

An Advantage of No Lawn

If I had a lawn, tracks wouldn't show. I discovered mystery tracks this morning in my yard. I spent about an hour and a half trying to get a grasp of what I was looking at here. The tracks cross our entire property across the top of one acre, all through the yard and out the other side of the big upper horse corrals, a long way! Years ago I came across similar tracks in a wash in the sand not far from the house. I spent a long time following those tracks, and that mystery was solved. After considerable scrutiny and much going back and forth and finally following the tracks to the end, I concluded that a fox had jumped a jackrabbit which was as big as it was, dragged it several hundred feet and then buried it in the sand. I found what was left of the hare, with just the tail sticking out of the sand.

The tracks in the yard this morning were of similar design. An animal dragged another animal, a dead one, of course. I assumed the dragger had caught something north of the house and then dragged it south. I followed and studied the tracks carefully in the county yard where the dirt is deepest. I was trying to find the paw prints of the dragger alongside the drag marks. I found one or two tracks barely pressed into the dirt and indistinct. Then I found displaced gravel where the gravel had also been dragged, and it was dragged north, not south like I thought.

Defining the direction of dragger and dragged illuminated the mystery at the gate, where the tracks were abundant and going back and forth. It was trying to find a way through the fence so went back and forth looking for an opening.

The animal was one familiar with the layout of the yard, no question about that. The drag marks clearly go under the gate. There is no room there at all. So the dragger went to find another way in, changed its mind and came back. I have seen cottontails get under that gate but not much else would fit. My theory is that finally the dragger left what I theorize to be a dead bunny right beside the gate, then leapt up onto the gate post and down and pulled the bunny under the gate and kept going through the yard.

Around 10 last night, I heard much noise through fig leaves which are dry and are all over the ground. I didn't see anything, didn't get up in time, but I now am sure it was the dragger because that is where the tracks go. The tracks continue clear through the yard and down the hill and off into state land where they no longer show and also through a nasty cactus patch. So I have to be content with the theory that one of the local stray, domestic cats (the dragger tracks that I did find were quite small and round, unlike a canine) has a reason to catch a bunny, kill it and drag it far away. I hope that reason isn't kittens but I don't see why else it wouldn't just kill a bunny and eat it on the spot. Anyway, it was ample entertainment for quite awhile!

Update

Mysteries bedevil me. I want to solve them. Clouds temporarily veiled sunlight and heat, so I grabbed camera and hiking boots and followed my

cat theory down into the wash below the house. I thought a domestic cat might consider the old cars that had been dumped in the wash to deflect flood water, as a good place to have kittens.

Spiraling through nasty, evil cholla cactus, I picked up the drag marks once again, headed right for the old cars! Wow, am I smart or what. Well, it is "or what". The tracks did not go to the old cars and in fact headed up the rocky slope on the other side of the big wash.

The tracks crossed solidly-rocky slopes, but every so often I could discern displaced rocks, so I followed along, coming out in a dirt patch where the tracks were once again clear. The tracks generally headed northeast. At about a half mile from the house, I knew I was tracking a wild animal, not a domestic one. No domestic cat in its right mind would be tromping off through the desert this way dragging a dead bunny. Many times I lost the track and had to spiral around in large arcs before I found the tracks again but find them I did!

The tracks had changed some. The original tracks appeared to be 2 hind feet and a haunch dragging in the dust, the fur marks of a haunch were obvious. These newer tracks were just the feet, as though the dragger had repositioned the bunny higher in its mouth.

About a mile from the house and a few giant rubbly-wash crossings later, the hand of the wind capriciously parted the cloud curtain that blindfolded the sun. Brilliant desert sunlight blasted down and felt along my skin, searing with white-hot heat. My mystery-solving resolve melted like chocolate.

When faced with a blast furnace, I am content to surmise that a local fox, that has been in my yard many times, caught the bunny and headed to a birthing den out in the desert. There are many dens out there, I have seen a lot of them (on cooler days). The tracks on either side of the drag marks were either non-existent or very faint so the creature was lightweight even with the bunny in its mouth. They might have fur between their toes that would make their track so indistinct but I am not sure about that. Anyway, I just wanted to share what else I found or didn't as the case may be.

Here is a sidebar: I came across an inhabited badger den in my wanderings this morning. When they go in to take a nap, they seal the opening with dirt. I don't know of other animals that like to sleep behind closed doors like that. It always amazes me that a badger can live in this severe desert!

