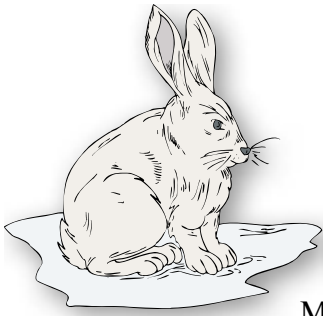


# Wildlife Express!

Volume 25/Issue 4      Snowshoe Hare      December 2011





# IDAHO'S Snowshoe Hare

In Idaho's forest, a magician leaps about.

Magically changing colors as the seasons come and go. Well, it may not be a true magician, but the snowshoe hare does seem to have a few tricks up its sleeve. It does change its coat to match the colors of the seasons – white in winter and grayish-brown in summer.

The snowshoe hare is a member of the rabbit family. It has long ears, large hind feet and can run and hop very quickly. Why is it called a hare and not a rabbit? It's easy. Hares are born with hair! Hares give birth to young that are much more developed than rabbits. Hares are born with fur and eyes open. They are able to move about shortly after they are born. When rabbits are born, they are still immature. Rabbits are born without fur, and their eyes sealed shut. Rabbits need to stay hidden in a nest for weeks after they are born for their protection.

It is a good thing that hares are born ready to move. Hares do not make underground burrows like rabbits. Snowshoe mothers have their young in a nest made of soft material and fur she pulls from her coat. The nest may be made in a shallow hole on the ground or in a hollow log. The young stay around the nest for a few days. Then they follow their mother to a new location. Young snowshoes grow quickly. They are weaned off of their mother's milk when they are about one month old. In about five months, they will be the size of their mother!

Females have anywhere from one to six babies at a time, and they may give birth more than once a year. Snowshoe hares may have one to four litters of babies a year. This means that one hare may have up to 24 young in one year! That is a lot of babies.

Snowshoe hares need to have lots of young, because so many animals like to eat them. Snowshoe hares are important food for bobcats, lynx, red foxes, hawks, eagles, and owls.

During the day, hares will rest in the dense cover of shrubs and grasses. They are most active at night and when the sun is rising and setting in the sky. These are the times they search for plants to eat. They will eat soft plants, grasses, twigs, buds, and the bark from small trees. Snowshoe hares also eat something else – their poop! That may sound gross to you, but it is important to the health of the hare. Hares and rabbits have two types of poop. One is dry and oval shaped. This is the poop that you have seen. The other is black and runny. This is the poop that they eat. Plants are hard for animals to digest, so scientists think that snowshoes eat this poop to get vitamins and nutrients that are still inside the poop. By passing through their digestive systems twice, rabbits and hares get all the vitamins and nutrients from their food they need to be healthy.

Look for snowshoe hares in the northern, central and eastern parts of Idaho. They like dense forests with shrubs and bushes. You are not likely to find this magician in Idaho's southern deserts.





## Clever Defenses

Can you think of an animal that has a clever way of protecting itself? Animals may use color, armor, or even poison to protect themselves.

Snowshoe hares use camouflage and speed. The color of their fur helps them to disappear in their habitat. If a predator does see them, hares quickly run and dart about to get away from danger.

Turtles use armor. Turtle shells are made of bone, and the outside is covered with scales called scutes. Scutes are made of the same thing as your fingernails. Something called keratin. Keratin is hard and tough and helps to protect the shell from weather. The patterns and colors on the scutes also help camouflage the turtle. If camouflage doesn't protect the turtle, it can seek protection inside its shell. Turtles' necks are very flexible, and the skin around the neck is loose. This allows the turtle to pull its whole neck inside the shell when danger is near. Most turtles fold their necks in an "S" shape inside the shell. It is very difficult for a predator to get a turtle out of its shell.

Some lizards also have armor. Horned lizards come to mind. They are covered by sharp, pointy scales. Horned lizards have another way to protect themselves. They can squirt blood out of the corner of their eyes! The blood may go as far as three feet. This definitely will startle a predator!

Poison is a good defense, too. Sometimes an animal might not look dangerous. Many frogs, toads and salamanders have glands on them that make poison. If they aren't poisonous, they may taste awful. Poisonous animals are sometimes bright and colorful. Their bright colors are a warning to stay away.

Think of a skunk. The stripes on a skunk are a warning to stay away, and boy, do they smell bad! Once an animal has had a run-in with a skunk, it most likely won't get too close to a skunk again. Can you think of other clever ways animals protect themselves? There are just about as many clever defenses as there are animals.

## What Big Feet You Have

Have you ever looked closely at a picture of an animal's foot? With all the wrinkles, bumps and shapes, animals' feet can be pretty interesting.

A close up picture of an animal's foot can tell you a lot about the animal and where it spends its time. Snowshoe hares have a large amount of fur between their toes and on the bottom of their feet. The fur not only keeps the snowshoe hare's feet warm, it also helps the hare walk on top of the snow. This is how the snowshoe hare got its name. Its large, furry feet really do act like snowshoes, so the hare stays on top of the snow when traveling.

Mountain goats have large squishy pads on the bottoms of their feet. The pads help mountain goats grip onto rocks as they climb on the sides of mountains.

The bottoms of porcupine feet are covered by small little bumps. The bumps make their feet look like they are covered in sandpaper. Their rough feet help porcupines climb trees. The bumps help them grab onto the tree bark as they climb.

Think of a beaver's foot. They have webs between the toes on their back feet. The webs are built-in swim paddles. Many animals that spend a lot of time in the water have webs. Have you ever seen the front feet on a beaver? The front feet do not have webs. The front feet have long toes and claws on them. The front feet are helpful in grabbing onto logs and branches.

Next time you see a picture of an animal's foot. Look closely. You may be able to figure out the animal's habitat just by looking at its feet.



Photo courtesy © Terry Gray

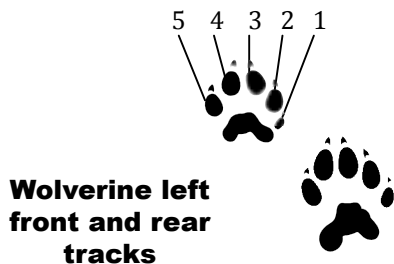
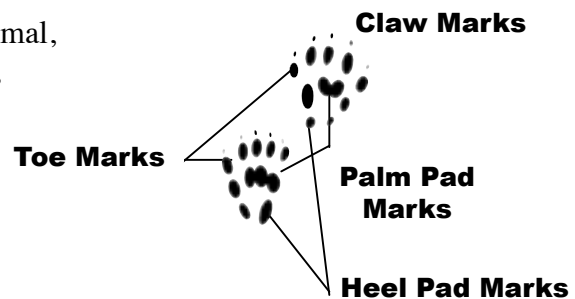
# TRACKS!

Winter is a great time to look for animal tracks. Tracking can be a lot of fun. It's a bit like playing detective. You observe, gather clues and do your best to put the clues together to solve a mystery. It also can be difficult at times. Here are some tips to consider when figuring out what animal left a track.

Look at the track from all directions. Are there other clues nearby? You may need more than a footprint to guess the animal correctly. Look for clues like chew marks, bones or scat. Scat is animal poop, and it is often one of the best clues you may find to solve your animal mystery.

Notice the size of the track and its shape. Mammal tracks are usually made up of marks left by the claws, toes, palms, heels and the space in between the toes and pads. Not every track will show all of these things, of course. It all depends upon the animal, and what the animal was doing at the time the track was left.

This is what a spotted skunk track might look like:





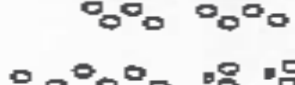


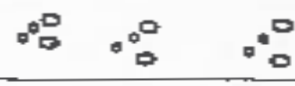








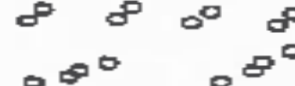












How many toe marks show in the track? Weasels have five toes on both the front and back feet, but sometimes only four toes leave marks. Hares have four toes only on their back feet; the front feet have five toes. In tracking guides, toes are numbered one to five beginning with the inside toe and moving outward. The smallest toe (#1) is usually found on the inside of most mammals' feet. This can help you tell if a track is from the left or right foot of an animal.

The front legs of dogs actually have five toes! The first toe is found high up on the leg, so you don't usually see it in a track. Coyote tracks usually have four clear marks left by the toes, and the front foot tracks are always larger than the rear foot tracks. These are just some of the things to consider when looking at tracks. The mammal track comparison chart on the next page will help you tell some tracks apart. At least you may be able to tell if the animal is from a certain group. Good Luck!



# Mammal Family Track Key

Toes	Claws	General Shape & Drilling	Coarsen Gaps	Shape of Pads	Family
4	Yes				Dog
4	No				Cat
4 or 5	Rare				Rabbit
4 or 5	Varies				Rodent
5 <sup>th</sup> toe may not show	Sometimes				Bear
5 <sup>th</sup> toe may not show	Sometimes				Weasel
5	Sometimes				Raccoon
5 (except)	No				Squirrel
3	Deer Claws				Deer

## Animal Hide & Seek

Sometimes sticks walk, leaves hop and rocks slither. Of course, these things really can't hop or crawl, but sometimes it sure looks like they're moving. Often when we are seeing a rock slither or crawl, it's actually an animal.

Camouflage (KAM-e-flazh) means to blend in with your surroundings and hide. It is a type of disguise. Camouflage may be a certain color, pattern of colors, or a special shape that fools the eye. Camouflage may help an animal to hide, help a hunter to sneak up on its prey, or both.

Many animals, like the snowshoe hare, change their colors with the seasons. Animals that change color to match their background are using cryptic (KRIP-tik) coloration. When snow starts to fall, their coats gradually turn white to match. Then in the spring, the snowshoe hare's white fur will fall out and be replaced with a brown colored fur. No matter what the season

happens to be, the snowshoe hare has a coat that helps it to hide from predators.

Animals may even change colors and patterns throughout their lives. Deer fawns are born with tan coats that have white spots. The spots match the sun and shade that dapple the tall grasses where the fawns hide. As long as the fawns do not move, predators will have a difficult time seeing them. As deer fawns grow older and can run faster to escape danger, the spots fade away.

Do you think zebras are camouflaged? They are not camouflaged for our eyes. Their black and white stripes stick out against the grasses of Africa, but this is not true for lions' eyes. Lions have a difficult time seeing some colors. Grasses and trees look like shades of gray, so the zebras' stripes help them to blend into the tall grasses. This helps the zebras avoid becoming a lion's meal. Whether hunter or hunted, camouflage helps animals to survive.

# Be Outside in Winter!



Winter is a wonderful time to explore the outdoors! A blanket of new snow makes familiar places look quite different. Noisy streams become silent under ice and snow. Animals that you rarely see can now be “seen” when you find their tracks in the snow. Cold nips your cheeks, and makes you look forward to a cup of hot chocolate after being outside.



Winter activities are many. Skiing and skating are great ways to enjoy winter. So are sledding and snowshoeing. Even if you do not have any equipment you can still enjoy winter by just taking a walk in the snow. Build a snow fort with your friends or decorate your yard with snowmen. If it is snowing, catch some snowflakes on your mittens and use a magnifying glass to look at the beautiful crystals. Take a walk in new snow to see what animal tracks you can find. Look for bird nests in the trees. If you live near a river or lake, do some winter bird watching to look for bald eagles and ducks. Don't forget to check out the winter night sky. Cold, clear winter nights can give you some great opportunities to see the stars.

No matter what kind of winter activity you enjoy, dressing properly is very important. Wear layers that you can take off when you warm up and put back on if you feel cold. Snowpants can help you stay warm and dry. Warm boots are very important for winter fun and don't forget a hat and mittens. Wearing a hat is one of the best ways to stay warm, no matter what you are doing. So, get into your winter clothes and head outside for some winter fun. After all, winter is a big part of every year in Idaho!

## A Cluster of Critters



You may know that deer hang out in herds. A group of hares is called a down or husk. But have you ever heard of a knot of toads or a murder of crows? How about a kettle of hawks? The English language has hundreds of names for groups or collections of critters.

Many animal group names date back to the Middle Ages. Some names were hunting terms. Hunters would pursue a dray of squirrels or a spring of teal.

There are many reasons why someone may have first chosen a particular name. The sounds the animals make – a murmuration of starlings. The animals' homes – a nest of pheasants. What the gathering looks like – a knot of toads. A repetition of sounds the animal makes – a gaggle of geese.

Some names are mistakes. A school of fish was first called a shoal of fish. Fish gather in a shoal, a shallow place in a river or lake. A long time ago someone translated shoal of fish as school of fish, and the name stuck.

Here are some other animal group names. Can you think of more?

- Descent of woodpeckers
- Army of frogs
- Cete of badgers
- Covey of quail
- Cloud of gnats
- Gang of elk
- Hive of bees
- Leash of fox
- Tribe of goats
- Romp of otters
- Pack of wolves
- Charm of finches
- Hover of trout
- Raft of ducks



Photo courtesy  
Gerald and Buff Corsi  
© California Academy of Sciences.

# Snowshoe Search

Find these words associated with the snowshoe hare in the puzzle.

J	A	O	I	P	B	F	G	M	C	S	V	T	J	C
W	X	E	Q	H	O	A	X	A	K	T	B	R	P	L
N	T	L	L	F	B	H	M	M	W	S	U	A	Y	E
W	E	Q	S	R	U	O	A	P	D	E	H	C	G	V
S	B	P	S	Z	U	X	N	Y	L	R	B	K	B	E
P	G	K	O	F	E	O	H	S	W	O	N	S	T	R
O	T	I	L	S	L	C	B	C	S	F	O	E	Y	D
O	Y	A	W	E	E	D	P	O	W	M	E	I	R	E
P	G	C	T	T	E	Y	W	A	B	F	Q	U	R	F
E	A	H	X	E	D	H	E	P	G	C	Z	Q	U	E
C	R	Y	P	T	I	C	F	I	R	P	A	T	F	N
H	U	S	H	T	I	J	B	E	B	E	W	T	W	S
R	A	U	E	D	N	U	O	B	D	Z	Y	S	R	E
S	S	N	J	D	K	R	I	I	D	O	W	N	Z	U
K	U	Q	C	J	R	L	R	E	A	R	K	R	N	H

**WORDS:**  
BIG FEET  
BOBCAT  
BOUND  
CAMOUFLAGE  
CLEVER DEFENSE  
CRYPTIC  
DOWN  
EYES OPEN  
FORESTS  
FURRY  
HOP  
HUSK  
LYNX  
POOP  
PREY  
SNOWSHOE  
SPEED  
TRACKS  
TWIGS  
WHITE

## WILDLIFE EXPRESS

Volume 25 • Issue 4 • Snowshoe Hare • December 2011

Wildlife Express is published nine times a year (September-May)  
by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Classroom subscriptions and an Educator's Guide are available  
for \$35.00 per year and includes a classroom set of 30 copies  
mailed to your school each month. Subscriptions of 10 copies or less are available for \$20.00.  
This publication is made possible through the sale of wildlife license plates.

For more information, call or write: Wildlife Express, Idaho Department of Fish and Game,  
600 South Walnut, PO Box 25, Boise, Idaho, 83707 (208) 287-2890.

Lead Writer: Adare Evans

Layout: Sandy Gillette McBride

Contributors: Vicky Runnoe • Lori Adams

WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express,  
it may be included in a future issue!

Send it to the address printed above!

Look for printable copies of **Wildlife Express** on the web  
at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov>

