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Reading Article GP1

Article #10: TRACKING

by Murray Banting

Sun-up two hours ago. The air is frozen and dense, and the sound of each step and movement I make is amplified in this barren cold, where sound travels fast and far. A woodpecker taps and probes for grubs on a dried-out black poplar a half mile away. Raven cackles from high in flight can be heard clearly at one mile. My snowshoes pack a familiar trail in the light covering of last night's snow as I follow the fresh track of a coyote through the frozen marsh.

Coyote going here and there, checking out that clump of weeds, looking for a vole or a long-dead duck left behind last fall when crippled and unable to fly south with its mates. Coyote then sniffing cautiously around the muskrat's house built from mud and dead vegetation scoured from the bottom and edges of the marsh and smelling of all things wet, damp, musky and alive. Below, the muskrat rests secure from the menace above, the coyote kept safely away beyond the frozen dome of marsh refuse. On to the next clump of willows, where other tracks preceded those of the coyote — mishmashed and seemingly random wanderings of a pair of sharp tailed grouse or "prairie chicken," as they are often incorrectly referred to. I wonder what the coyote calls them, and if it is the correct name. A good meal one of these would have made for a hungry coyote, but he can't catch one simply by being where they were. Tracks are history and, as one old-timer used to say, "make very thin soup."

Ah, but the coyote knew where his best chances were last night when he left his signature on this frozen land, and I follow his tracks in anticipation. Coyote leaves the marsh and cuts into a thicket of hazelnut and red willow. Finds rabbit trails, packed and perfect for a coyote to travel and nab the unsuspecting snowshoe hare whose silent feet seldom leave the trail. Tracks weave and crisscross for miles along the marsh and from thicket to thicket. The minus twenty-five degrees Celsius air fills my lungs with cool fluid from which I extract much more than oxygen. The snow is crisp and with each step I announce to all that a man, a very noisy creature, has entered their world and is also leaving tracks for the next passerby to ponder.

Ravens duel in the distance, the sound of the dense air rippling over black-feathered

wings as they toss and turn in flight making as much noise as I do breaking the crust of snow. Today I am not stalking my quarry, so there is no need to be exceptionally quiet, even if I could be. Today I am checking a coyote snare that I set four days ago on a rabbit trail.

Tracking a wolf is different from tracking most other animals on a trap line. For some reason — and it doesn't seem to be conscious — you find yourself looking in the direction in which the tracks are going and, equally, in the direction from which they came.

To the hunter or trapper, the tracks that all wild things leave behind have a special power and they affect us similarly. Is it just the track that makes us react so profoundly — the simple mark in the snow or the indent in mud left fresh after a receding water level? No, it is much more than that. There is the feeling of discovery and of respect for the beast that was here to leave such a dignified and bold statement of its presence. "Behold me," proclaim these tracks, "I am one of the four-legged."

Once, when I was about eight, I went with my dad to a trapper's cabin to deliver some hardware supplies. It was a dark, early winter night in the middle of moose season, and it was snowing heavily. The old fellow was in a cheery mood and invited my dad to have a drink with him. As we sat at his table, he and my dad talked about this and that. The cabin smelled of wood smoke and the pungent aroma of beaver and muskrat hides drying. The woodstove belched out excessive heat, and though the cabin was uncomfortably hot, the trapper wore his dirty, faded, fluorescent orange toque. I sat glued to my chair, thoroughly eyeing the steel traps hanging from the walls, the guns propped up in the corner and the duck decoys and ammunition boxes in the porch. The only thing I recall from the conversation was that the trapper would blurt out every so often, in a "happy-new-year!" type of voice and with ever-increasing volume, the phrase "fresh tracks in the morning."

After each of these exclamations he would hold high his coffee mug (filled with Five Star whiskey, straight up) as if saluting some sort of royalty, then take a good slug and let out a big breath.

Later, as my dad backed the truck away from the cabin, the old fellow came out on the porch and looked skyward, giant snowflakes melting on his leathery face.

He was framed in the truck headlights as if on stage at the local talent night. He squinted towards us and let out one last salute: "*Fresh tracks in the morning, boys!*"

Coyote tracks veer off the rabbit trail ten paces before they reach my snare. I exhale into the cold dense air and glance quickly over my shoulder — an old habit. The steel snare hangs lifeless and undisturbed, not caring about the correct identification of sharp tailed grouse or prairie chicken. I wanted to outsmart the coyote and am disappointed, but the tracks offer solace that only I can appreciate. They say: There will be another chance. Where is he now? I ask. I imagine his stealthy paws etching out another tale to be read and deciphered later.

Throughout the day, as I make my way along my trap line, I am greeted by many unseen inhabitants of the land. Some are quarry and others are not, but all weave a tale of immense proportions upon the landscape. I read it like others read the morning paper. Tracks ahead! What or whose are they? Where are they going?

Can I get there first? And will they come again?

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