for quite some time, and were found here. They had yet to establish themselves in the Netherlands, and so far I had not been lucky enough to find their tracks. To get good quality photos of raccoon tracks we decided to ask for help from our German tracker friends, who suggested this location – a raccoon release site.

The next day we got up early and headed to our first location. It did not take me long to find the perfect raccoon track. I shouted to Tom, who found a track and shouted to me at the same time. We both found beautiful raccoon tracks! Goal achieved! The rest of the weekend was well spent exchanging knowledge with our friends.

Not even a year later I was walking in the woods near my house in the Netherlands. As a tracker, I'm always scanning the ground, and my eyes fell on a track near a puddle. A raccoon track! The first I had found so close to my house.

Western Europe is currently an amazing area for animal tracking. Many animals long gone are returning, such as the wolf and lynx. Others, such as the golden jackal, are naturally expanding their range. Some animals that were introduced for commercial reasons have become invasive species, such as the mink, raccoon, coypu and muskrat. I hope this field guide will help you to explore all the information that can be found outside, on the ground.

Jeroen Kloppenburg  
Weylin Tracking  
Deventer, 19 November 2018



Ronny te Wechel

# Track traps

A track trap is a natural funnel or narrow point that animals tend to make use of when moving from one area to another. For the tracker, track traps are excellent places to study animal footprints.

In some instances it is possible to increase the potential of track traps. Try tidying the track trap by removing all organic matter. You could create a flat substrate by digging up and spreading out clean sand or mud, or by using sand that you bought at a hardware store. Different types of sand hold tracks in different ways. Fine, dry sand works well for insects, but larger mammal tracks will be blurred and reduced to an outline shape. Coarser sand that is moist will hold mammal tracks better. Adjust the substrate to your needs.



Visit your track trap regularly. Every morning is ideal; this is easy for the owner of the track trap on the photo above. The tracks of nocturnal animals are still fresh and sharp in the morning. After reading last night's stories, use a rake to wipe the slate clean, ready for the coming night's stories.

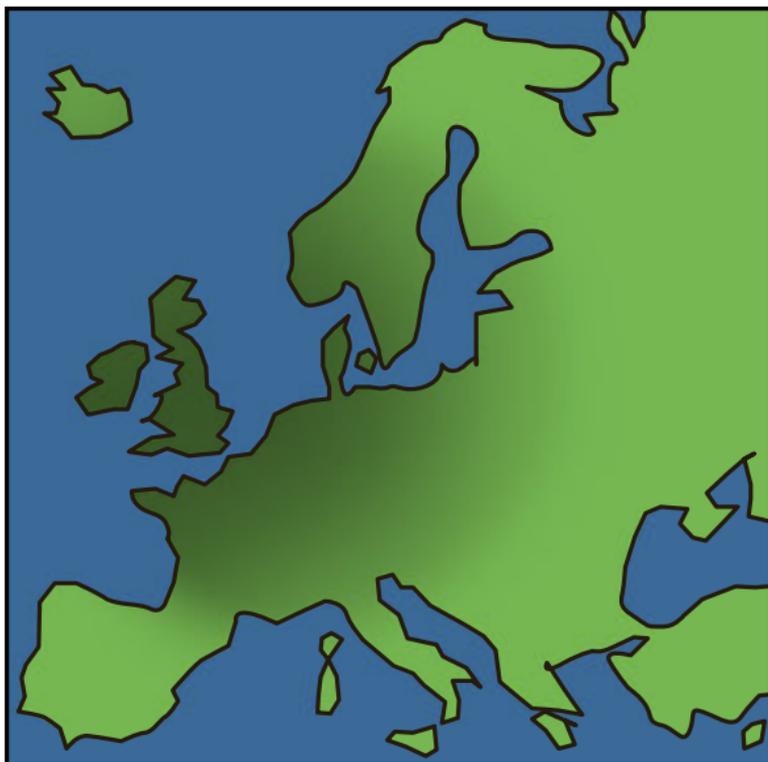
There is much to be learned if you can use a track trap regularly. Over a long period, seasonal changes in activity will be revealed. Leaving tracks to weather over a period of days will help you to estimate the age of tracks found in the field. The photo below shows the same hedgehog track, four days apart.



If you can use a camera trap alongside your track trap, the photos will help you to understand the tracks you find. Point the camera in the expected direction of travel of your target animals, not at a 90 degree angle, as animals move fast. By the time the camera has been activated, many animals (especially mustelids) will be long gone if your camera is aimed directly at the trap.

## Using this guide

With this guide, you will be able to identify the vast majority of animal tracks that you can find in the field in Western Europe, including the British Isles - the shaded area on the map. Although Scandinavia and the mountain ranges of central Europe are not included, you will probably be able to identify most tracks you find there too. Species that rarely produce tracks are not included, and similar species that cannot be identified from tracks alone are grouped together. This means that the guide is small and light enough to be easy to carry. Only if you take it with you will be able to use it in the field, and this is the best way to learn tracking!



Flipping through the pages, you might notice that the order in which the animals are listed does not follow any scientific system. The order, however, has been carefully planned based on years of experience with students on tracking courses. Animals that make similar tracks are placed together. For example, it is easy to confuse the tracks of shrews and mice, or those of hedgehogs and squirrels, so the animals with similar tracks are placed together, instead of grouping insectivores and rodents together.

In tracks, morphology is more important than size. Here and there, information about the size of tracks is provided in the text, and most of the drawings of individual footprints are approximately life-size, but there is a lot of variation in track size. Size varies with sex and age, and there are also regional differences. Generally, the members of the same species are bigger the further north in Europe they live. So, instead of relying on size, take a close look at the morphology of the tracks described here, and look for those specifics in the tracks you find.

## Using this guide

When learning to track animals, it will help if you know which species you can expect to find tracks of at your particular site and time of the year. You can get this information from visitor centres at nature reserves, from other naturalists, or from specialist websites. In some countries, organisations such as mammal societies have websites where members of the public can report sightings. Often, these websites also provide a way to search for results, even for a certain time period. However, you may find the track of a new-comer. Tracks don't lie! If you make such a find, do report it.

The way you approach the identification of tracks is very important. We humans are naturally inclined to identify tracks very quickly. This is rooted in our evolution, since long ago we needed to make quick assessments about whether someone or something leaving a track was a friend or a foe. We do not have the need for this fast judgement anymore. So, if you find a track, do not start by putting the name of an animal to it immediately. If you do this, you will only search for (and probably find!) confirmation of that animal in your mind. Instead, make a mental list of all possible candidates, and then remove them one-by-one based on the evidence you find in the track.

Finally, if you find a track that you cannot identify, or a nice track that you can identify, please share it on our Facebook group 'Tracks & Signs of European Animals', using the photograph methods explained on the previous pages.



# Red fox

*Vulpes vulpes*



The tracks of a fox are the shape of a water droplet. Foxes squeeze their toes together so that their tracks have a compact form. The tracks of the front feet are larger than those of the hind feet. The metacarpal pad of the front foot is triangular in shape, whereas the metatarsal pad of the hind foot is more oval in shape. There is a border where the hairs stop at the back edge of the metacarpal pad. This often shows up as a clear line (see the arrow in the photo on the left).



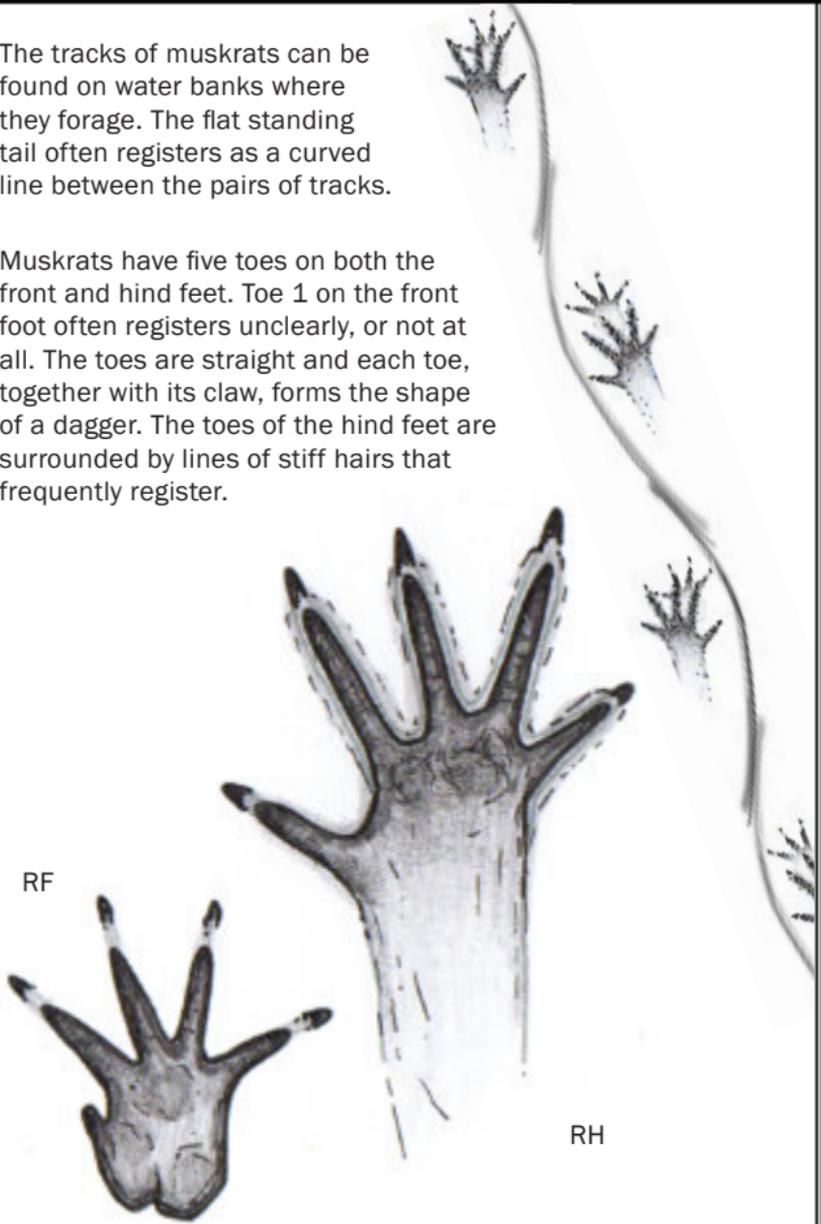
In trail A, the fox is walking; in trail B, it is sideways trotting. The sideways trot is a faster version of the trot, in which the body is angled across the direction of travel. This body position prevents the hind feet from making contact with the front feet, and results in a specific gait pattern that sees all the hind tracks on one side of the trail's central line (shown as a red dotted line), and all the front tracks on the other. In track sequence, the hind tracks register ahead of the front tracks. This gait is used by most members of the canid family (Canidae) and especially by foxes. Trail C is from a fox in gallop. This gait is mostly used when foxes are chasing prey animals.

# Muskrat

*Ondatra zibethicus*

The tracks of muskrats can be found on water banks where they forage. The flat standing tail often registers as a curved line between the pairs of tracks.

Muskrats have five toes on both the front and hind feet. Toe 1 on the front foot often registers unclearly, or not at all. The toes are straight and each toe, together with its claw, forms the shape of a dagger. The toes of the hind feet are surrounded by lines of stiff hairs that frequently register.



Below, the photo on the right shows a right hind foot of a muskrat. The stiff hairs surrounding each toe are clearly visible. The arrow in the photo on the left indicates how these hairs register in the substrate.





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**Tracks & Signs of European Animals**

The 'Weylin Field Guide - Tracks of West European Animals' is a compact and richly illustrated guide. Designed to be taken and used outdoors, it contains the main tracks or footprints of the mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates that are common in Western Europe.

This field guide is published by Weylin Tracking, specialist in tracking. For more information please visit [www.weylintracking.eu](http://www.weylintracking.eu).

