

Life in the snowy wilds



Above, Before hitting the trail, Kay Hunt shows off one of several skulls they've found in the woods (this one's probably a fox). Right, Alan Smith and Kay Hunt shine a light on a coyote track.

STURBRIDGE — The snow may reduce the number of people venturing out into the woods, but there's no reduction in what the species that live there are doing. On Saturday, Feb. 16, Opacum Land Trust's Scott Gerrish and Kay Hunt took a small group of hikers into its oldest preserve off New Boston Road to learn about the tracks and traces that show how the life of the wilds goes on even when humans aren't looking. Those signs are everywhere, from footprints to scat, bitten-off tree limbs and bushes to small food-cache holes in the snow, beaver constructions to little flakes of bark on the snow. The issue is just knowing how to read them.



Most of the group crosses one of the more obvious signs of human presence.



One of the most recognizable wildlife signs is the beaver dam.

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Scott Gerrish, center, talks about how variable woodland habitat matters. "It's important to have mature forest, but you don't want everything to be mature forest" because many species need the undergrowth and open spaces for food, nesting and other life functions, he said.



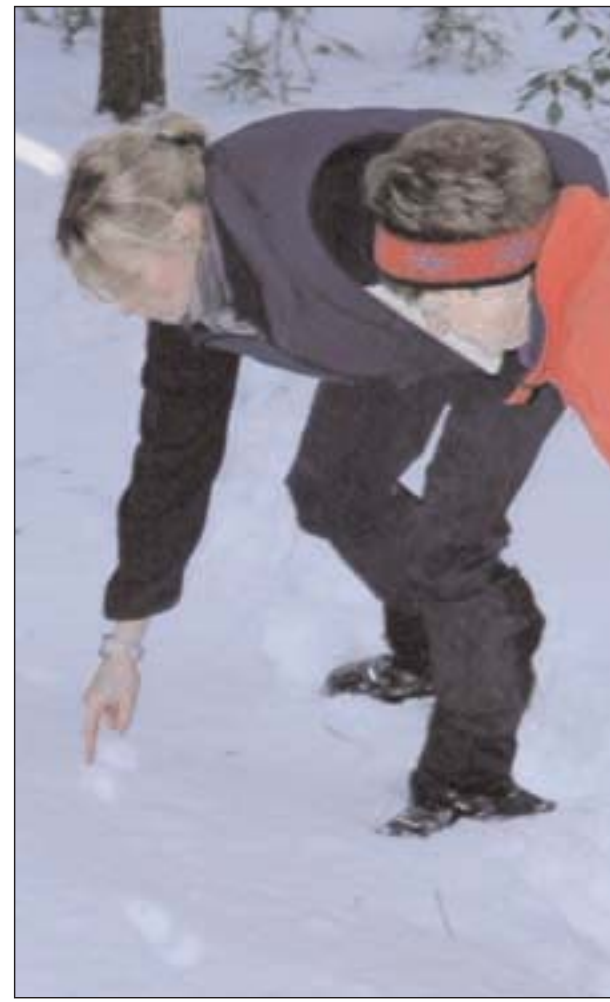
Taking single file, the group passes a glacial boulder that Scott Gerrish noted is an ideal place for porcupines to rest, although there were no signs of them at the time.



Also scattered through the woods are small rock shelters like this one, once used by Native Americans who needed a place to sleep while hunting or traveling.



This "ice cream cone"-shaped track is characteristic of the fisher, one of the larger members of the weasel family. Kay Hunt said fishers and many other species will follow the same routes through their domain repeatedly, so if someone is patient and waits nearby, they might get a look at one, particularly around dusk.



Kay Hunt points out details of a fisher's track to one of the participants.



A whole cluster of bushes became food and building material for a local beaver lodge.



Beside a dead old hemlock, Scott Gerrish talks about how flecks of bark on the snow might be evidence of woodpeckers hunting for grubs in the wood above.