

Community News



Tips on 'tracking' desert wildlife

Geri Rodin

Syd and I do a lot of hiking, have seen so many tracks in the trail and always wondered "what made that kind of a track?" While in the bookstore recently, I came across the neat book, *"Animal Tracks of the Southwest,"* by Chris Stall (1995).

In the introduction, "How to use this Book," he says when you find a track, "measure it by the ruler printed on the cover of this book."

quickly through...until you find tracks that are about the size from smallest to largest." He also gives you TRACKING TIPS, one of which he tells you "on very firm surfaces, place your cheek on the ground and observe the surface, first through one eye, then the other, looking for unnatural depressions or disturbances."

The footprints captured as the cement of the sidewalk was hardening, just two blocks from our home made me wonder "who went there?" Armed with our trusty book, Syd and I headed

out to our concrete sidewalk, to begin our learning cycle of "TRACKING," first in our neighborhood.

Our "neighborhood tracks" measure just 2 1/2 inches to 3 inches in length like the coyote tracks on page 67.

Another criteria which matched. "The walking strides of 8 to 16 inches and leaps to 10 feet may help you distinguish coyote tracks from those of domestic dogs with feet of the same size." Our concrete tracks matched the 8 to 16 inches. But this guy must not have needed to leap, as we did not find any of 10 feet distance. The sun hot, the concrete also hot, we both deferred from "putting our cheek to the ground," as we both agreed that we think it was a coyote and our neighbors were wondering what we were doing down on our knees with our book!

Can you tell the difference in scat (droppings) from a coyote and those from a dog, which are supposed to be "scooped up" by the owners on their walks? Yes! Because the diet of the two differ quite a lot. You can readily tell the coyote scat, because in the winter and spring their scat will be composed of mostly hair from the rodents they have eaten and will have a curly pointed end like a soft ice cream cone. Dog diets are completely different and will not have the hair content or the curl. Dog owners, beware! We now know!

Our very next encounter with tracks came to our front door step this last summer with some unrecognizable "pellets" deposited right on the black rubber door jam. After a friend's visit, when she left the house, I noticed she had "tracked in" something on her shoes. When I looked outside, I found the scat on the doorstep, got broom and dustpan and removed it.

Next morning, curious, I checked the front door again, and WOW! There were about 3 times as many as yesterday. They were tubular, over an inch in length and about 3/8 inch in

diameter. Please! These droppings were all lined up in three-column row as though placed there! And all were on two-inch rubber door jam. Not on the concrete or dirt! Nowhere else in the yard did we find single scat. Well, I asked Syd to take a look, and remove them.

The following day, we went on an early hike. On our way home we stopped at our neighbors' door. It was a unanimous (minus 1 — me) decision that it was from TOADS! It must have been from a couple gathering there. Immediately upon arriving home, I checked the front door — AND SUPER WOW! If the scat from the day before was from a couple of toads, then there must have been a TOAD PARTY on our doorstep the night before. And, what a party. There were over 50 droppings! Both Syd and I cleaned it up and decided to do some research on toads. In the meantime, after all was moved, I took the broom and some Clorox and scrubbed the door jam to try to sterilize it.

Being computer literate, I went on the web and was amazed to see the multitude of information about "Toads." However, as I roamed in on several interesting looking sites, I found that I had to do with Rock Groups, Toads as hallucinogens. It seems that the greenish-brown toads that produce the hallucinogenic secretion, Bufotoxin, are found in the Sonoran Desert in the Southwest U.S., our front yard! They produce the liquid as part of evolved defense mechanism against predators. Upon moving here, we were told to be sure that our pets "did not lick frogs" and we thought they were pulling our legs!

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Geri Rodin is a member of the Desert Awareness Committee, the Desert Foothills Land Trust. For more information about the Desert Awareness Committee, please write to P.O. Box 17, Cave Creek, AZ, 85331.