

Mini Mystery #1

Amelia and the Mysterious Footprints

ONE FRIDAY IN FEBRUARY, Amelia awoke to a sunny morning. The past few days had been gloomy- cloudy and filled with tons of homework. She'd been so busy that she hadn't had much time to explore nature and go birding. But this morning, as Amelia peeked out the window, she saw a fresh blanket of snow over her backyard and the surrounding forest. It had started snowing hard last night but she'd barely noticed since she'd been rushing to finish her math homework.

The snow muffled all sounds, and she could see that her mountainous road hadn't yet been plowed. She glanced at her clock: 7:15! She had overslept! But just as she began to panic, Dad came into her room.

"You girls got lucky today," he said, ruffling her messy hair and grinned. His brown hair flopped in front of his eyes.

Amelia tilted her head and raised her eyebrows. Her heart pounded wildly, but she didn't want to get her hopes up. Amelia's school typically didn't have snow days, since snow was normal in her mountainous town. But as she squinted out her window, she saw that this snowstorm was different.

It was deep.

"No school?" she asked cautiously. But before he could answer, Amelia's little sister Katie ran into her room, cheering.

"SNOW DAY!!" Katie started dancing, her pigtails bobbing.

"YESSS" Amelia cried, and grabbed her sister's arms and started dancing around with her. They hadn't played together in awhile, and it felt good.

Dad yawned and said he was getting more coffee.

Amelia threw on her snowsuit over her pajamas and grabbed Katie, encouraging her to get changed fast so they could play together. After searching

under piles of clothes for gloves and hats, the girls ran outside and immediately fell into the light, fluffy snow. When Amelia tried to stand, the snow went up to her thighs.

Katie immediately started digging tunnels through the snow. Amelia took two steps towards the forest and fell down again. She looked up at the sky and breathed in the cold winter air. She watched her breath and saw a turkey vulture soaring high up the sky.

She pushed aside all worries about school and homework.

Today she was free.

"Come on, Meeli, help me!" Katie cried, and Amelia rolled onto her side and groaned, as snow touched her bare neck and face. It was difficult to get up! She finally pushed her way to her feet and started walking back towards Katie, who was frantically digging a tunnel.

But as Amelia turned to brush off snow from her wet forehead, something caught her eye: footprints in the snow!

"Whoa," she murmured to herself, and stumbled towards the footprints, which were about 20 feet away, on the edge of the ponderosa pine forest.

"Come on, Meeli!"

Amelia couldn't keep her eyes off the tracks. "One sec, Katie!" She trudged forward slowly, as her legs sunk down deep each time. Her coat zipper started sliding down, but she ignored it. Finally, she reached the tracks and sat down in the snow to catch her breath.



Who made these footprints? she wondered. *A fox?* If so, they were the largest fox tracks that she'd ever seen. *A coyote?* Her neighbor's dog, Tucker? She chuckled. Tucker was a tiny dog, more bark than bite.

Amelia took off her right glove to fix her zipper but accidentally dropped her glove and it landed near one of the prints.



Amelia compared her glove to the size of the track. *Wow, it really was huge!* She fixed her zipper but just as she stood up to follow the tracks, Amelia heard a cry. It was Katie.

"Meeli, Meeli, help! I can't get up!" her sister cried.

Amelia rolled her eyes, but trudged back through the deep snow to get to Katie, who was rolling around on her back.

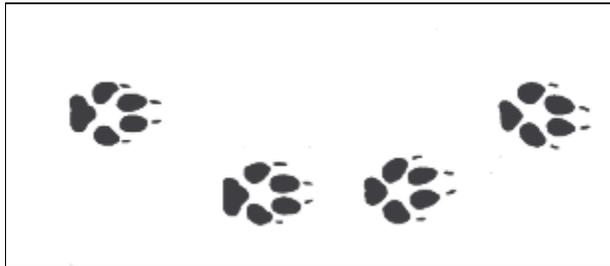
"Here, Katie," Amelia said. She stood behind her sister and bending down, slid her arms under her sister's armpits, and lifted her up. Katie tottered a few times, then smiled, her cheeks pink from the cold.

"Thanks, Meeli! I gotta go to the bathroom. Can you come help me get my snowsuit off, please?"

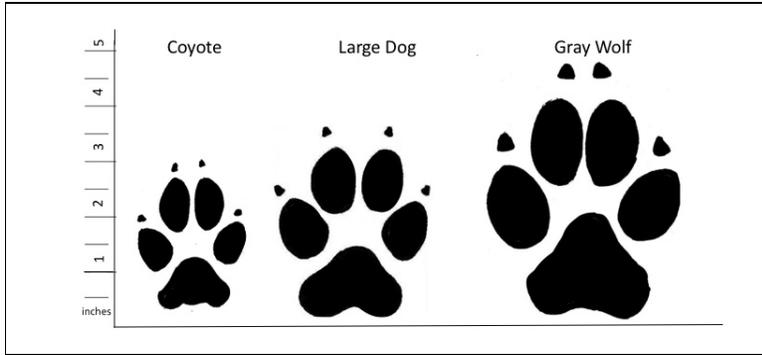
Amelia sighed, looking back at the tracks. *Maybe while Katie's going to the bathroom, I can do some research, she thought.*

"Alright, Katie, let's go!"

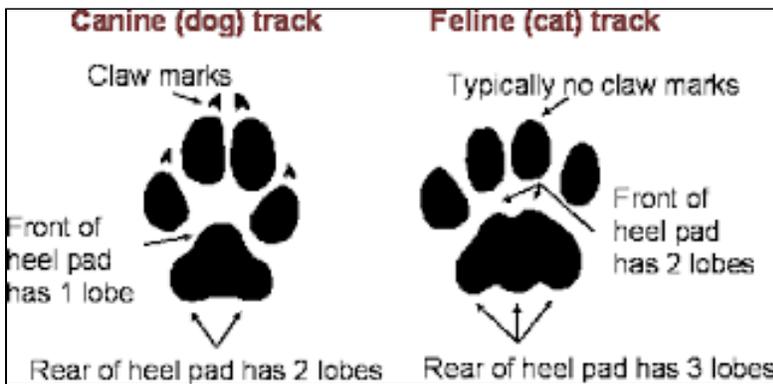
After tugging Katie's snowsuit off her, Amelia rushed upstairs and pulled out her *Mammals of Colorado* field guide. She flipped to the fox section first.



The tracks did look similar. As did the other canine prints: coyote, dog, and wolf. But they didn't have wolves here.



But something wasn't quite right. Did the tracks she found have claw marks? There was a comparison picture of canine to feline tracks and she saw that feline's don't have claw marks in their tracks.



What if the tracks were feline? If so, what kind of cat would make such big prints? She would have to go back out and check. She looked out the window and noticed clouds heading their way, possibly bringing more snow.

She hoped Katie would hurry.

What do YOU think made those tracks?

- a. A coyote
- b. A wild cat
- c. A pet cat
- d. Tucker the dog
- e. Something else

The mystery will continue next week!