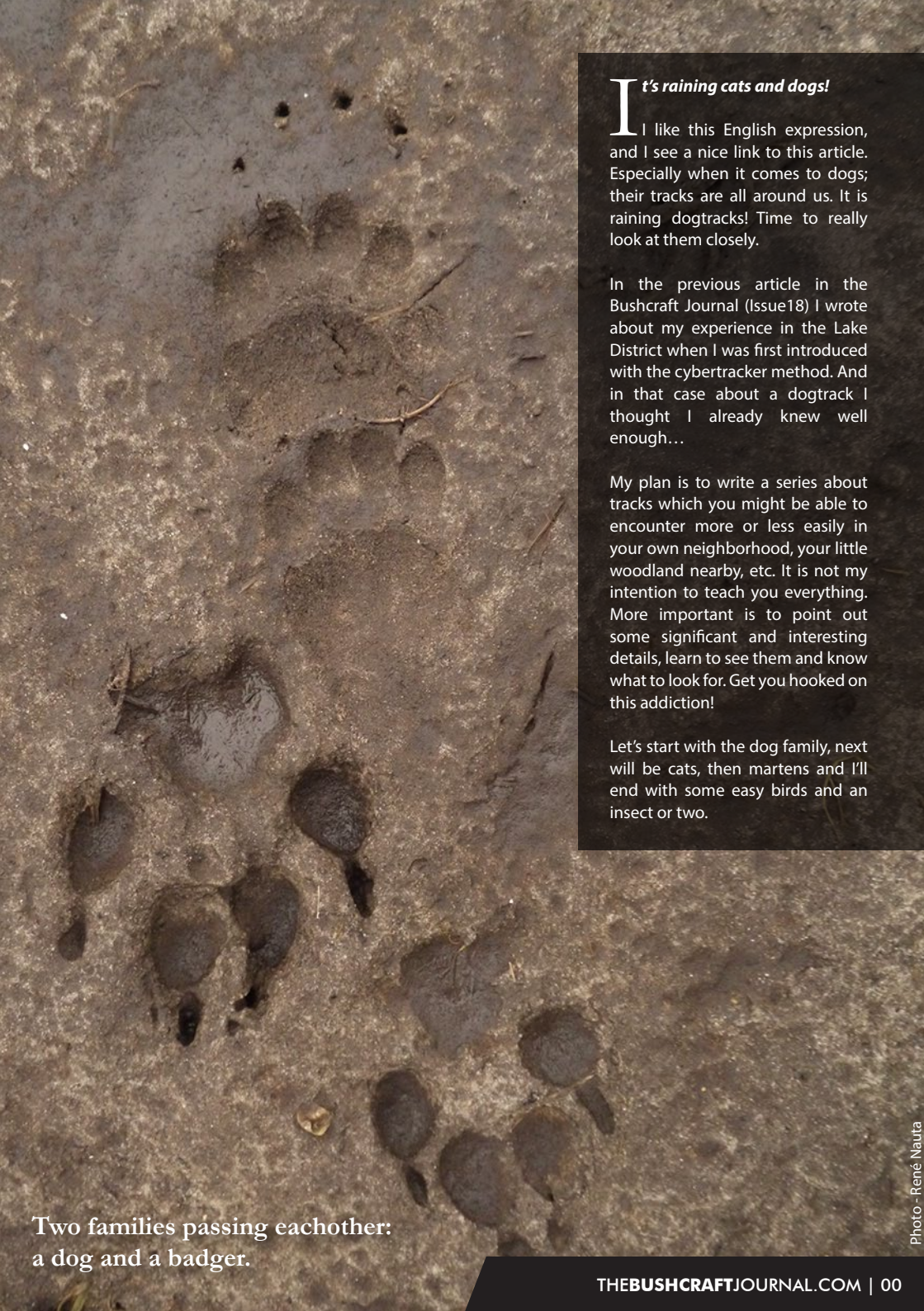


Tracks of the DOG FAMILY

By René Nauta
EXTRA Survival & Bushcraft





I t's raining cats and dogs!

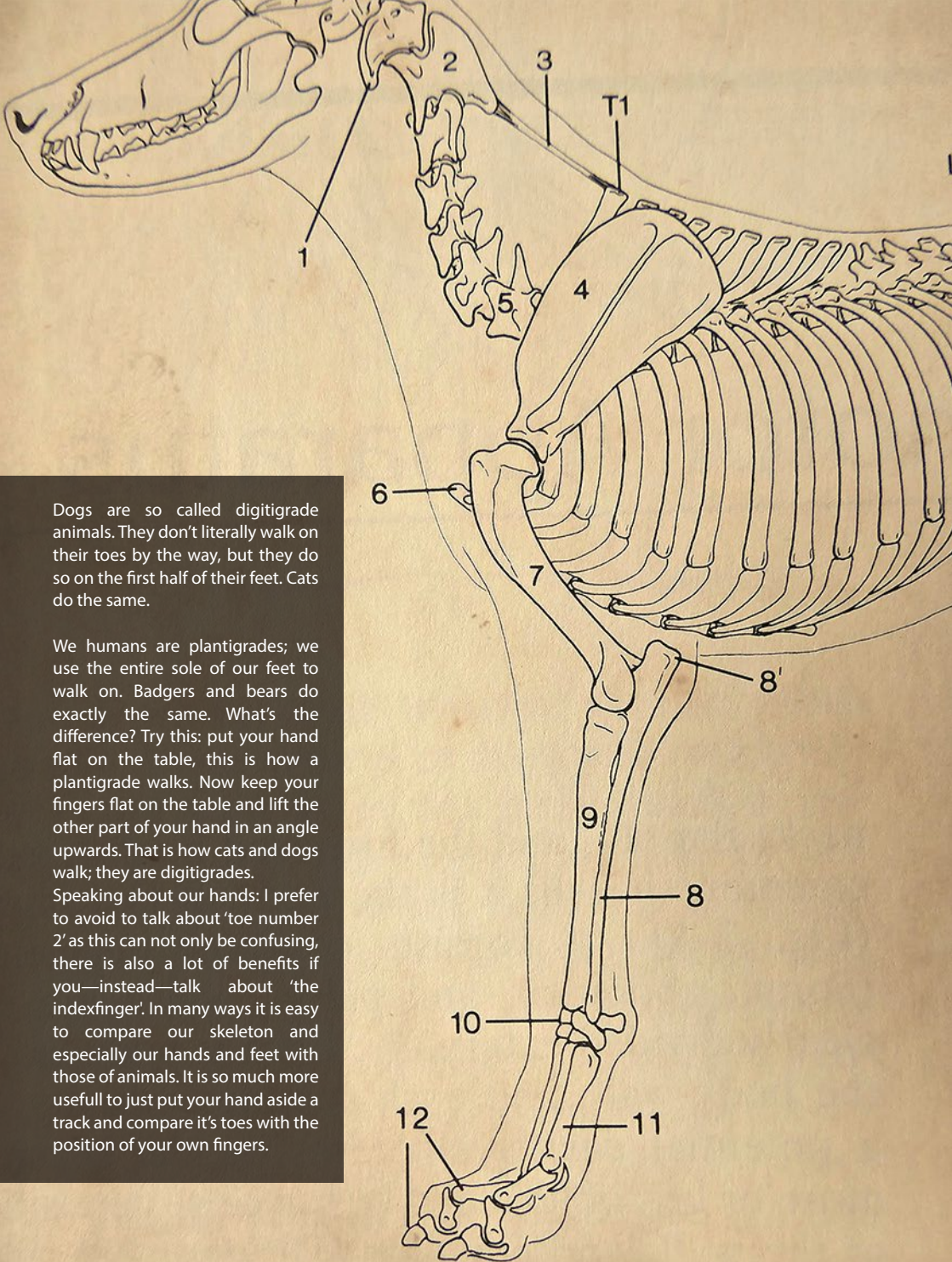
I like this English expression, and I see a nice link to this article. Especially when it comes to dogs; their tracks are all around us. It is raining dogtracks! Time to really look at them closely.

In the previous article in the Bushcraft Journal (Issue18) I wrote about my experience in the Lake District when I was first introduced with the cybertracker method. And in that case about a dogtrack I thought I already knew well enough...

My plan is to write a series about tracks which you might be able to encounter more or less easily in your own neighborhood, your little woodland nearby, etc. It is not my intention to teach you everything. More important is to point out some significant and interesting details, learn to see them and know what to look for. Get you hooked on this addition!

Let's start with the dog family, next will be cats, then martens and I'll end with some easy birds and an insect or two.

Two families passing each other:
a dog and a badger.



Dogs are so called digitigrade animals. They don't literally walk on their toes by the way, but they do so on the first half of their feet. Cats do the same.

We humans are plantigrades; we use the entire sole of our feet to walk on. Badgers and bears do exactly the same. What's the difference? Try this: put your hand flat on the table, this is how a plantigrade walks. Now keep your fingers flat on the table and lift the other part of your hand in an angle upwards. That is how cats and dogs walk; they are digitigrades. Speaking about our hands: I prefer to avoid to talk about 'toe number 2' as this can not only be confusing, there is also a lot of benefits if you—instead—talk about 'the indexfinger'. In many ways it is easy to compare our skeleton and especially our hands and feet with those of animals. It is so much more usefull to just put your hand aside a track and compare it's toes with the position of your own fingers.

The front leg of a dog.

Nice left front track of a badger.

In many ways, toes of animals are 'lined up' just as your own fingers. Take a look at this badger left front foot (*pictured right*). The middlefinger is the longest, then ringfinger, the thumb being smallest and on a lower level, etc. Need I say more?

But, back to dogs.

If you own a dog, call yourself lucky. It's the perfect opportunity to look at it's feet! In what way are the toes arranged? What shape do they have? What do the nails look like and what is the size and shape of the metacarpal pad? My advice is to do so with all animals you can get your hands on. Even when they are dead and you don't have any problems with that. Almost all mammals and birds we are writing about in our new upcoming book on tracks, have been in my hands. I have touched them, felt their nails, toe pads, hairs and skin. A very valuable way of learning!



Photo - René Nauda

Track from a fast running dog, showing both thumb and metacarpal pad, making this a right front.

Both cats and dogs have 5 toes on their front feet, but the thumb (just once with the number: 'toe number 1') in most cases will not register in a track. You might see this thumb when the animal was running for instance. Or when it was walking in a deep substrate like mud, or very soft sand.

In this picture you can see the track of a small dog, running on the beach in full speed. All toes are splayed for grip, the thumb has dropped down a bit but is clearly visible, and there is even another 'dot'. This is the carpal pad, situated a bit higher on the leg and opposite the thumb. On front feet only. So if you see all of this together, you will know right away: front foot!

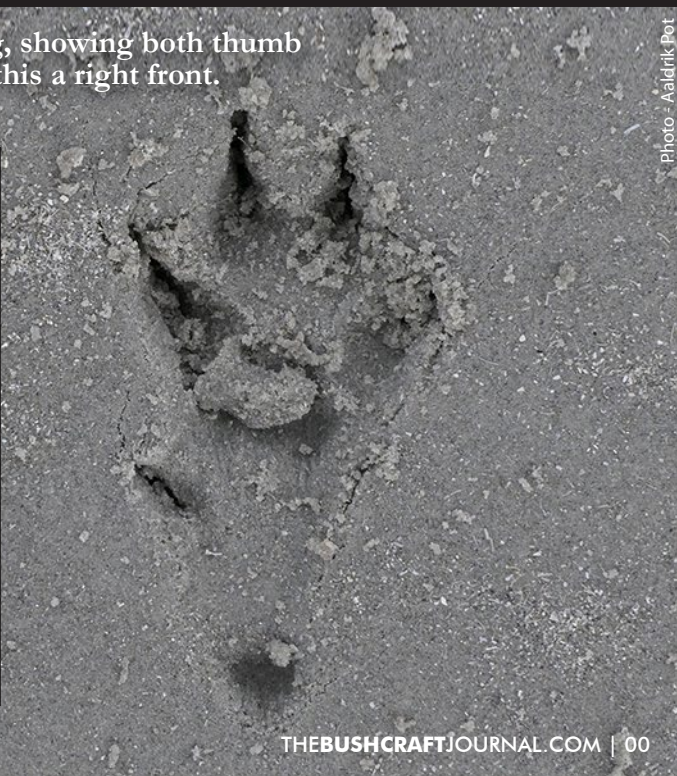


Photo - Aaldrik Pot



Look at this dog track picture with a front and a hind track on it. Are they the same in size and shape? It is like an observation game: spot the difference!

Many animals have slightly bigger front feet, compared to their hinds. Dogs are no different as you can see. The front foot is also a bit more roundish in overall shape. What stands out is the difference in the shape of the metacarpal pad. In the front it looks a bit like a triangle, on the hind it is nothing more than a firm dot. What both feet have in common are the position of the toes. In both feet there are 2 toes in the front and 2 set further back. Look at the shape of these 2 couples, they themselves are not the same either!

Front (at the top) and hind track of the same dog.



Lastly, forget the toes and metacarpal pad. What can you say about the so called negative space; the area in between toes and metacarpal pad? With dogs, the negative space looks like a wide 'H' shape (*Pictured left*).

When you start to familiarise yourself with all these key features of the dog family, you will be able to recognize other dogs. Of course the variety in dogs itself is endless, reaching as far as from a little Chihuahua up to an enormous Danish dog. But they all share these same features!

◀ Look at the negative space, it looks like an 'H'. A happy Dutchman writing this, as this H is the first in the word 'Hond'; the Dutch word for 'dog'.

Huge track of a Danish dog.



Very small foot of an unknown dog



I hope you will one day soon, run in to the tracks of a fox, the beautiful red coated hunter. His tracks are delicate and quite small, but they also show every feature of the above explanation. And foxes have an extra beauty with all the hairs visible within the track because of their (very) furry feet. It's nails are long and sharp. The negative space forms an 'X', the x from fox. Aren't they beautiful?

This fox shows the X nicely!



Beautiful and 'razorsharp' fox track, showing so many details!

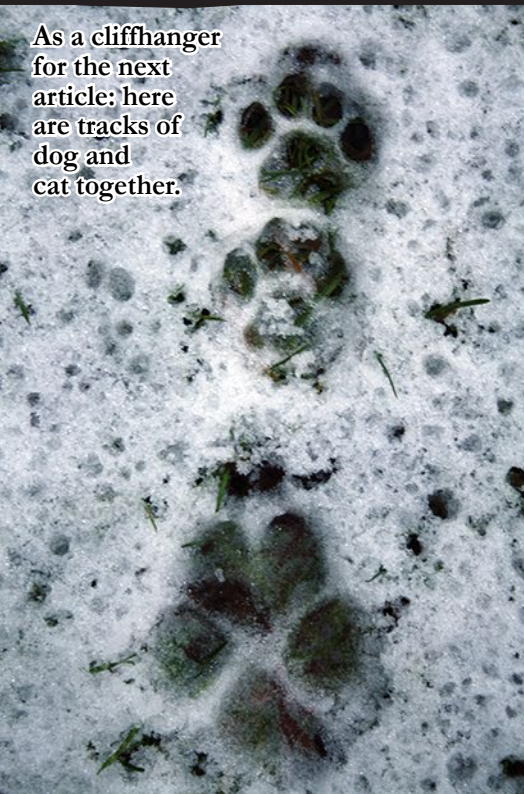
Photos - René Nauta

Beautiful track of a coyote in dried clay.



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As a cliffhanger
for the next
article: here
are tracks of
dog and
cat together.



And if you are crossing any borders, here they are again: more dogs! Maybe you have a chance in your own area to see tracks of coyotes or wolves sometime?

Last January we had another fantastic expedition in Namibia. We didn't see many dogs, but we saw it's close relatives, like brown and spotted hyenas, jackals and the lovely small bat eared foxes...

By the way, we didn't see them all alive, but by finding and reading their tracks, we saw the spotted hyena trotting over a long, sandy road in the Kalahari.

Tracks always change the landscape around me, making it come alive with stories and movies of the animals passing by. It never stops. I hope this is your experience too, and if it hasn't been, I hope it will be in the near future.

See you next time at the cat tracks!

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Tracks of a spotted hyena.