

So many wonders to keep track of

RYAN YOUNG, Freelance

Published: Thursday, February 07 The Gazette West Island section

Tracking animals is a dying art. It is an art and a science I have always been fascinated with. Its purpose, I suppose, arose out of humans' need to find and kill animals to eat. Increasingly, though, even the famous Bushmen in the southern Kalahari desert are using their tracking skills to work in ecotourism because they are no longer hunting and gathering.

Most people in our industrialized society do not hunt animals even for sport, but instead more often hunt them with cameras. This is especially true of birds but also for mammals, which always have been difficult to locate because of their tendency to hide from people and the fact that they are most active at night and at dawn and dusk. Therefore, most naturalists like myself are more likely to encounter the signs left behind by their activities than actually come face to face with them.

For me, winter has always been a time to view the local woods, meadows, and wetlands as mostly devoid of life. There are no insects to be seen, very few birds, and all amphibians and reptiles are in hibernation. Some mammals are hibernating, yet the majority of mammal species in the area are active in winter. The problem is, they are very hard to see. What is to be seen however, especially in the winter, are their tracks in the snow. I was always so confused with the myriad tracks I encountered. I could easily recognize deer tracks, but what about everything else? This all changed when I met Rob Baker, an expert tracker. Rob has been certified through the Tracker Evaluation System that originated in South Africa through Cybertracker Conservation to test and certify competent trackers so that they may be employed in research, ecotourism, anti-poaching and other jobs. In only four weeks, Rob has taught me how to recognize the tracks of the red fox, beaver, coyote, raccoon, meadow vole, white-footed mouse, ruffed grouse, cottontail rabbit and long-tailed weasel - and all within the Rivière à l'Orme ecoterritory that spans the borders between Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Senneville and Pierrefonds north of the TransCanada highway. Suddenly, the woods are alive like never before as Rob points out how to tell how fast the animals were travelling, what they were doing, where they looked and what they ate. It's often quite exciting, much like what I imagine detective work to be like where you're piecing together what happened in the recent past based on clues that were left behind. The mere fact that we have an active coyote population on the island of Montreal is amazing in the first place - that a large predator that can weigh as much as 50 pounds can sustain itself at the top of the food chain on the natural riches in this area. Coyotes, I learned, are mating at this time of year, and one way to tell is by looking for blood in the urine of female coyotes. This indicates that the female is in estrus and receptive to mating for a small window of time. Sure enough, Rob and I encountered some urine with blood in it right alongside fresh coyote tracks.

Tracking is so poetic, as well, because of the fact that everything in nature can be thought of as a track and these tracks are always ephemeral - the elements are always conspiring to erase or replace them. This whole area - as I pointed out in many of my previous columns - is slated for development. People need to demand that the area be protected so that these amazing creatures can live out their lives from generation to generation and, unlike us, continue to leave behind only footprints. As Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki remarked to me after a recent talk at McGill University: "I would tell the developers and the politicians that the area is already fully developed and fully occupied." Ryan Young is a teacher in the Creative Arts department of John Abbott College. He has a master's degree in Environmental Studies from York University and co-hosts an environmental radio program called Ecolibrium on CKUT 90.3 FM every Tuesday at 11 a.m. He can be reached at young@ecomail.org