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# Who Goes There?

by: Geri Rodin

## TRACKING WILDLIFE

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Syd and I do a lot of hiking, and have seen so many tracks on the trail and always wondered, “What made that kind of a track?” While in the bookstore recently, I came across the neatest, SMALL (4½” X 5¾” – perfect for hiker’s backpack) book. It is *Animal Tracks of the Southwest*, by Chris Stall.<sup>1</sup>



In the introduction, “How to Use this Book,” he says, “When you find a track, measure it by using the ruler printed on the back cover of this book...Flip quickly through...until you find tracks that are about the size from smallest to largest.” He also gives you TRACKING TIPS, one of which is, “On very firm surfaces, place your cheek on the ground and observe the surface, first through one eye, then the other, looking for unnatural depressions or disturbances.”

The footprints captured as the cement was hardening in the sidewalk just two blocks from our home made me wonder, “Who went there?”

Armed with our trusty book with ruler on cover, Syd and I headed out to our concrete sidewalk to begin our learning cycle of “TRACKING,” first in our neighborhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Article first published March 1998. The Chris Stall book is now (Nov 2010) out-of-print, but is available as a Used Book at Amazon.com. Many other comparable books are also available.



Our “neighborhood tracks” measured just 2½” to 3” in length like the coyote tracks on page 67. Other criteria which matched: “The walking strides of 8 to 16 inches and leaps to 10 feet may help you distinguish coyote tracks from those of domestic dogs with feet of the same size.” Our concrete tracks matched the 8 to 16 inches. But our guy must not have needed to leap, as we did not find any “leaps to 10 feet.” The sun hot, the concrete also hot, we both deferred “putting our cheek to the ground,” as we agreed that we think it was a coyote and our neighbors were wondering what we were doing down on our knees with our book!

Can you tell the difference in scat (droppings) from a coyote and those from a dog (which are supposed to be “scooped up” by the owners on their walks)? Yes! Because the diets of the two differ quite a lot, you can readily identify coyote scat because in winter and spring the scat will be composed mostly of hair from rodents eaten and will have a curly, pointed end like a soft ice cream cone. Dog diets are completely different and will not have the hair content or the curl. Dog owners beware; we now know!

Our very next encounter with tracks came to our front doorstep last summer with some unrecognizable “pellets” deposited right on the black rubber door jam. After a visiting friend left the house I noticed she had “tracked in” something on her shoes. When I looked outside, I found the scat on the doorstep, got broom and dustpan and removed it.

Next morning, curious, I checked the front door again, and WOW! There was about three times as much as yesterday. The pellets were tubular, over an inch in length and about 3/8-inch in diameter. Please! These droppings were all lined up in a three-column row as though placed there! All were on the two-inch rubber door jam. None on the concrete or dirt! Nowhere else in the yard did we find any scat. Well, I asked Syd to take a look, and please remove them.

The following day we went on an early hike. On our way home, we stopped at our neighbor’s home and discussed the droppings at our door. It was a unanimous (minus one - me) decision that it was from TOADS! It must have been from a couple coming together there.



Immediately upon arriving home, I checked the front door - AND SUPER WOW! If the scat (droppings) from the day before were from a couple of toads, then there must have been a TOAD PARTY on our doorstep last night! And what a party! There were over 50 droppings! What will happen tonight? Perhaps we will not be able to get out our front door tomorrow morning. Syd and I cleaned it up today and after it was all removed, I took the broom and some Clorox and scrubbed the door jam to try to sterilize it. We decided to do some research on toads.

Being computer literate, I got on the web and was amazed out of my mind to see the abundance of information about “Toads.” However, as I zeroed in on several interesting looking sites, I found that most had to do with rock groups, or toads as hallucinogens.

It seems that *Bufo alvarius*, the greenish-brown toads that produce hallucinogenic secretion, are found in the Sonoran Desert in the Southwestern United States, our front yard! They produce the liquid as part of an evolved defense mechanism against predators. Upon moving here we were told to be sure that our pets “did not lick frogs,” and we thought they were pulling our legs!



Wikipedia

Since hallucinogenic recipes were not the type of information we were looking for, back we went to my favorite store, the bookstore, and found many, many books on toads, amphibians and reptiles. In the magazine section, we found a magazine, “Reptiles,” and were amazed to see articles on *Herping in Tibet*; *Calendar of International Reptile Shows*; and advertising by a company named “Mice on Ice” that advertised CRYOVAC® Vacuum Sealed Individually Packaged Mice-Cicles™ and Rat-Cicles™ with no freezer burn, 2- to 3-year shelf life, AND no refrigerator odor! Wow, what we have been missing.



Moving to the Sonoran Desert has certainly expanded our “areas of interest,” and knowledge. It seems that the arrival of summer rains in the Southwest triggers the sudden nighttime emergence and clamorous calling of toads. These paradoxical animals are dependent on water, yet are most abundant in the Southwest’s driest country – desert, dry grasslands and scrublands, and arid woodlands.

Toads like the Spadefoots spend the dry parts of the year dormant in self-dug burrows, or those of gophers, squirrels, or kangaroo rats, near where water ponds after summer storms. In extremely dry parts of the Sonoran Desert, Spadefoot toads may spend two years underground waiting for the vibrations of thunder that signal summer rains, then emerge for only a few days to feed and mate frenziedly.

When the summer thunderstorms rouse these amazing amphibians, they tunnel upward at night from their solitary burrows and congregate by the thousands (in our front yard!). Once on the surface, they head for the nearest water and rehydrate, absorbing water directly through a highly porous skin patch on the belly. Each dawn, the tiny toads take shelter in the top layer of damp earth, reappearing again after sunset. When the rainy season ends, the Spadefoots dig themselves deep into the soil for the more solitary winter months.

Now that we know their habits, we can certainly see that there must have been quite an interesting TOAD PARTY, right at our front door. While they did no harm, one thing you can count on is that Clorox will definitely encourage them to move to someone else’s doorstep for their next evening’s get-together!



# DEFEAT THE HEAT

## A LIST OF MINIMAL ITEMS FOR SAFELY HIKING IN THE DESERT

### The Top Three things to have with you:

1. Water
2. H<sub>2</sub>O
3. Agua



### What you should wear:

1. Loose fitting cotton clothes that cover the body
2. Sun hat
3. Comfortable, sturdy hiking shoes or boots.



### Equipment:

1. Sunglasses
2. Cellphone (may not receive a signal)
3. Walking stick
4. Pocket comb
5. Pocket knife/multi-tool
6. Hard candy/Energy bar
7. Map of area



## MORE GOOD ADVICE

*When hiking always remember the following:*

### H—HYDRATE

which means take water no matter how short the hike. Always be prepared for the unexpected and that means having water at all times!

### I—INFORM

always tell someone where you are going even if it is just in the wash by your home. Leave a note if necessary, but be sure someone will know where to look for you.

### K—KNOWLEDGE

know your limitations...consider your footwear, clothing, and your stamina. Don't venture on unknown trails without a map or guide.

### E—EXPERIENCE

if you are not an experienced hiker, we don't recommend you begin by hiking in the desert alone. As beautiful as the desert is, there are many dangers if you are not properly prepared. Find a guide or seek guidance.

For information on safe desert hiking, contact a member of the Desert Awareness Committee at [http://azfcf.org/desert\\_awareness\\_index.html](http://azfcf.org/desert_awareness_index.html)

**HIKE RESPONSIBLY...BE SAFE**

