

Paws for thought on an outdoor adventure

A monthly series following **Rob Cowen** and **Leo Critchley** as they reconnect with the simple things in life



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Animal tracking

Your instinct may tell you that the weather is a reason to stay in, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Spend some time close to the muddy and snowy ground and you can discover a hidden world. Animal tracking is all about familiarising yourself with patterns left by wildlife, a skill that deepens our connection to the landscape and its wildlife.

A few centimetres of fresh snowfall provide an ideal canvas. If you are up early enough, a flurry even in the city gives an easy-to-follow record. In rural areas, head for the intersections between habitats: the field and forest, the forest and stream, the stream and field. If there is no snow, muddy areas also retain clear impressions.

Look for prints around walls, hedges, gateposts and at the edges of woods. Investigate any "runs", paths cut by regular animal use, leading to and from feeding and breeding grounds. Telltale signs are flattened grass, holes pushed through thicker vegetation and clumps of hair trapped in fence wire.

Record any print you find so you can identify it properly at home. Photograph it alongside something that adds scale, such as a coin or, in mud or sand, try casting a print with plaster of Paris. Encircle the track with a ring of stiff card pressed a few millimetres into the ground. Shake plaster of Paris into a jam jar half-filled with cold water. Keep stirring until it resembles pancake batter, then pour into the card circle until the track is covered. After 20 minutes it can be lifted.

We found fresh prints running along in a muddy furrow in a Welsh wood, not far from Carmarthen. At first we took them to be those of a dog, but they were too long and slender. There was also an undoglike separation between the front two pads and the two outer pairs.

Tracing the prints through the vegetation meant lowering ourselves to the ground. At this point, we realised, as Ted Hughes did, that "delicately as the dark snow, a fox's nose touches twig, leaf". There was no mistaking the musky, sour scent of this bushy-tailed omnivore.



Trail of the unexpected: look for tracks in muddy ground near undergrowth ROB COWEN/LEO CRITCHLEY

Track down some wildlife

■ **Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire**
The largest abbey ruins in the country, and the adjoining grounds of Studley Royal, form an 800-acre estate and deer park where you can easily cast red, fallow and even roe deer prints. The varied woodland and river terrain that surrounds it is also home to a complete cross-section of British wildlife.

■ **Ashdown Forest, Sussex**
Originally a medieval hunting ground, this thick wood supports a diverse animal population including deer, mice, foxes, rabbits, squirrels and (some claim) wild boar. If you see a five-toed,

bear-like print it could either be a badger or Ashdown's most reclusive resident, Winnie the Pooh.

■ **Bradgate Park, Leicestershire**

A printer's paradise, best known for its herd of fallow and red deer, but also likely to be thick with the trails of shrews, mice, foxes, stoats, weasels and badgers.

■ **River Tamar, Cornwall**
Otters often leave webbed tracks along the banks of this wonderful river as they busily fish for salmon and trout. The woods and fields fringing it are also fantastic hot spots for everything from foxes to weasels.

To be in a wood as night approaches is a strange sensation. Instinct tells us it is unsafe, but it is exciting too.

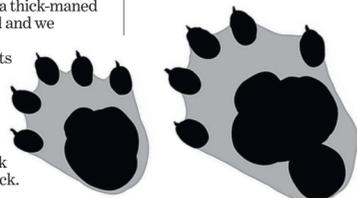
Wood pigeons returned to roost, and tree-creepers fizzed up the young birch in corkscrews. Suddenly, a crash of undergrowth nearby; rabbits, disturbed while making their way to the fields for their evening feed, were bolting into holly bushes. On the path below us stood the fox, frozen in the moonlight.

We've probably all seen urban foxes ravaging a black bin bag in the wee hours, but this creature seemed utterly different: as a wolf is to a dog. It was a thick-maned wild animal and we were trespassers in its kingdom.

After a minute sniffing the air, it melted back into the black.

From childhood, we are encouraged to appreciate nature in the majestic and grand sense, but it is important to take in the small scale too. Tracking prints satisfies something ancient in our hunter-gatherer DNA. We walked, unspeaking, back to the cottage where we were staying, both wondering where the fox's footsteps were being left now. The mournful vibrato calls of tawny owls rang out, the frost a crystal sheen over the grass.

Rob Cowen and Leo Critchley appear on *The Culture Show* tonight at 6pm on BBC2. *Skimming Stones and Other Ways of Being in the Wild* (Hodder/Coronet) is available now. See their blog at robandleo.com



The big six

Convent hotels

BY KATIE MONK

Le Couvent d'Hérépian France

Hérépian has long been a place of quiet contemplation: pilgrims used to stop here en route to the Way of St James in Spain. Here, in the heart of the Haut-Languedoc national park, a 17th-century nunnery is now a four-star hotel with 13 suites and a restorative spa. Vaulted ceilings, mullioned windows and stone staircases retain a sense of history, while plasma televisions and iPod docks bring things into the 21st century. Le Couvent d'Hérépian, 2 Rue du Couvent, Hérépian, Languedoc-Roussillon, France (00 33 4 67 11 87 15; garrigae-resorts.com). Doubles start at €129, room only.



L'Hotel in Pietra Italy

Architects Giuseppe and Michele Andrisani spent three years sculpting a rock-hewn Benedictine church into a boutique hotel. Part of the Unesco-protected *sassi* (ancient cave dwellings) of Matera, the 12th-century structure now has eight rooms and two suites with exposed walls, stone bathtubs and stark white linens. There's also a wine cellar in the underground cistern. L'Hotel in Pietra, Via San Giovanni Vecchio 22, Matera, Italy (00 39 0 835 344 040; hotelinpietra.it). Double rooms start at €110, including breakfast.



Hotel Sacristia de Santa Ana Spain

This 18th-century former convent is a blissful retreat in Seville's vibrant Alameda area. It has 25 colourful rooms arranged around a serene inner courtyard, each with a name relating to the legend of Hercules who - according to Greek myth - founded the city. The decor inside reflects the classical theme, with antiques, crisp floral fabrics, frescos and simple shuttered windows offering solitude at night. Hotel Sacristia de Santa Ana, Alameda de Hércules 22, Seville, Spain (00 34 954 91 57 22; hotelsacristia.com). Doubles from €59, with breakfast.

Convento do Espinheiro Portugal

Built on the site of an apparition of the Virgin Mary, this 15th-century convent counts Portuguese monarchs and nobility among its past guests. Set in lush grounds on the outskirts of the Unesco World Heritage city of Evora, it offers escapism of the highest order, with 23 richly decorated rooms, an on-site chapel and luxury spa to restore mind, body and spirit. There's a peaceful courtyard where breakfast is served each morning, and a vaulted restaurant for evening meals, located in an ancient wine cellar. Convento do Espinheiro, Praça de Giraldo, Evora, Portugal (00 351 266 788 200; conventodoespinheiro.com). Doubles start at €129, including breakfast.



Convento de la Missió Mallorca

This sanctuary has 14 cutting-edge rooms hidden in a side street in Palma's historic old town. Guests can relax in the subterranean sauna, admire the art gallery in the former refectory or sample Mediterranean cuisine at the new restaurant, *Simply Fosh*. Convento de la Missió, Missió 7a, Palma, Mallorca, Spain (00 34 971 22 73 47; conventdelamissio.com). Doubles from €185, including breakfast.



The Old Convent Ireland

Dermot and Christine Gannon have turned a one-time home of the Sisters of Mercy into a gourmet haven in County Tipperary. After dinner in the old chapel, guests can retire to one of seven homely bedrooms with views of the Knockmealdown mountains. The Old Convent, Mount Anglesby, Clogheen, Co Tipperary, Ireland (00 353 52 7465565; theoldconvent.ie). Doubles start at €170, including breakfast.