

EDUCATION

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You may not often see woodland mammals as most of them are shy, secretive and nocturnal, but you can be sure of their presence by the tracks they leave. For good clear prints look especially on muddy banks of ponds and streams and on damp woodland paths.

One of the best ways to make a record of tracks is to start a collection of plaster casts of tracks. Casts give you an accurate record of the track and also look attractive when painted and varnished.

YOU WILL NEED:

- Plaster of Paris (from a chemist)
 - An old knife
 - Strips of cardboard (about 30cms long by 5cms wide)
 - Water
 - Old mixing bowl and spoon
 - Newspaper
1. When you find a good track, take out one of the strips of card and bend it round the track. Join the ends together with a paper clip. Push the card ring a little way into the ground.
 2. Empty into the plastic bowl enough of the plaster of Paris powder to fill half the card ring, then carefully add water, a little at a time, stirring the mixture as you do this. Stop adding water when the mixture begins to feel like thin porridge.
 3. Do not make the mixture too thick. Pour it into the card ring, being careful to pour it at the side of the track if the track is in dust.
 4. Leave the cast to dry for a few minutes, so it has time to harden. You can leave it for longer while you go to make other casts nearby.
 5. When the cast has set, use the knife to lift it out of the ground. Brush off any mud on the cast and when you get home, carefully wash off the rest of the dirt using a soft toothbrush.
 6. Wrap the cast in newspaper to take it home. Clean it with an old toothbrush. You can varnish the whole cast with clear varnish to protect it.



Here are some books which will help you identify the tracks you find:

"Collins Guide to Animal Tracks and Signs"
by P. Bong (pub. Collins)

"The Clue Book Animal Tracks and Signs" by G. Allen and
J. Denslow (pub. Oxford)



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