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Local hiking trails provide opportunities for winter fun

BY BARBARA ARMENTANO ReminderNews

When the first snowfall of the winter season covered the Hilliard trail last month, Roger Morgan put aside his clippers, his saw and hammer, and took his snow shoes out of storage. His dog Molly ran back and forth and wagged her tail, waiting for him to bundle up and take her out to play in the snow.



Roger Morgan and Molly enjoy the first snowfall on the trail. Courtesy photo.

Morgan became interested in snow shoeing years ago, when he spent winter vacations in New Hampshire, and he continues to enjoy the sport on the Manchester trails.

Doug Smith, of the Hockanum River Linear Park Committee, said Morgan is a dependable trail worker and a great carpenter. While the other committee members were working, Morgan glided about on the light powdery snow, and Molly ran around in circles, chasing a family of mallards.

Using snow shoes helps beat down the paths for hikers to follow. Members of the committee began the day by shoveling snow off the bridges, clearing paths and cutting down fallen trees. Extra caution is used on the steep, slippery banks. Now and then, they stop their work to bird watch or follow animal tracks in the snow. They find it interesting to discuss the tracks and distinguish what type of animal or bird made them.

On this particular day, they noted the tracks of a blue heron and decided that it must have been sizeable, because the prints looked as large as dinosaur feet. Squirrel and rabbit prints are similar, but when the tracks stop at the bottom of a tree, it's apparent that the outlines couldn't be those of a rabbit.

The various tracks divulge the presence of many animals and birds, and it is challenging to determine their species without actually seeing them. There are signs that many wild turkeys are in the area, and wild cats are occasionally seen. Others often seen are red fox, opossum, striped skunk and mink. Raccoon activity is discovered by their five-toed prints.

When dog tracks are discovered, there are usually human foot prints nearby. But when human prints are not noticeable, it is assumed that the feet were those of a coyote. While Smith sat in his car waiting for the group to join him one day, he said he personally watched a coyote walking stealthily through the woods.

Muskrats, otters, beavers and other water animals feed on fish, mollusk and vegetation on the bottom of the riverbed. The otter has webbed feet and a long, slightly flattened tail. The feet and claws of the river otter can be followed on land to the edge of a sloping bank, and there, the pattern changes to a sliding mark made when it slid into the water.

Deer are seen on a regular basis, as they come to feed on the soccer field near the New State Road trail. A nearby neighbor has been providing food for them for several years and said there are three generations that enjoy the apples, grain and cracked corn that is set out for them.

Winter time on the trails can be quite invigorating, interesting and exciting . The trails are constantly maintained , so hikers can still take walks on them, snow shoe or cross-country ski. Ice skating is not available on the trails or river, but can be enjoyed in areas provided by the Town's Recreation Department.