

A few ideas (and rules of thumb) about animal tracks in the snow:

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First, looking yourself is a good way to show your kid(s) how to look. Get down, look closely, do some ooh and ah, and they are likely to come over and see what you're up to. Sometimes kids are more likely to become interested the less you try.

Wonder and ask questions. See what your child comes up with.

Know what animals live in your area you are exploring, and in what sort of habitat they spend their time (fields, forest, swamps, marshes, stream banks). Also know which ones hibernate or sleep during the winter. You can prep your kid(s) with "I wonder if we'll see some tracks from deer or mice or ..."

Your kids will imagine animals that make certain tracks. If you talk with them sometimes about the usual animals that live near you, they are more likely to wonder "which of our usual animals might have made this track?" instead of insisting that it is a gorilla track.

But don't bother arguing with a kid about what it really is. That can come much later. Enjoy with them wondering what that dinosaur or gorilla was doing in the neighborhood, and whether it made a lot of noise.... Sometimes it's time for true science, sometimes it's all about imagination and fun...

If you don't know what the track is, talk about it; ask 'what might drag its belly in the snow?' and so on. Remember the sign you've seen or make a sketch or take a picture for reference. Then you can do a good joint activity to look up what you see in a field guide or online, later.

A few general guidelines about the tracks you see:

- Tracks by deer and their relations (moose, elk, etc) are two-toed imprints side by side
- Cats and dogs have four toes on each foot (front and back), but dogs typically leave claw marks as part of their track, while felines do not since they typically retract their claws while walking. Also, dogs leave a single lobed imprint at their 'heel' while cats leave doubled lobed ones.
- Animals in the weasel family (weasel, mink, etc) also raccoons and possums make tracks with five toes on both front and back feet. Bears also have five toes but obviously make a much larger track...
- Rodents have five toes on hind feet but only four toes on front. Rodents include everything from mice to beavers, so the size of the track is an important clue.

Sources of more information:

<http://www.tahoma.wednet.edu/subsite/th/teachers/szkweb2004/apweb2005/envirothon/pdfs/Track1.pdf>
www.tahoma.wednet.edu/subsite/th/teachers/.../pdfs/Track1.pdf

Michigan Nature Association

<https://michigannature.wordpress.com/>

<https://michigannature.wordpress.com/tag/animal-tracks/>