

Trails

Some Things We Can Learn from Them.

Written for The Western Home Monthly. By H. Mortimer Batten.

TRAILING is one of the most interesting sections in the art of woodcraft, because it brings before us the wonderful provisions nature has made in constructing the feet of various animals in a manner that will best suit their surroundings. As an elementary illustration, it will be noticed that the animals that spend their lives on snowy or swampy ground have all large and spreading feet to prevent them from sinking, while those that live on hard land, and are dependent to a large extent upon their running powers, have usually small and compact feet.

Take, for instance, our domestic dogs. The instincts of the spaniel and the otter hound, with their large spreading paws, are such that these dogs are far better suited for hunting in marshy and swampy land than on dry land; while exactly the reverse applies to the fox terrier, the greyhound and the deerhound. The spaniel has little speed, and therefore in open country he is comparatively helpless in comparison with many of the small-pawed members of the canine tribe, but he can hunt with ease and alacrity where the speedy greyhound would be hopelessly at a loss.



Pleasant moments for the Young Holstein.

A study of the trails, however, soon shows us that many animals have feet or hoofs so constructed that they naturally adjust themselves to the surface on which the animal walks. The common hare, when travelling on snow, leaves an immense trail behind him. His feet are so spread out that they are equal in size to those of the coyote, while the whole of the back leg, from the middle joint to the extremity of the foot, presents a bearing surface to the snow. Thus the animal is prevented from sinking, and one would hardly credit that the trails the hare leaves behind him on firm, plastic ground were that of the same animal. Here the footprint is but one half the size, while the lower portion of the back leg does not come in contact with the ground at all except when the animal stops to feed.

The hoof of the reindeer is one of the most wonderfully constructed in nature. The ease with which the reindeer travels on heavy snow has made it invaluable, in many parts of the world, as a draught animal, but in a wild state the reindeer makes immense journeys on foot across the hard mountain slopes. His hoof is so constructed as to enable the beast to travel with the greatest ease either upon hard land or soft snow. A glance at the accompanying illustration will show how this provision is made. The fetlock joint is so constructed that the foot, from this joint downwards, can be placed flat upon the ground when travelling upon a soft surface, thus presenting a much greater bearing surface, while upon hard ground only the actual hoof is brought into use.

The reindeer is the only member of the deer family that migrates as a regular habit. Winter and summer these animals are constantly on the move, travelling many hundreds of miles from one feeding ground to another. Thus nature has provided them with snowshoes, but yet another wonderful provision has nature made designing the hoofs of the reindeer.

When the animal walks, its hoofs click loudly at every step. Mr. Ernest Thompson Seton, the well-known American naturalist, advances the theory that the object of this clicking is to keep the herds together when travelling at night time, just as the constant twittering one hears high in the heavens during autumn nights keeps the migrating birds together. The reindeer do not call to one another—that would not be safe in a land of so many enemies—and if a reindeer herd passed near to you at night time, and you did not know what to listen for, you would probably hear nothing to arouse suspicion. Yet if you knew what to listen for you would hear it clearly enough—the multitudinous cracking of cloven hoofs, a sound so faint and unattractive that one could never guess its meaning.

No other member of the deer family is provided with snowshoes like the reindeer. None of them have any real need for such equipments. The giant moose is hopelessly at sea in deep snow. When winter comes on the moose congregate

into small herds, and each herd proceeds to make a maze. The maze consists of a network of pathways trodden into the snow, and as winter proceeds this network is enlarged, the animals nosing away the snow to reach the moss that lies beneath it. Once out of his maze and in deep snow the moose is so helpless that he is almost sure to be dragged down by wolves, while the reindeer, thanks to his snowshoes, is able to travel safely throughout the winter.

Some years ago I was living in a part of Canada where reindeer—or caribou as they are called in the west—are very abundant. We had at our camp a small cow, who wandered in the woods all day at will, returning to her stable at night time. At first I was unable to distinguish the difference between the hoofmarks of the cow and the reindeer, so I called one of the boys to my assistance. He led me to a frequented runway where both animals had left their mark. On level ground there was certainly little difference between the two, but directly they started to go down hill, where the road was slippery, the difference was instantly visible.

The cow, on feeling herself slipping, had at once closed her hoof so that it formed a solid wedge, whereas the reindeer had opened his at the splay, bringing the inside edges into contact with the ground.

This opened up a new line of enquiry. The hoofs of the cow, like those of the moose and also the goats and sheep are constructed for use on hard ground. The outside edges are the gripping edges, and upon feeling themselves slipping these edges are at once brought

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