

Snow going: Hares leave three-part tracks. This one was headed toward the camera.



4
THE EXPERIENCE

After a Storm: Fresh Tracks

Play follow the leader on a new blanket of snow.

BY ANNETTE McGIVNEY

→ **THREE FEET OF FRESH SNOW** sits on top of a layer of old, hard snow, making the steep hill even tougher to ascend than usual. It's as if I'm marching on a frozen lake with a 10-pound bucket of cement attached to each foot. My arms flail at my sides in an attempt to stall the constant sinking and backward slide of my boots on unseen ice. Nearby, my dog Sunny, a 65-pound lab, is submerged in the powder but pushing ever forward like a panting snow plow.

I have hiked cross-country around this area called Mars Hill in northern Arizona's Coconino National Forest nearly every day for the past 20 years. I do it religiously, no matter the conditions. In winter, when a single storm can smother my hometown of Flagstaff in 5 feet of snow, it may be too blustery for shoveling my driveway but not for trekking 7 miles up the hill and through the woods and back.

I start walking from the house and eventually make it to the forest. The 9°F air on this

frigid January afternoon burns my lungs and freezes the insides of my nostrils.

About halfway up a 400-foot climb, I stop to catch my breath and look back at the tracks Sunny and I have made. They proclaim, unmistakably, a determined, tunneling dog and an equally determined, post-holing human were here. In summer and fall when the ground is dry, travelers pass through invisibly, leaving only their scent. But in winter, every creature traversing this forest leaves an impression, a chronicle of its existence frozen in time.

As I trudge higher I study the tracks of others. During these daily hikes, I keep tabs on who has been out and about: mice, ravens, rabbits, bobcats, foxes, deer, and mountain lions. My imagination wanders with the paw prints and I try to visualize the creatures that made them. Sometimes I discover that animals followed the trail I broke through the previous day's fresh snow and other times I follow their prints. They have their routines—

searching for food, running to and from their dens. Sometimes the snow is sprinkled with fresh blood and tufts of fur. Occasionally, I come across the track of another human and it catches me by surprise. Who is the owner of this very large boot print and what did he see? But I'm usually blissfully alone, methodically putting one foot in front of the other, just another mammal on the move.

This time, I top out on a plateau where I find dimples in the snow left by a jackrabbit. I suddenly sense I am not alone and look up. About 3 feet away, a big, old doe stands calmly, seemingly unfazed by my presence. After all these years of walking in each other's tracks, I guess we need no introduction.

"Hello," I say instinctively.

The doe looks at me for another second and then slowly high-steps through the powder on her way downhill. I continue post-holing across the plateau, following my dog who is following the rabbit.

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) MARY WRAY, (4) ISTOCKPHOTO.COM / MARC LATROUILLE, NANCY HONEYCUTT, SKISERGEI, MITCH HAMMONTREE, GRAHAM HEYWOOD

5

Call it the hiker's Turkey Trot.

Take your Thanksgiving spirit outdoors. Pay reverence to your Butterball's cousins by looking for a wild tom on these hikes.

Conecuh Trail

Conecuh National Forest, AL
Trace the Alabama-Florida state line (scan for eastern wild turkeys) on this 22.5-miler. Contact fs.usda.gov/alabama



Gibbons Creek Trail
Steigerwald NWR, WA

Wander through a riparian zone (Merriam's wild turkeys here) on this 2.2-miler. Contact trails.gorgefriends.org

North Point Trail
North-South Lake, NY

Tour the Kaaterskill Wild Forest—chock-full of eastern wild turkeys—on this 7-mile loop. Contact dec.ny.gov

Willow Falls Trail

Willow River State Park, WI
This 3-mile loop takes you through eastern wild turkey habitat en route to 45-foot Willow Falls. Contact dnr.wi.gov



Wolf Mountain Trail
Pedernales Falls State Park, TX

Look for predator (coyote) and prey (Rio Grande wild turkey) on this 6-mile out-and-back. Contact tpwd.texas.gov

No. 6
Embrace the cold.

Hey, it's what owls do, and if you follow suit, you may be able to spot one. Expect snowy owls to return to the north Atlantic Coast from the Arctic in November as the mercury drops. Head out to open beach trails (that resemble arctic tundra) for a chance at spotting them.

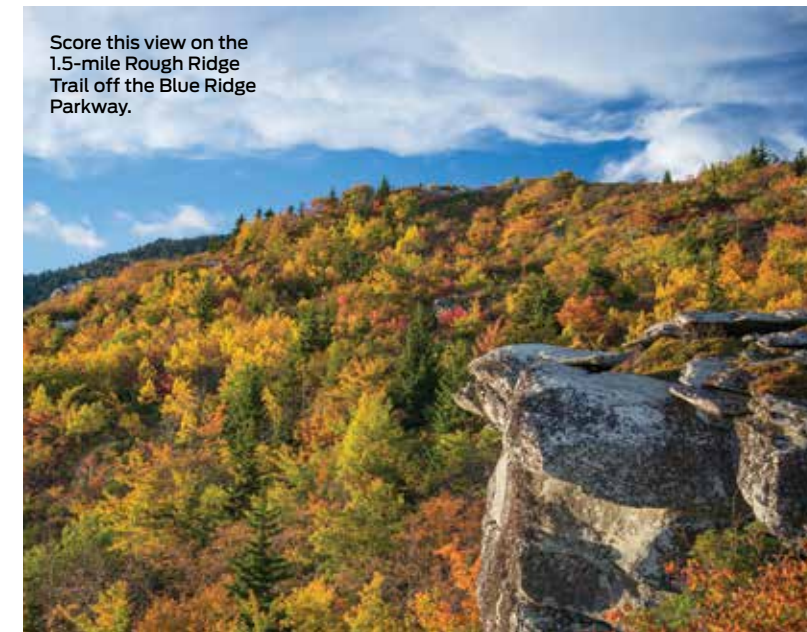


IN THE CLUB
7

...in which we honor the best hiking clubs in the country.

→ The Carolina Mountain Club may be the most well-rounded club we've heard of: 175 hikes each year, 400 miles of maintained trails (including part of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail), and it's been going 90 years strong. In addition to the hikes (ranging from a mile to 12 miles), members can complete different challenges (such as bagging all 40 of the Southeast's 6,000-footers or hiking all 400 miles of trail in the Pisgah Ranger District) to earn patches. Contact carolinamountainclub.org

Score this view on the 1.5-mile Rough Ridge Trail off the Blue Ridge Parkway.



No. 8
Come through with flying colors.

Fall foliage may be a thing of the past north of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but come November, the Southeast (and much of the Midwest) is hitting its prime. Visit foliagenetwork.com to find an up-to-date color report and hit the trails.