

[View this email in your browser](#)



**Grass River Natural Area wishes you the kind of peace in 2022
that this scene brings to mind.**

SECRETS IN THE SNOW

by

Emily Burke

GRNA Conservation & Education Specialist

Lots of folks assume that winter isn't a great time for wildlife watching. Migratory bird species are far away enjoying their southern climes, reptiles and amphibians are lying dormant in cozy hibernacula or in ponds under the ice, and some of our most well-known mammals like black bears and chipmunks are, for the most part, slumbering away in their dens. But winter has one advantage over other seasons in terms of wildlife watching: *snow*. Yes, animals leave clues to their presence on the landscape all year round in the form of scat, shed fur or feathers, feeding sign, or other traces; but no season is better for keeping track of exactly what our non-human neighbors are up to than winter, when the blank canvas of snow preserves a record of their movements as perfect as ink on a page.

As Mark Elbroch writes in *Mammal Tracks & Sign: A Guide to North American Species* (what I consider to be the tracking bible), "Tracking is the meeting place between storytelling and science." It is the art of deciphering the secret lives of often elusive and cryptic animals. It lets us see the very essence of wildness – how animals behave when they're not under the watchful eye of direct human presence, the way that coming across a mink on a trail or an opossum crossing the road will never be. This – the opportunity to "see" animal behavior in its truest, most natural form – is what fascinates me so much about tracking, and I've spent countless hours on (and off) the trails of GRNA, searching for tracks. Here are some of my favorite sightings over the last three winters:

1. Walking the backside of the Sedge Meadow Trail in my first winter at GRNA, I came across my first-ever river otter tracks. They were even complete with a slide, a long mark made when an otter glides on its stomach across the snow. My jaw hung open and I smiled as I pictured the otter playfully cruising along as if its belly was its own personal sled. Following the slide into the swamp, I was rewarded with fresh otter tracks on a small, frozen drainage showing the classically wide and asymmetrical tracks with five teardrop-shaped toes, each capped with a short claw.





2. Last winter, on an outlying parcel of GRNA along the southern shore of Clam Lake, I stumbled upon perfectly preserved bobcat tracks. The animal had walked down the two-track toward the lake while the snow was slushy, likely the previous above-freezing evening. By the time I came along the next morning, the slush in the

two-track had frozen solid and a fine dusting of snow

had fallen, creating such perfect ice molds of the bobcat's feet that I could almost see it stalking quietly toward the lake, the embodiment of stealth and control. The icy tracks neatly highlighted the c-shaped negative space between the toes and heel pad as well as the lead toe jutting slightly forward of the others (analogous to our middle finger), two traits that are diagnostic for members of the feline family.



3. In late 2019, after a weekend snowfall, I arrived at the Center early and immediately headed out on the boardwalks. To my delight, I picked up a coyote trail from a point on the backside of the Sedge Meadow Trail and followed it down the boardwalk, across both bridges over Finch Creek, and all the way back to the cabin. Some of the tracks were more well-preserved than others, and those that were clearest showed the classic "x" shape in the negative space and the tight, overall oval shape characteristic of coyote tracks. As I followed the trail, I imagined this coyote trotting along the boardwalk after-hours, sniffing the air and searching intently

for a rabbit or vole, its amber eyes bright and its breath creating clouds in the cold.



So far this winter at GRNA in addition to the three species highlighted above, I've come across raccoon, weasel, snowshoe hare, ruffed grouse, deer, and opossum tracks, gaining precious glimpses into each of their lives, just a single page out of the vast and complicated book of their existence. Next time you're out at GRNA, pick up one of our tracking brochures, head out on the trails, and see what stories you can discover by reading the wild mysteries left behind in the snow.

IT'S TIME TO SHIVER AND CELEBRATE WINTER AT GRNA SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12



5k/10k Shiver Snowshoe Race Fundraiser
In-person at 10:00 a.m.
or any time virtually on Saturday or Sunday
\$25 preregistration, \$30 on race day

Once again, we invite you to put on your snowshoes and run through the beautiful snow-covered Grass River Natural Area as a fundraiser for our programs! A prize is awarded to overall male and female 5K/10K winners. 10k runners do two loops of the course. Walkers are welcome, too! *This year we are adapting the Shiver to a virtual hybrid format. Run or walk at your convenience on Saturday or Sunday. An official clock will start at 10 a.m. on Saturday morning for those that would like an official clocked time and to run their race with other runners and walkers.*

[Register here](#)

After the Shiver, stay and have some fun with your family at...



Winterfest

12:00 p.m - 3:00 p.m.

Free - no need to register

Enjoy a fun-filled family event with outdoor and indoor activities. There will be snowshoeing and x-country skiing demonstrations and activities (weather permitting). Try your hand at crafts or listen to a nature story inside or stay outside for nature-themed games and kids' activities like snow art. Wherever you choose to spend your time, take a break in our outdoor pavilion to warm up by the fire, make s'mores, sip a customized cup of hot chocolate, or sample conifer tea. Masks must be worn indoors.

PROGRAMS ON THE HORIZON



Winter Watercolors

Saturday, January 29

1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

\$10 per person

Winter is an inspiring time to make art. With instruction from naturalist Arlene Westhoven, create a winter scene using watercolors as your medium. All materials are supplied, but you are welcome to bring your own sketchbook and watercolors if you prefer. [Register here.](#)



Lantern-lit Ski and Snowshoe

Saturday, February 5 & Friday, February 25

6:00 pm - 9:00 pm

\$5 per person

Lantern light reflecting off of freshly fallen snow is a great way to enjoy the forest in winter. Enjoy an evening ski on GRNA's groomed ski trails, or snowshoe the boardwalk to the river. We will have a warm campfire at the Center pavilion and the heated building will be open and staffed. Come any time during the 3-hour, self-guided, "open-house" style ski or snowshoe. Bring a flashlight or headlamp. Skis and snowshoes for all ages are available for rent at the Grass River Center for an additional \$5 rental fee during the program or bring your own. [Register here.](#)

Shiver and Winterfest, Saturday, February 12, See article above

Classes at GRNA through NMC are available:

February 3, Winter Tree Identification

February 16, Animal Winter Adaptations

February 24 and March 3, The Science of Making Maple Syrup

[For more information and registration - click here.](#)

GRASS RIVER CENTER HOURS

Winter hours: 10:00 am - 4:00 pm, Saturdays and Sundays

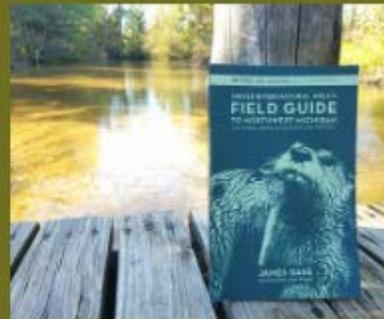
B-R-R-R COLD TEMPERATURES ARE HERE

Purchase a long-sleeved shirt or hat to stay warm and GRNA benefits



Choose from any of the logos featured above, printed on a variety of styles, colors, & sizes from youth to adult. Order online by clicking on this box. A portion of the sale comes back to GRNA as a donation.

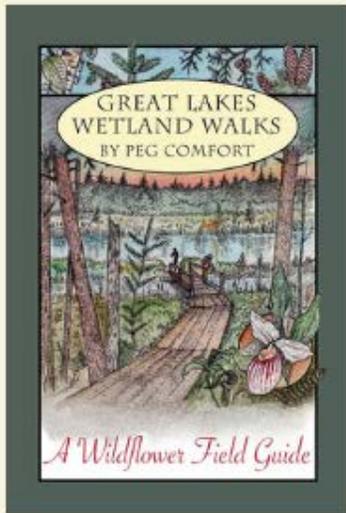
**The 2nd Edition of
Grass River Natural Area's
FIELD GUIDE
to Northwest Michigan
is now available.**



This guide is written and compiled by GRNA Education Director James Dake. It features several new and expanded sections and a new Foreword by Executive Director Jenn Wright.

Cost is \$18.87 plus tax

Order online by clicking on this box or available at the Grass River Center Gift Shop



This beautiful and
informative book
is available online and in the
Grass River Center Gift Shop.

It is perfect for hikers, gardeners, and
nature enthusiasts.
Artistic illustrations and photographs
add to the book's appeal.

[Click here to order](#)

Grass River Natural Area is a nonprofit organization that has flourished for fifty-two years because of the generous support of people who value our mission "to manage the Grass River Natural Area, conserve and protect its watershed, and provide opportunities that increase knowledge, appreciation, and community-wide stewardship of the natural environment".

If you believe in our mission and want to help us fulfill it for many years to come, please click on the Donate button below. Your support is greatly appreciated.

DONATE



Copyright © 2019 Grass River Natural Area, All rights reserved.

Our mailing address is:

PO Box 231

Bellaire, MI 49615

Natural area address:

6500 Alden Highway, Bellaire MI 49615

Want to change how you receive these emails?
You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#).

