

[Close this window](#)

[Print this page](#)



Daily News - Miner

Alaska museum program teaches students to track wild animals

Published Sunday, November 23, 2008



Photo by [Eric Engman](#)



Photo by [Eric Engman](#)

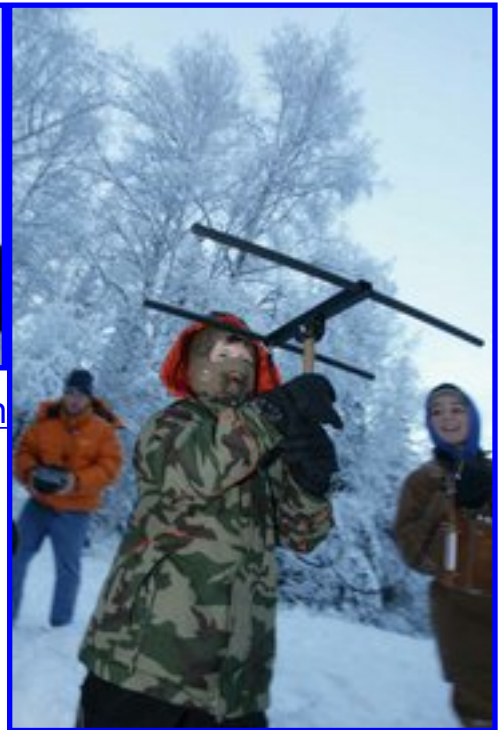


Photo by [Eric Engman](#)

FAIRBANKS — The trackers walked single file down a trough in the snow that led into the woods behind the University of Alaska Museum of the North, oblivious to the 10 degree below zero temperatures.

They were hot on the trail of something; they just weren't sure what it was yet.

That's when Micah Miller stopped to give the searchers following him a clue.

"There's some really good moose signs nearby," Miller told the trackers, all of whom

were bundled up in hats, mittens, facemasks parkas, snow pants, snow boots and mukluks. "What do you want to look for?"

"Tracks," 8-year-old Chet Ellison said through his neoprene camouflage face gator.

"Poop," offered 10-year-old Addie Willsrud.

Those were two good answers, but not what Miller was looking for in this case. He pointed to a large, white spruce tree nearby. All the branches were covered with snow except one at the bottom of the tree.

"If you see a tree that doesn't have snow on it, that's a pretty good sign something has been there," Miller said, pointing to the naked branch.

The young trackers fell back into line and continued down the trail, looking for more clues.

While many kids were still snuggled in their beds or curled up on the couch watching Saturday morning cartoons, a group of a dozen elementary school children were tromping through the woods at 10 below, trying to find signs of life around them as part of a mammal tracking class sponsored by the museum.

"We try to do a Saturday program each month," Jennifer Arseneau, the museum's education program leader, said.

Jeff Ellison accompanied his son, Chet, to the class.

"Anything to do with animals, bugs or hunting, he's into it all," Jeff Ellison said.

Saturday's three-hour class started indoors with Arseneau talking to the children about different kinds of mammals in Alaska and how they survive in the winter by adapting to the environment. Some, like bears, hibernate. Others, like snowshoe hares and ermine, camouflage themselves by turning white.

Arseneau quizzed the kids on what kind of evidence animals leave behind, such as tracks, scat, beds, and in the case of moose, broken branches from where they have browsed.

The children then made clay prints of tracks using molds from different animals, such as fox, beaver, porcupine, otters and hares, before heading outside to look for the real thing.

The children, all of whom were accompanied by an adult, were broken into two groups — the bears and the foxes. One group searched for tracks with Miller and Cortney Pylant, both of whom are wildlife biology students at the university, while the other group learned about radio telemetry with Falk Huettmann, an assistant wildlife biology professor who demonstrated how radio collars work.

Miller showed the kids how you can tell which way a moose is walking by looking at its track.

"Moose have a pretty distinctive track," he said, kneeling over an old moose track in the snow. "The two hooves kind of meet together with dewclaws behind them."

Depending on the length between the tracks, he said, you can tell whether an animal

During the course of a half hour, the class found two piles of moose droppings, an old moose bed and some squirrel tracks under a spruce tree with a piece of fox scat next to it.

Pylant used a thermometer to demonstrate how much warmer it is under the snow than on top of it.

“Right now, it’s reading negative 10,” Pylant said, holding up a digital temperature probe. “We’ll pretend we’re little voles and we need to stay warm. How cold do you think it will be under the snow?”

She stuck the probe down into the snow and the kids huddled around her to see how high it would go. Within 30 seconds, the temperature shot up almost 25 degrees. Pylant asked the children if they knew why the temperature was so much warmer under the snow.

“Snow helps keeps your heat in,” 9-year-old Lars O’Hara replied.

“That’s right,” Pylant said. “Snow acts as an insulator. It can keep it about 20 degrees above zero. That’s how voles survive the winter. They stay under the snow.”

After the outdoor portion of the class, the children went inside for hot cocoa before heading to the basement of the museum to look at specimens of different mammals in the museum’s mammal collection.

That’s what Tom Willsrud, who brought his two home-schooled daughters, 10-year-

old Addie, and 8-year-old Elsa, to the class, was waiting for.

“I’m looking forward to checking out their collections department,” he said.