



George Leoniak, right, an animal tracker from Vermont, shows tracks to students during a workshop.

wild things

From chipmunks to raccoons to minks, you can learn to track them

BY STACEY ALTHERR
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Looking for wild creatures usually means gazing through a pair of binoculars at something in the distance. But searching for wildlife can also involve close-up analysis of tracks animals leave behind.

An internationally recognized wildlife tracking certification program has come to Long Island this spring for the first time, teaching a course on identifying prints and other telltale signs of animals living in the wild.

Offered through the Long Island Nature Organization, the course both teaches and tests participants. Graduates receive a certification that is helpful for those in the naturalist fields, says Mike Bottini, wildlife biologist and co-founder of Long Island Nature Organization. "Our goal is to get a

group of wildlife biologists based on Long Island who are trained in wildlife signs and tracks," says Bottini.

ABOUT THE CLASSES

Students learn how animals can be recognized through the tracks they leave — clues come from looking at the

WILDLIFE TRACK AND SIGN WORKSHOP

WHEN | WHERE 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. May 2 and 3 (and possibly May 4, depending on interest) at Quogue Wildlife Refuge, 3 Old Country Rd., Quogue. Held rain or shine. Register online. **INFO** 631-267-5228, longislandnature.org **COST** \$110

animal's gait (as seen by its physical footprints) as well as spotting remnants of food or scat.

"Once you start tracking, you can see one that is all of a sudden showing up," says George Leoniak, a professional wildlife tracker who comes here from Vermont to teach the workshops. "It's a



similar hobby to birding."

Students spend the day out in the field with Leoniak, who will ask relevant questions while looking for evidence. While tracking is easiest in the snow, it can be done on wet or dry ground, too.

"I'll circle off an area in the sand, and a set of tracks, and questions will be such as, 'Who made this track?'" says Leoniak. "Each student will get time to look at it up close, and then provide the answer."

The program is open to wildlife enthusiasts and those on the professional track.

TRACKING FOR CLUES

At the first class last month, students learned obscure things, such as what animal left the remnants of an acorn on a log, says Rebecca Kassay, 24, who runs outdoor programs for teens at Avalon Park and Preserve in Stony Brook.

"It was very stimulating, and makes you feel aware of what's going on around you," she says. "It was incredibly accessible. . . . The whole course was a test; what kind of animal did what?"

Perhaps more surprising were the clues students passed right by in the field, says Bottini. One of those was a series of little nicks in a red maple tree. Leoniak showed the students how the nicks were made by a gray squirrel that chewed the bark just enough for sap to ooze out. In another instance, Leoniak pointed to a golf-ball-size hole in the ground that could only have

been made by a chipmunk, because there was no dirt piled around it. "We all walked by it," says Bottini. "There were about 30 things like that during the course."

CHANGING HABITATS

Long Island's wildlife population is a constantly changing landscape, with some animals — such as the coyote — recently making their way here, says Bottini.

Naturalists are particularly interested in other species, such as the river otter, the mink and striped skunks. Then there's the gray fox, which Bottini says has been seen in the Manorville Hills area.

With more people out scouting for tracks of these and other animals, naturalists learn more about their habitats.

"Anecdotally, even though a lot of folks haven't seen the gray fox or mink or long-tailed weasel," Bottini says, "we know they are here."



The gray fox, above, and the American mink are among critters found in the wilds of Long Island.

