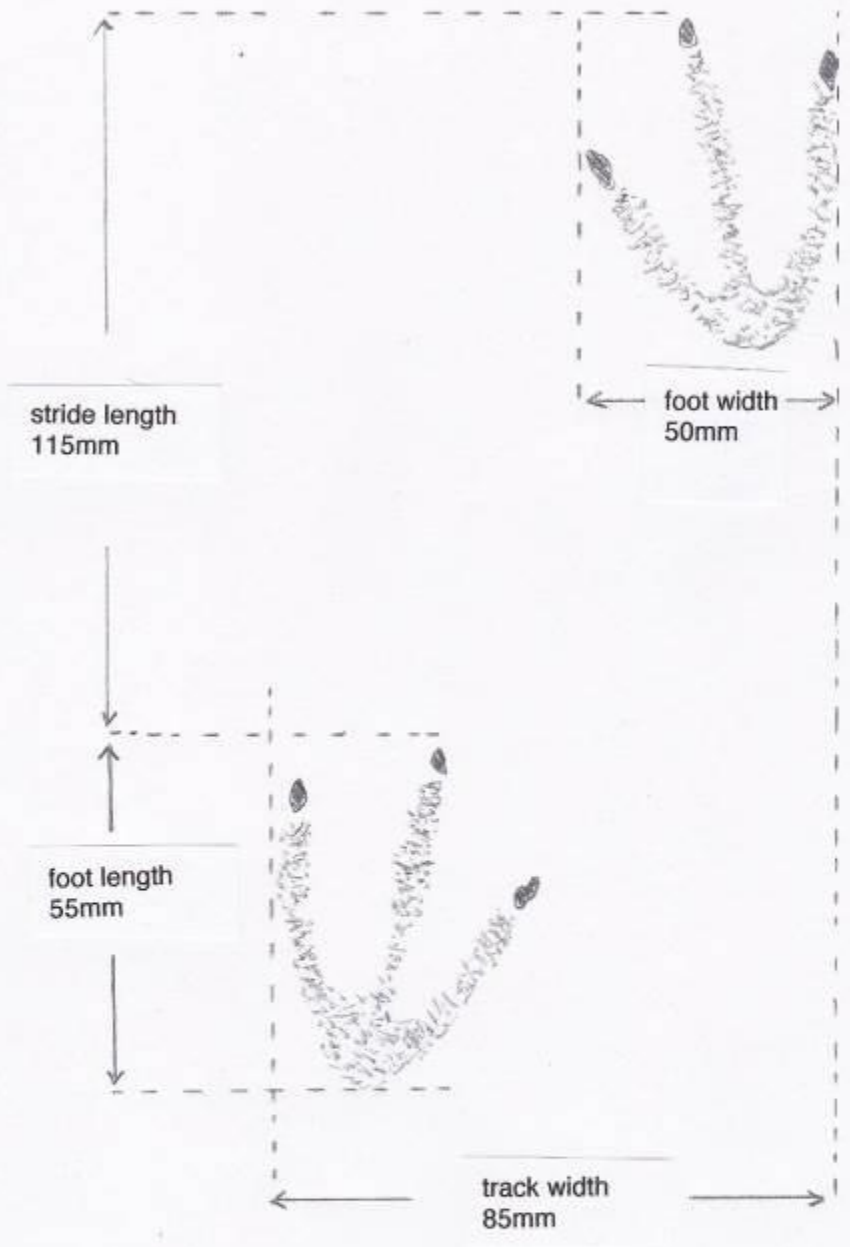


TRACKING BLUE PENGUINS ON WEST COAST BEACHES

Some handy hints to identify common tracks





Typical penguin tracks



Little Blue Penguin Tracks

A typical set of penguin tracks leading straight to the sea from the bird's burrow. These tracks are several days old as evidenced by the streak of wind-blown sand lifted from the crumbling edges.



Penguin tracks showing typical toe drag marks. Occasionally you will find drag marks on each side from the tips of the flippers, or even belly imprints where a particularly tired or lazy bird has laid down mid waddle.



Penguin tracks: note the tight arrow like shape with an angle which is never more than 75 degrees between the heel and outer toes. Note the strong indents left by the clawed tips of toes and the well rounded heel. They always walk slightly 'pigeon-toed', even the males.¹



¹ Females of just about any species walk with the toes more turned in than males, relatively speaking that is....not always apparent unless you see both together.

Dotterel

There are several species of dotterel likely to be found on West Coast beaches and their foot prints are abundant on many sandy beaches. Where penguins mostly walk directly between their burrows and the sea, dotterels will mostly wander about parallel to the sea. When tracks are old or indistinct it is often this wandering look about the tracks which will give them away.

Note that the line of tracks below is not as wide as a penguins track width, the 'arrows' are more splayed forming an angle of around 120 degrees, and they lack the webbing or strong claw marks seen in penguin tracks.



A close up of dotterel tracks. These particular tracks are smaller than penguin and the much wider angle of the outer toes is apparent.



Oyster Catchers

There are two species of oyster catcher to be found on West Coast beaches and their tracks are rather similar to dotterel tracks only larger. The tracks of oyster catchers also tend to run parallel to the sea as they wander about probing the sand.

Oyster catcher tracks, below, can bear some resemblance to penguin but tend to be in more of a narrow line than the wider set prints of penguins. The finer detail of individual track shape is needed to tell the two apart.



Detail of oyster catcher tracks, note what appears to be drag marks is actually wind-blown sand. Note also the wide angle of the outer toes (~120 degrees). As for dotterels, this is the main thing to look for to distinguish them from penguin tracks.



Close up of oyster catcher tracks in firm damp sand, note the lack of a distinct heel mark as the birds tend to walk more on the toes than the flat footed way penguins walk. Although these tracks are a similar size to those of penguins, they don't have the "rounded point arrow" look to them at the heel.



Gulls and Shags

These two groups of birds are very different (and diverse) but their tracks are all very similar. As you would expect there are a wide range of sizes of gull and shag tracks, with many being in the same size range of blue penguins. Like penguins, they all show the webbing in good sand. Shags will often walk straight up the beach from the sea like penguins when they come ashore tired and wet. The distinction is in the shape of the foot compared with penguins. Gulls and shags have the outer toe on each foot nearly as long as the middle toe and this outer toe has a distinct curve inwards unlike penguins who have rather straight toes with only the middle one being longer.

Several sets of Black Backed Gull tracks with the webbing clearly visible in the soft sand are shown below. The close up (second down) shows the distinctive asymmetrical shape and curving outer toe.



Dogs, Hares and Cats

While out looking for penguin tracks, very often you will find tracks from all the four legged creatures which roam our beaches. Large dog tracks can be very easy to identify but many people struggle to tell the difference between prints made by a hare and a smaller dog. Cat prints are usually easier to identify because of the small size and the lack of claws. Hares and rabbits don't have retractable claws like the cats and, when running in loose sand, the track can appear to be from a much larger animal. The easiest way to tell hares and dogs apart is by the gait; as hares (and rabbits) hop, the back feet will land next to each other and the front feet will land staggered. Dogs swing each side of the body at a trot leaving a slightly zigzagged line of prints (remember the fox trot?).

Below is one set of hare tracks. Note the way the two back feet are side by side (to the right) and the two front feet register behind and offset (below lighter, at each end). As these tracks are formed in firm damp sand, they are close to actual size; loose dry sand will make them appear twice as big.



Below is a set of dog tracks showing the typical zigzagged line form. This set has the front and rear paws from opposite sides of the body paired close together. The spacing of pairing (front left with rear right or vice versa) will increase or decrease relative to speed of travel.



Below are drawings of cat tracks (left) and stoat tracks (right). While not exactly to scale with each other these drawings show how different cat and mustelid tracks are. The average cat paw print is at least double the size of a stoats. Stoats show a clear bounding type gait where cats mince along.



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July 2013

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