

Youth Activity

TRACKING WILDLIFE

Learning Objectives

To learn which animals live (often unseen) in your area and how to recognize them by the tracks they leave behind.

Materials

Empty half-gallon paper milk cartons; scissors; plaster of Paris mix; water; container for mixing plaster; stick or mixing spoon; dust masks; sand, loose dirt, soft mud, or wet snow; wildlife field guide.

Activity Description

Finding animal tracks is exciting for kids, especially trying to figure out which animal made the tracks and what the animal was doing. In this activity, you will look for signs of wildlife and make casts of any tracks you find.

Step 1: Look for Tracks. Select an area that has frequent animal visitors. Depending on the ages of your youth participants, you may want to scout out the area in advance so you can direct children to the best locations.

Look for animal tracks on trails, in nearby woods or fields (with landowner permission), and along the edges of waterways. This can help children hone their outdoor skills, and they may also enjoy the opportunity for a hike.

When you find animal tracks, ask the youth what animal they think made each set of tracks. Then try to identify the tracks using a field guide, such as the *Peterson Field Guide to Animal Tracks*. After you identify which animal(s) visited the site, ask the youth why each animal lives in your area – how

they find food, water, and shelter; what temperatures they may like; etc. This is a good discussion to have while plaster casts dry (see next step).

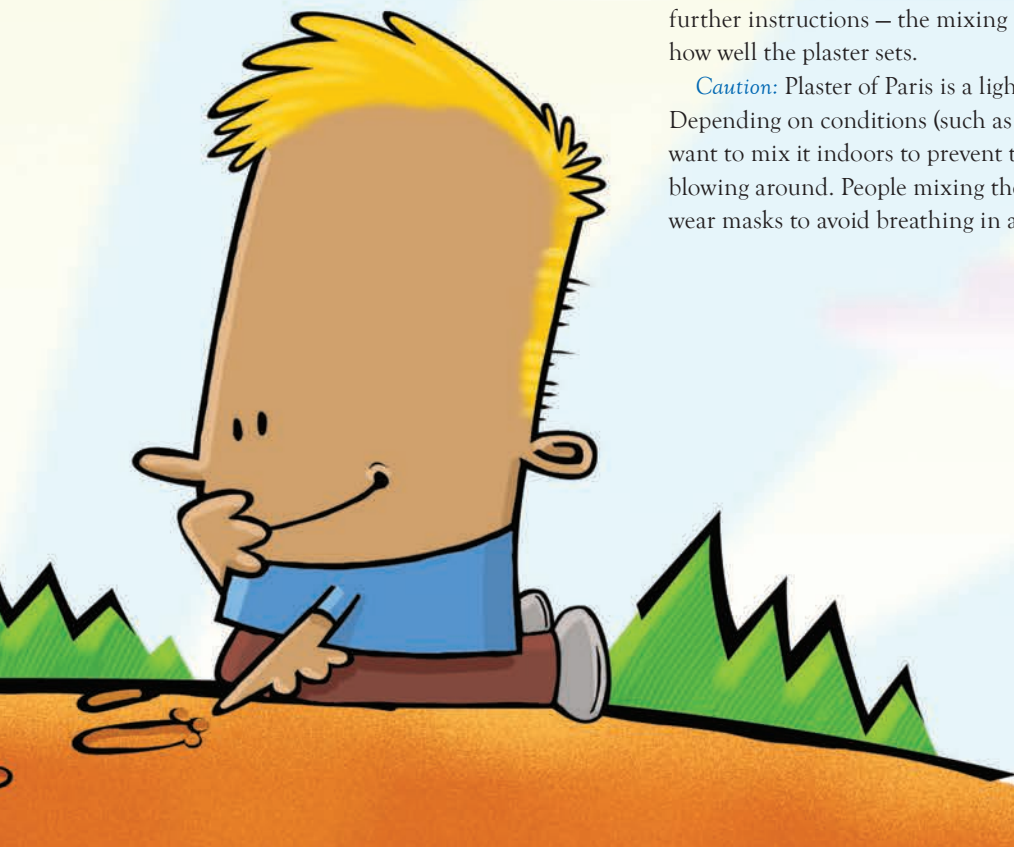
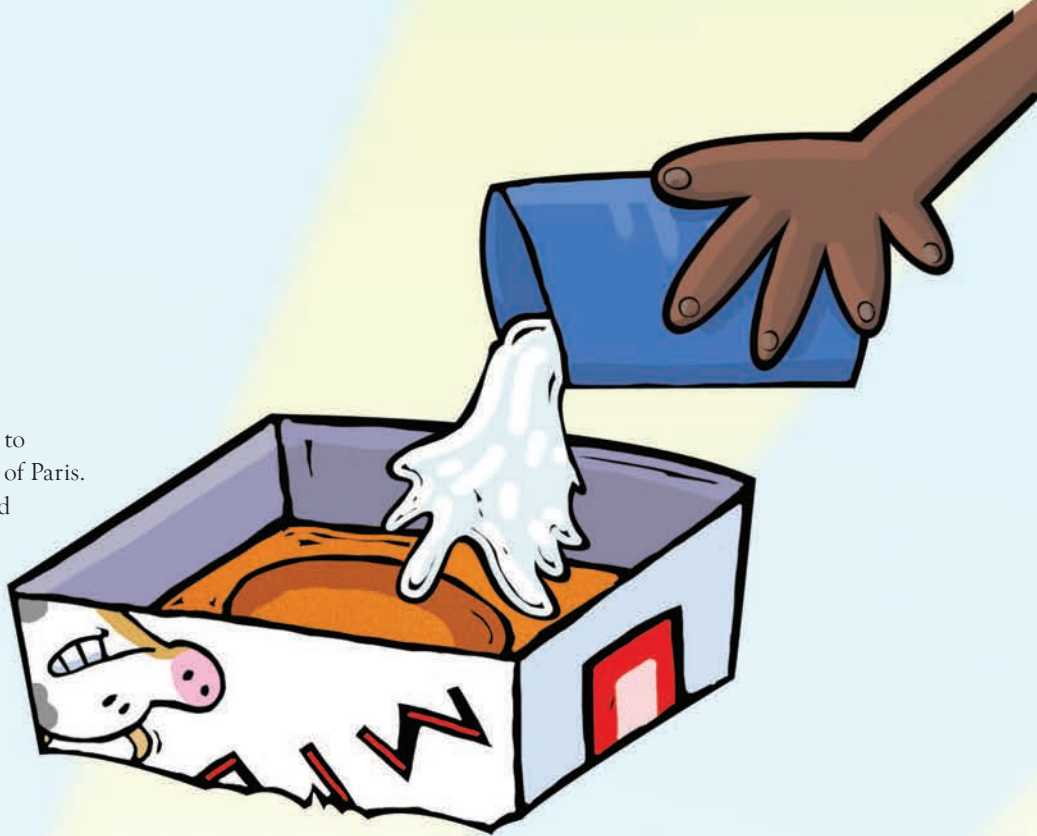


Step 2: Cast it. If the tracks are firm, try to preserve them by making a cast using plaster of Paris. Carefully remove loose twigs, leaves, dirt, and other debris from the track. Cut the milk carton width-wise into squares about 3 to 4 inches tall. Place one square over each track you want to preserve so the sides of the square surround the track. Gently press the cardboard square into the soil to hold the dirt and wet plaster of Paris in place. When possible, allow each youth to make his or her own cast of an animal footprint.

For tracks found in snow, dust the track with dry plaster of Paris and allow it to harden or spray water in the track to freeze it before trying to make a cast of the track. When plaster of Paris hardens, it produces heat that may melt snow tracks before the cast can take shape.

Next, mix the plaster of Paris with water. Use a ratio of approximately one part plaster of Paris mix with two parts water. Plaster starts to set as soon as it comes into contact with water, so work quickly but gently. Look for lumps as you stir. You can also tap the container on the ground to force air bubbles up and out of the mixture. Check the package for further instructions – the mixing method will affect how well the plaster sets.

Caution: Plaster of Paris is a light, fine powder. Depending on conditions (such as wind), you may want to mix it indoors to prevent the powder from blowing around. People mixing the plaster should wear masks to avoid breathing in any of the dust.



Illustrations by
Peter Grosshauser



Carefully pour the plaster into your prepared mold. Do not pour it directly into the animal track because this can damage the track. Instead, pour it onto the surrounding soil and let it run into the track or pour it over the back of a spoon or other utensil. Make the cast relatively thick (at least half an inch at its thinnest point) to prevent breakage. The cast will still be fragile.

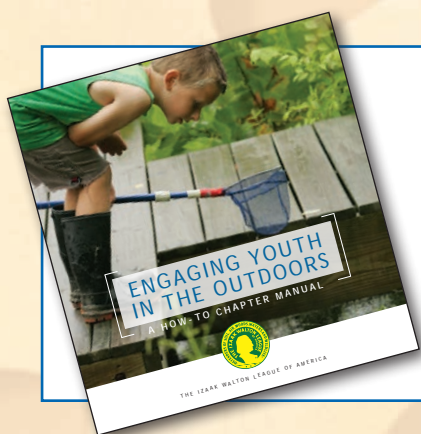
To remove the finished cast from the ground, dig out the soil around and under the edges of your cardboard mold and gently lift the cast out. If it does not immediately come loose, dig out more of the soil – forcing the cast out of the ground can crack it. Gently remove the milk carton frame.

It can take up to two days for a plaster cast to dry completely. The plaster feels warm while it's drying. When it is cool and dry to the touch, you can clean the cast gently with a toothbrush or cotton ball.

Step 3: Make It Artful. For additional fun, have the youth paint their plaster casts. Allow the plaster to dry for at least 24 hours before painting it. Spray on a clear acrylic sealer first; once dry, paint the track with acrylic or poster paint.

Alternatively, you can have the youth draw pictures of the animal tracks rather than making casts of them. (This is quicker and less messy than casts.) Provide drawing pads and pencils for this activity.

Drawings and plaster casts can be put on display at the chapter facility, or you can let the youth take them home.



Want more great youth activities like this one? Check out the IWLA *Engaging Youth in the Outdoors* manual!

E-mail chapters@iwla.org to request a CD-ROM of the manual.

Estimated Time

Making casts: one hour or more, depending on the plaster drying time. Add time to search for tracks (depending on how far you plan to walk) and if you decide to paint the casts.

Ages

Recommended for 5 to 8.

For ages 9 to 11, no adjustments needed. These youth can take more responsibility for making and pouring plaster of Paris, preparing cast sites, and pulling out finished casts.

Discussion Questions

- Can you identify this track? What kind of animal made it?
- Why does the animal live in this area?
- How does this animal find food, water, and shelter?

Answer(s): Will vary depending on the animal tracks you find.

Credits

Adapted from "How to Collect Animal Tracks" from *Nature with Children of All Ages* by Edith Sisson, Massachusetts Audubon Society, 1982.

RELATED SOURCE

Peterson Field Guide to Animal Tracks, by Olaus Murie and Mark Elbroch, Houghton Mifflin, Third Edition, 2005.

