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| **Canine vs. Feline Tracks** How to Tell the Difference  By Kim A. Cabrera | |
|  | **What kind of track is it?**  **How do I tell the difference between cat (**cougar, bobcat, domestic cat**)  and dog (**coyote, wolf, fox, domestic dog**) tracks?**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | The most commonly found tracks can sometimes be confusing. How do you tell the difference between the tracks of dogs and cats? Was that track you found on the trail left by a mountain lion or a big dog? There are some clues that will help you tell the difference between dog and cat tracks. Dogs include such species as red and gray foxes, coyotes, wolves and domestic dogs. Cats include mountain lions, bobcats, lynx, and domestic cats. Lynx tracks have some unique features of their own, so are not treated here. What is said here should apply to bobcats, mountain lions and domestic cats. If you look closely, you can sometimes even tell the difference between right and left tracks, as well as front and hind tracks. | | | Here are some things that help identify this as a canine track.  A: The claw marks. Dogs usually show claw marks in their tracks. However, it is possible to see claw marks in cat tracks, but this is usually when the animal is running or pouncing.  B: The lack of a third lobe on the hind edge of the hell pad. See cat tracks below for the difference. Although it is visible in some dog tracks, the third lobe is located higher, not aligned with the other two as it is in cats.  C: The shape of the leading edge of the heel pad is a single lobe. See cat tracks for difference.  D: The alignment of the front two toes. They are side-by-side, or very close to it, in dogs tracks. There are exceptions, such as when the animal is making a turn or walking on a slope.  E: The almost triangular shape of the pads of the outer two toes. Take a look at the photo to see this more clearly as my drawing is not the best for indicating this feature.  F: Dogs have a little point where the heel pad turns. Cats share this feature.  Front tracks are usually larger than hind tracks. This is true for both dogs and cats. | **What makes this a dog track?**  D:\tracking\canifeln\dogfeas.gif | |  | | | **What makes these cat tracks?** | | | cat track features 1 | cat track features 2 | | This is the track made by the front left foot of a cougar.  A: Note that the front two toes are not lined up side-by-side as the dog prints were. The toe that is further forward is analogous to a human index finger (the one you point with). The alignment of this toe will tell you whether you have a left or right track. This toe is the inner toe.  B: The leading edge of the heel pad has two parts, or lobes.  C: The hind edge of the heel pad has three parts, or lobes. They are aligned with each other.  D: This is the front track. One clue that tells you this is that the edge of the heel pad is relatively straight. See hind track for difference.  E: Cats have a little point where the heel pad turns. Dogs share this feature.  Front tracks are usually larger than hind tracks. This is true for both dogs and cats. | This is the track made by the hind left foot of a cougar.  A: Note that the front two toes are not lined up side-by-side as the dog prints were. The toe that is further forward is analogous to a human index finger (the one you point with). The alignment of this toe will tell you whether you have a left or right track. This toe is the inner toe.  B: The leading edge of the heel pad has two parts, or lobes.  C: The hind edge of the heel pad has three parts, or lobes. They are aligned with each other.  D: The toe pads of cats are more teardrop shaped than those of dogs. The outer toes of cats are not triangular in shape. Also note that claw marks don't usually show in cat tracks, although there are exceptions, such as when the animal is pouncing.  E: This is the hind track. One clue that tells you this is that the edge of the heel pad is curved inward. See hind track for difference.  F: Cats have a little point where the heel pad turns. Dogs share this feature. | | **Some photos so you can see the differences....** | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | plain dog track | dog track shape | dog track feature | | A typical dog track. This one is from a golden retriever named Holly. | The overall shape of a dog track is oval. Here the shape is outlined in yellow. Dog tracks are usually longer than they are wide. | If you look at the position of the toes in a dog track, you can draw an imaginary X along the ridge between the heel pad and the outer toes. Here it is done in yellow. |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | cougar track | domestic cat track | | This is a mountain lion track. Note the position of the leading toe and the three parts to the hind edge of the heel pad. The lack of claw marks is also clearly visible. All these features identify it as a cat track. This is the left front foot. | This is the track of a domestic cat. The leading toe tells you this is the left foot. The straight edge of the heel pad tells you this is the front foot. The toes are spread out in this case because the cat was running on the sand. This also illustrates that cat tracks are usually wider than they are long. | | cougar print | cougar print | | This mountain lion track illustrates well the teardrop shape of the toe pads. The two parts to the leading edge of the heel pad are somewhat visible here. | Size also helps you identify which animal left the track. No domestic cat track would be three inches long. Three lobes on the heel pad are visible. | | **Now for some side-by-side comparison** | | | gray fox print | cat tracks | | This is a gray fox track. The claw marks are barely visible. If you imagine the X drawn in the middle, you can easily see the difference between it and the cat tracks to the right. Foxes also have a lot of fur on their feet, particularly in winter, when this photo was taken. The marks from the fur are visible in this print. The alignment of the two leading toes side-by-side is a clue. The triangular shape of the outer two toe pads is also. | This pair of tracks belongs to a domestic cat named Bones. Front track on the right and hind track on the left. The hind track is slightly more pointed and smaller than the front. The claw marks are visible due to the softness of the sand, as well as due to the fact that the cat was running. The heel pad on the track on the right has the relatively straight edge that identifies it as a front track. The print on the right is the front left track. | | Which tracks are which? | | | **1.** In the photo above, which are the fox tracks and which are the domestic cat tracks? The bird tracks belong to a killdeer. Hint, ignore the claw marks and look for the X in the heel, or lack of one. | | | Who made these tracks? | | | **2.** Whose tracks are these? The stick is three inches long. | | | Which are front and which are hind? | | | **3.** In this dog trail, which are the front tracks and which are the hind ones?  **Bonus question:** Which direction was the animal looking as it made these tracks? | |  |  | | --- | | **Answers to questions**  **1.** The three tracks in the upper right corner are cat tracks, including one that shows an imprint of a dewclaw. The rest are gray fox.  **2.** The tracks are mountain lion tracks.  **3.** The larger tracks are the front tracks. The smaller ones are the hind tracks.  **Bonus:** The animal was looking to the right. Note the position of the front tracks in relation to the overall direction of travel, which is from right to left across the screen. | |