



# Signs Of The Times

A good pile of scat speaks volumes about your backwoods neighbors, if you know how to read the calling card. By Todd Wilkinson

**Legend has it that the Inuit people of Arctic Canada are so in tune with the land, they can predict the lay of a snowflake before it hits the ground. Such a bond with the Earth also breeds expert tracking skills, among which is a distinctive, albeit unsavory, technique used when a hunter comes upon a**

steaming, moist pile of scat: He pops a piece in his mouth. Assessing the delicacies of the dung supposedly helps the tundra dweller age an accompanying track, and thus determine how close the critter is and where it's headed.

Now, whether this is a vanishing art passed from

years has studied the spoor and footprints of Canadian Rockies' animals. According to Dr. Geist, you can decipher what feathered or furred creature left the calling card, whether it's predator or prey, and its gender. With moose, for instance, if the nuggets are elongated, chances are they were left by a female. To verify, correlate the scat with the size of the hoofprints; males' tracks are larger, up to 6½ inches long.

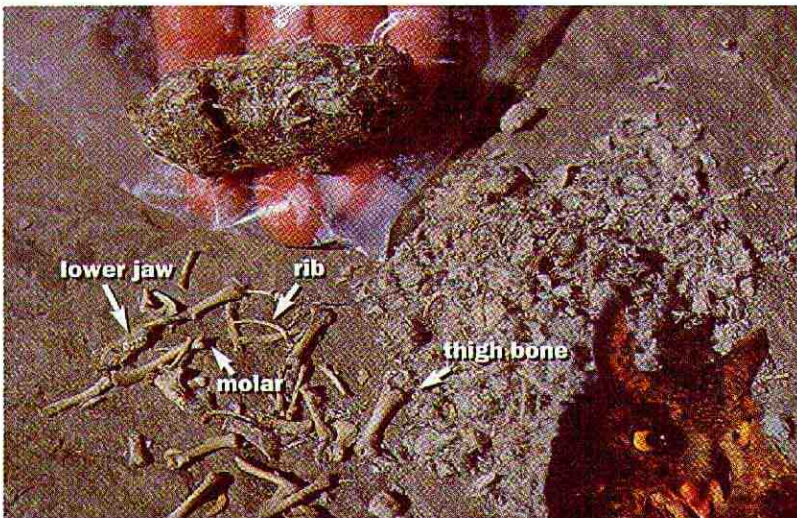
Scat also tells you what food an animal has eaten. A large pile of hair-filled poop in spring suggests a grizzly that, after its long winter's nap, has gorged on meat—probably bison, moose, deer, or elk. An oily summer pile indicates that trout from local spawning streams topped the menu. In autumn, bears leave behind colorful piles (often purplish in hue) laden with nuts, berries, seeds, and other edibles high in protein and fat.

On the other hand, wild felids, or cats, digest about 90 percent of the bones they eat; canids (wolves, for example) process only 80 percent. That means that if you're in predator country and you don't see much bone in the droppings, you're looking at traces left by a cougar or bobcat. Raptors and even crows and kingfishers cough up pellets that contain all the bones, fur, and feathers of the previous day's dinner.

Most scat isn't dropped willy-nilly along the trail, Dr. Geist notes. In the same ways your dog demarcates its turf, wolves, coyotes, and foxes squirt urine on rocks and trees and dump piles to establish their home ranges.

The sites are warnings to intruders, smelly "No Trespassing" signs.

Such warnings are particularly important for hikers to heed to avoid confrontation. A campsite loaded with scat means that critters find the locale just as appealing. Best to



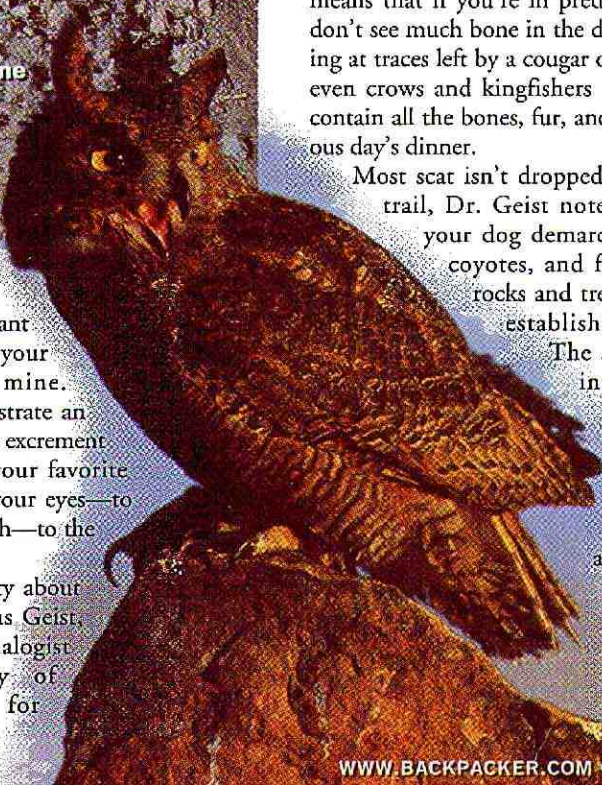
## Heave-ho:

Scat doesn't come out of just the back end.

Raptors expel pellets through their mouths. This great horned owl pellet (above, in hand) laden with bones and fur indicates a rabbit or squirrel was last night's dinner.

parent to child, or merely a campfire tale meant to be told at mealtime, your guess is as good as mine. Nonetheless, it does illustrate an important point: Wildlife excrement speaks volumes about your favorite wilderness if you open your eyes—to say nothing of your mouth—to the messages before you.

"Scat can tell us plenty about an animal," says Valerius Geist, Ph.D., a retired mammalogist from the University of Calgary, Alberta, who for





pitch your tent elsewhere. In the case of large or aggressive predators—like bears, mountain lions, wolverines, and badgers—camp well away from the area, even if the scat seems relatively old, experts say.

## GETTING DOWN AND DIRTY

Scatology isn't a technique reserved for Ph.D.'s like Dr. Geist. You, too, can get down on your hands and knees and catalog insights into your four-legged neighbors.

But first, realize that scat handling must be done with care—specifically, with a stick and rubber gloves. For years, conventional wisdom held that the best way to “read” scat was to squash the stool in your bare hands, then draw it close to your nose for a good, strong whiff. This was supposed to help you open your senses to the texture, color, and aroma.

Don't do it, warns Dr. Geist. “You're definitely being overzealous and unnecessarily putting yourself at risk, particularly if you're examining scat from members of the wild dog family—wolves, coyotes, fox.” The concern: deadly parasites.

Use scat's many clues to figure out who deposited it.

■ Bits of plant material (stems, seeds, husks, and stalks) indicate an herbivore source.

There's almost no scent to the droppings of a plant-eater, although those that have gorged on berries leave (believe it or not) sweet-smelling dung.

■ Scat filled with animal material (scales, bones, and fur) was left by a carnivore, and usually has a rank smell.

■ Listen, as well as look. A mass of flies indicates a pile of fresh scat. If you hear flies buzzing but can't spot any scat, you may have a fresh predator kill on your hands. Leave the area immediately.

■ Moose pellets are larger than those of deer. Deer and rabbit pellets are about the same size, but deer pellets are pointed; rabbit scat is rounder.

■ Mink, weasels, marten, and fishers leave their calling cards on prominent objects,

such as rocks and logs, in the middle of the trail. Their spoor are compacted, twisted bits of fecal material and hair, but if you find seeds in them, you're on the trail of the omnivorous marten.

■ Mouse droppings are the size of rice, very rough, wrinkled, and irregularly shaped. Squirrels produce smooth, oval pellets that are slightly larger.

■ Wild cat scat is more segmented, as opposed to the loglike canid feces.

■ Piles of scat at a tree's trunk were left by a raccoon or a raptor. Look up for a nest or roost.

Similarly, don't forget that scat isn't just at your feet.

■ Cliff faces that are “whitewashed” tell of birds' nests up high.

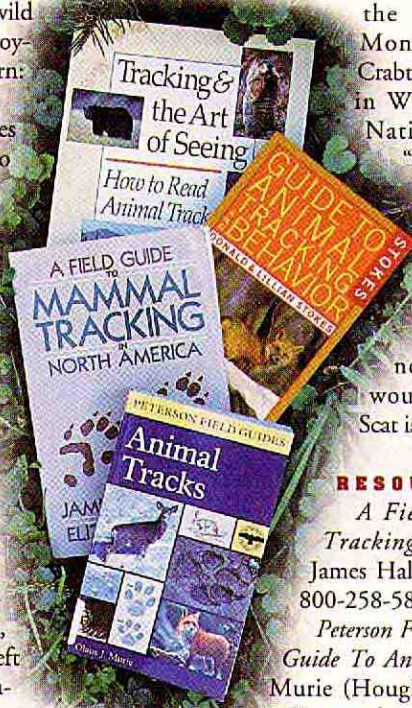
■ Rock outcrops are often outhouses. Small, twisted pieces of scat reveal a marmot's presence.

And one last tip: Remember that, just as with humans, seasonal variations in diet change the color, shape, and size of scat.

“Why is scat important to the backpacker?” asks Montana ecologist Robert Crabtree, who's studied coyotes in Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park for years.

“Because it's a condensed package of information that tells you about the place you're hiking. Take coyotes, for instance.

You get to learn about a nocturnal predator you wouldn't know otherwise. Scat is an advertisement.”



## RESOURCES

*A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America*, by James Halfpenny (Johnson Books, 800-258-5830; \$14.95).

*Peterson Field Guide Series: A Field Guide To Animal Tracks*, by Olaus J. Murie (Houghton Mifflin, 800-225-3362; www.hmco.com; \$18).

*Stokes Nature Guides: A Guide to Animal Tracking and Behavior*, by Donald and Lillian Stokes (Little, Brown, 800-759-0190; www.littlebrown.com; \$15).

*Tracking and the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Sign*, by Paul Rezendes. (HarperCollins, 800-331-3761; www.harpercollins.com; \$25).

Todd Wilkinson is a longtime BACKPACKER contributor.

# Quiz: Poop and Paws

Guess what animals left the scat and tracks below and then turn to page 127 to find out if you're a master tracker or you need to step up your doo-doo duties. Use the clues to distinguish tracks in the wild.

—Susan Newquist

QUIZ CONTAINS: BLACK BEAR, BOBCCAT, COYOTE, DEER, MOOSE, RABBIT



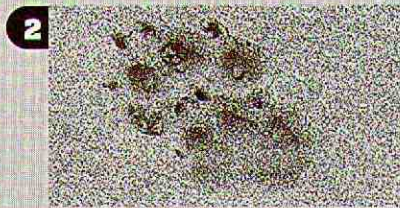
thumb-size; oval



heart-shaped; pointed front



grape-size; pointed end



nail marks



marble-size; very round



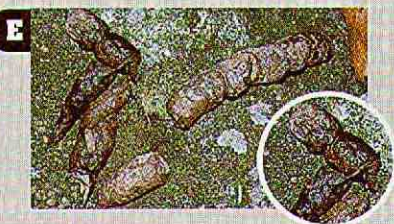
pads look off center



large bone fragments



triangular pattern



very segmented



five toes with nail marks



full of nuts



heart-shaped; rounded front

# ANSWERS TO QUIZ ON PAGE 36:

Moose = A, 6

Deer = B, 1

Rabbit = C, 4

Coyote = D, 2

Bobcat = E, 3

Black Bear = F, 5