

The Last Word

By Ted Brown

I quite often smile when there's been a fresh new snowfall.

Now I'm not talking about a huge dump of snow, where we can't find our cars the morning after.

Nope, I'm thinkin' of a light dusting that seems to cover up all those annoying little blemishes in the landscape.

In the office, I hear grumbles and complaining about the snow, having to shovel the driveway, or the fact there's more salt to be cleaned off those brand new boots, or causing stains on the bottom of your pant legs.

But in my mind, it's not all bad.

Sure, clearing the snow can be a nuisance, and it takes time.

But out in my corner of the country, it ain't all bad.

First of all, a new snowfall makes the world look so much cleaner. It's almost like having a clean slate to start another day, when another layer falls in the night.

It's a protection for all those things underneath, helping those plants and hibernating animals through another cold winter by insulating them, and keeping the frost out, sort of like a huge white quilt covering the sleeping ground below.

But there is another aspect of the snow which appeals to me.

I find a new snowfall a bit like following in Sherlock Holmes' footsteps. When one is out in the country, where the snow isn't disturbed quite as quickly as it is in town, there's a myriad of tracks and 'clues' all over the place.

Consequently, that fresh layer of snow allows me to 'deduce' what's been happening around the farm during the past few hours.

There's animal tracks, there's tire tracks, and I can see which way the storm blew in, by looking at the snow drifts, or the formation of the curl of snow blowing off the roof. There's a plethora of things to be learned by studying the snow.

Animal tracks are my favourite observation.

They tell me what has been poking around the farm buildings during the night.

Take last winter, when we had a skunk living in a burrow under the house verandah.

And how would I know that?

Skunks don't truly 'hibernate' for the winter, but they do have periods of inactivity for weeks at a time, when they don't leave their den.

But it seems this skunk had to be in and out of her newest residence a few times, leaving a perfect set of tracks, where she entered under the verandah.

Knowing she was in there during the winter was a great advantage the following spring. Armed with that knowledge, I could feed a garden hose down her burrow

and gave her a watery eviction notice, suggesting she make tracks and settle elsewhere to raise her young.

And she did— real quick.

After a fresh snowfall, I know if there's been an unwelcome visitor around the barn, sniffing at the doors to see if there are any sheep inside. In spite of their similarity to dog tracks, I have come to be able to recognize a coyote's tracks when they make a nocturnal visit.

Early one morning last winter, I was walking to the driving shed in the darkness to get out the tractor and clear the snow that had blown in the night before.

By the light of a dusk to dawn yard light, I saw how a set of tracks from two coyotes wound their way around the farm house, right along the garage door, and then over to the driving shed.

It was still snowing lightly at the time, yet there was no snow in the tracks. That told me they were pretty fresh, perhaps only a few minutes old. There was also a set of rabbit tracks, running in zig-zag pattern. Obviously, the coyotes were in pursuit of this rabbit, around the out-buildings.

The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end and bristling as I carefully followed the tracks, and slowly peeked around the corner of the shed, which was in shadow from the yard light.

There were no coyotes in sight, but I could see the outcome of the pursuit.

All that was left of the rabbit was a few tufts of its fur, and some blood on the snow.

*A puzzle to deduce
the morning after*



It reminded me how the balance of nature is on-going, as one creature feeds off another one lower in the food chain.

Quite regularly I see deer tracks leading down the lane, and I can see where they have veered off into the wooded areas to avoid the buildings, and coyotes, as they travel in the safety of the underbrush.

Some mornings, I can see those places out in the open fields where an owl has swooped down from above in the darkness and left a single set of wing imprints in the snow, marking the last place that mole or mouse was traveling on top of the snow, before it met its fate.

Animals aren't the only ones leaving tracks.

I often see where a vehicle has pulled into the driveway at the road, and turned around, while I wasn't at home. I can also see the places where a snowmobile has crossed the fields in the night.

And they're all unique tracks, to the point where I can figure out who has come or gone— or at least know what type of vehicle it was.

Yes, snow is one of Mother Nature's blessings, not only protecting the ground and wildlife underneath, but also cleaning up the look of her landscape, like a mother cleans up a child's bedroom.

And in doing so, she also gives me a puzzle of sorts, to deduce who went where, during the past 24 hours.



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