

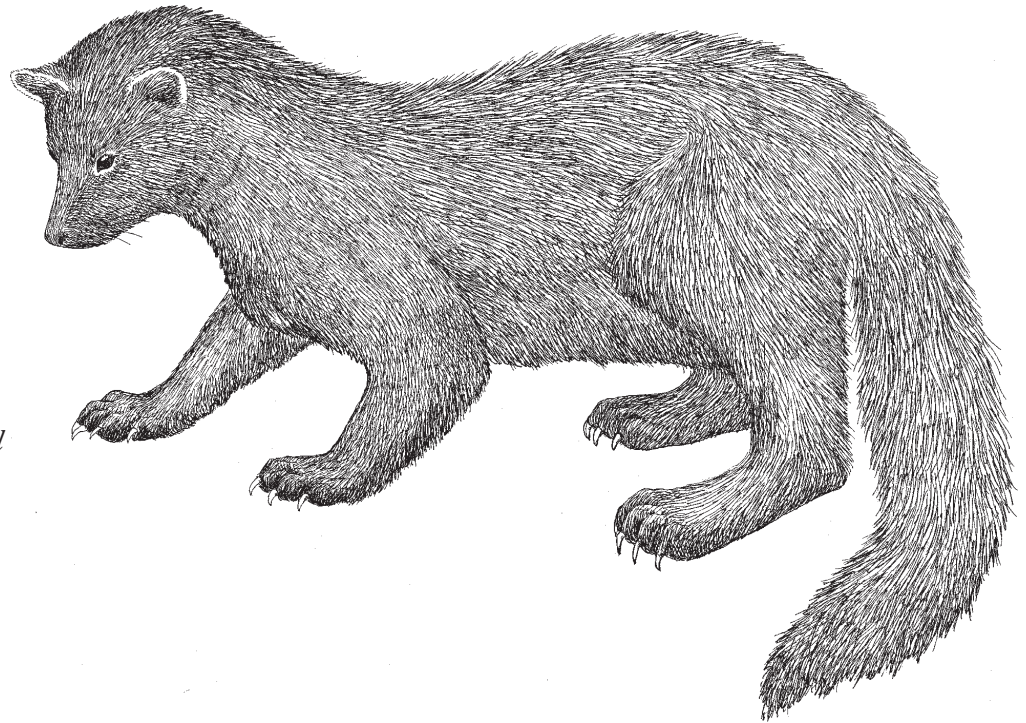
KEEPING TRACK

In step with bears, bobcats, and other beasts

by Joshua Brown

But when I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here—the cougar, panther, lynx, wolverene, wolf, bear, moose, deer, the beaver, the turkey, etc., etc.—I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tamed, and, as it were, emasculated country... Do not the forest and meadow now lack expression?...

HENRY DAVID THOREAU
Selected Journals



HENRY DAVID THOREAU MIGHT BE SHOCKED to stand on the banks of Walden Pond today: the low roar of cars, the pounded maze of dirt trails, triathletes in wetsuits sneaking past the designated swimming area to take long laps from end to end. He might be just as bewildered to see the hayfields, pastures, and scattered woodlots of his day covered by a resurgent forest, more extensive than anytime in the past 200 years; his open-space-loving meadowlarks replaced by tree-dwelling birds and wide-ranging forest animals.

Of course, commuters on nearby Routes 126 and 2, inbound to Boston 15 miles away, rushing past Walden Breezes trailer park, may also find it hard to believe that they are traveling through the terrain of bobcats, mink, fishers, otters, coyotes, black bears, and even the occasional lost moose.

Lydia Rogers hopes that these mammals can continue to travel through the historic landscapes of eastern Massachusetts.

As the coordinator of Walden Keeping Track, she is part of Keeping Track, Inc.'s national effort to give citizens the tools to find tracks and signs of wildlife in their regions. "In this very suburban setting we are used to seeing the landscape in terms of people activities—like where your car can go," she noted. "But when you start looking at animal sign, you start seeing how the animals are moving through the landscape: how they find suitable forest cover, how they are using edge, how they are using the waterways, how they are coping with the roads and highways. It's a different way of looking."

Keeping Track trains volunteers in this way of looking. Rogers' group of 19 trackers—including a high school teacher, aeronautical engineer, conservation commissioner, piano teacher, principal, painter, environmental consultant, poet, and student—spent six days over the course of a year with Susan Morse, Keeping Track's founder and expert track-

er. They followed tracks across snow and mud; they searched for other wildlife sign like bear “mark trees”; they sniffed for a pungent tomcat smell on rocks and branches, the signal of a bobcat’s recent passage; they peered at spraints, the mucous-covered, twisted grass mounds made by otters.

“Our basic purpose is to get wildlife information into town and regional plans,” explained Lars Botzjorns, Keeping Track’s executive director, from the group’s national headquarters in Huntington, Vermont. “While our training is a wonderful way to improve natural history skills, we have a deeper mission: that conservation commissions and others will use this information to protect habitat.”

Armed with a clipboard, specialized ruler, camera, field guides, and gumption, Rogers’ volunteers mark each positive identification on a standardized form accompanied by documentary photographs. As other Keeping Track chapters have discovered, this stack of data sheets resolves into a portrait of wildlife movement. “Because our protocol has trackers out all four seasons—year after year on the same transect—we see crucial patterns,” Morse noted. A single bobcat track in one season is noted; later, there are two together—a mate has been found. Then in the spring, data sheets indicate the presence of tiny kitten tracks. In the same way, the Walden group hopes that their walks through the woodways and green spaces around Walden Pond and nearby Estabrook Woods will reveal animal corridors, feeding areas, and perhaps even denning sites.

Rogers is optimistic: “There have been very reliable sightings of bobcats in Lincoln, plaster casts of moose print going right into the Concord River, black bears spotted in Great Meadows. We have tons of fisher and river otter. In all seasons I see their spraint mounds.” Working closely with the Natural Resources Commission in Concord and the Lincoln Conservation Commission, their data may translate into landscape-scale planning that protects the paths of mustelids as much as minutemen.

A DESIRE FOR BETTER PLANNING was the genesis of Keeping Track in 1994. “I was very frustrated as a planning commissioner,” explained Morse from her home at Wolf Run in Jericho, Vermont. “I felt our information was woefully inadequate (and still is) to make appropriate decisions regarding land use.” She didn’t see precise wildlife maps coming from state or federal agencies. Nor did other conservation groups seem to be taking on the task of making connections

between general habitat data and the actual animal occupants of specific places. How can a rural planning commission make informed choices if it doesn’t know who is living on the land?

Beginning with a large wedge of programs in Vermont and New Hampshire, Keeping Track has been giving conservationists, hunters, school groups, retirees, landowners, and other friends of wildlife the skills to address this question. Standing in front of a development board or regional planning hearing with maps—saying “bears feed on spring plant growth in this proposed wetland elimination” or “buying this land will protect a riverway for otters”—can make global abstractions about habitat loss pressing and real. The Piscataquog Watershed Association in New Hampshire recently used Keeping Track data to stop a proposed snowmobile trail through bobcat habitat and to relocate a proposed trash transfer station. “We take stories of what [wildlife] was found back to landowners,” said Gordon Russell, one of the watershed association’s founders. “That gives us the additional punch to convince landowners into giving conservation easements.”

Over the last five years, trainings have taken Keeping Track beyond northern New England to Pennsylvania, New York’s Cayuga Hills and Adirondacks, northeastern Connecticut, and west to greater San Diego County in California as well as to programs with the Sky Island Alliance in New Mexico and Arizona. Each program picks a group of focal species appropriate to their region. Morse is particularly excited about a new program launched in Florida, where volunteers track the Florida panther. In some more remote parts of the continent, Keeping Track has trained groups to look for signs of cougars, grizzly bears, wolverines, lynx, and wolves.

Keeping Track’s method rests on the idea that the consistent presence of wide-ranging animals is one indicator of healthy land. Of course, spotting the tracks of a bobcat or bear is not a complete measure of biodiversity, but positive records of area-sensitive mammals give reason for hope. Rogers and her group are aware that eastern Massachusetts is a likely population sink for many roamers and top predators—they may travel through, or try to immigrate, but it is unlikely that the area by itself can maintain a viable population. Nevertheless, the presence of these animals suggests at least a few remaining strands of habitat connectivity to core breeding areas to the north and west. “When you know that these critters are using so much of the landscape, even though we can’t see them, it creates a different sense of stewardship. We can’t afford to just

PHOTO: Bear hairs, trapped in tree bark, are one of many wildlife signs recorded by Keeping Track volunteers.

preserve parks,” Rogers noted, because disconnected parks are often genetic and ecological islands in a sea of people.

Standing near Walden Pond, on the margin of Route 2, Rogers can imagine the impact of a recent proposal to erect Jersey barriers along the whole road. “This is absolutely horrendous for wildlife,” she said, watching a constant stream of cars. “You can see gray fox crossing, you can see deer crossing, and there is mink road-kill. We hope that we can document how much and where in particular the animals are crossing.” Not only could this information be of use in developing wildlife underpasses, it could also spark drivers to a new awareness of who else is moving through the landscape.

BUT ARE VOLUNTEERS REALLY UP TO the tracking task? “It’s not rocket science, but it’s science,” is Executive Director Botzojorns’s reassuring reply. “We still have a ways to go to have some scientists appreciate the fact that volunteers can collect data and it’s good data. In terms of baseline informa-

tion you can’t beat it. How are you going to get a bunch of Ph.D. candidates combing the landscape for fisher sign?”

Not surprisingly, trackers-in-training are repeatedly reminded not to fill out a data sheet unless they are sure. Trained trackers set out in groups of three and as they comb their 60-foot-by-2-mile transects, heads are often put together studying a mark, checking a reference book, gathering hair samples, taking photos. “When in doubt, follow it out” is a favorite Keeping Track mantra that reminds volunteers to backtrack along an animal’s path, looking for the aggregation of crisp tracks, signature scats, favorite habitats, distinct gaits, or strong smells that makes a positive identification. “While there is a scientific mission here, there is a lot of fun too,” Rogers said. “How can you study a bear pile with two friends and not make a few scatological jokes?”

Despite volunteers’ best efforts, they make mistakes (just like the professionals)—but Keeping Track’s science staff reviews each record. “With photos measured to scale, we’re going to catch errors,” Morse explained. “If there is not 100% certainty, the record is rejected.” Although Keeping Track makes no claims to be creating complete inventories of wildlife populations, the organization’s national database is starting to gather statistical weight. Staff from the U.S. Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other professional naturalists have taken the tracking course; inquiries about the pending data-set are starting to come in from academic and agency researchers.

Like many citizen science efforts, Keeping Track is part of a back-to-natural-history impulse that is moving through the biological sciences. If nothing else, their data can provide a tool for scientists and planners who “want a real sense of what is out there—as opposed to relying on generalized maps or projections of habitat,” Botzojorns notes. “The power of our information is that it is ground-truthed.”

Setting out in the woods, carried by the quiet—but real—traces of wild animals, is something Thoreau probably *would* understand. ☺

Josh Brown is assistant editor at Wild Earth and a freelance writer. He has credible evidence of skunks in his neighborhood in Burlington, Vermont, and has seen bobcat tracks in the nearby Green Mountains. ☞ For more information, contact Keeping Track Inc., P.O. Box 444, Huntington, VT 05462; 802-434-7000; info@keepingtrackinc.org; www.keepingtrackinc.org.



SUSAN C. MORSE