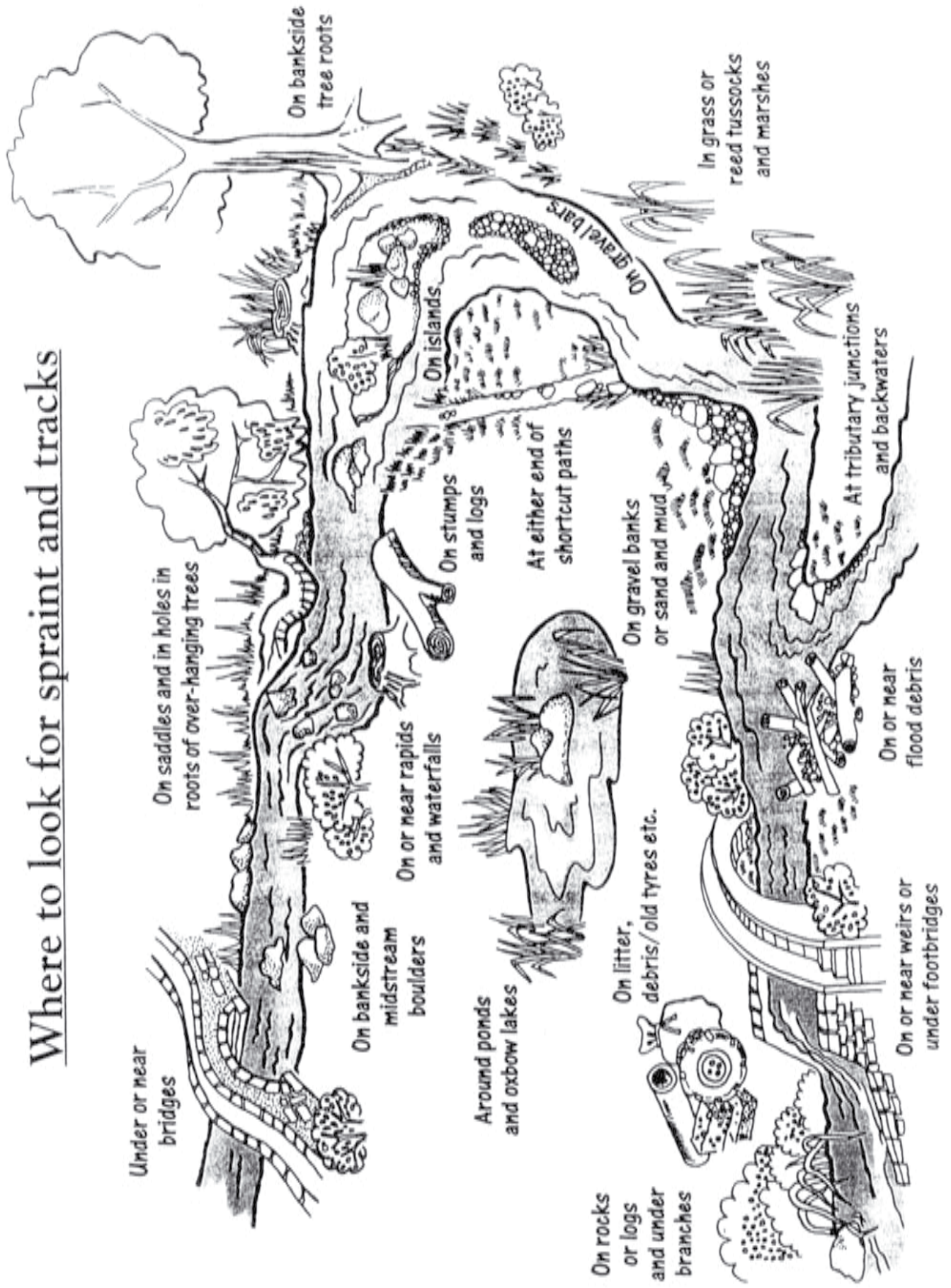


Where to look for spraint and tracks



4. OTTER SIGNS

OTTER SIGNS

A BRIEF GUIDE ON WHAT TO LOOK FOR

SPRAINT

The main sign of the presence of an otter is the spraint that it left for the other otters to find and decipher. It is usually black, and crinkly, of any shape or size. As it is a scent signal, the otter is not always moved to leave a large spraint; a very small sample will suffice for the length of time that the information is of current interest to an otter. It can be tubular and sausage shaped, but frequently is not; the otter hunters often referred to it as "coke" because it resembles a small lump of that now outdated fuel.

On close examination you should be able to see fish bones and scales, or occasionally feathers, frogs' leg bones or fish eggs, fur is not a common content. A large furry dropping is probably fox, a small, pencil-slim one, mink. The infallible diagnostic feature is the smell. Otter's spraint smells sweet, like a fresh fish or like a fishmongers. The smell of a mink scat is sharp and repellent. A mink scat rapidly grows mould, which spraint never does.

When first produced, spraint is black and moist with a coating of an oily looking slime. This will dry off, leaving a dry piece of "coke". With age the dark colour fades, until the spraint goes grey, and then white, by which time it is just a small pile of fish shrapnel.

MINK SCAT is always tubular, about the diameter of a biro, and pointed a one or both ends. It usually contains some fur, as well as feathers and fish bones, and often shows a twisting or spiral pattern. It smells foul.

Any dropping which has a white, creamy portion was produced by a bird.

AJ

Anal Jelly is the misnomer for another secretion deposited by an otter. It looks like marmalade without the lumps of peel, and like marmalade it can vary in colour from golden orange, almost brown, (the bitter, Oxford sort), through a paler yellow (Golden Shred), to a greeny tone (lime?). There are no bones or fish bits, but it has the correct smell. Originally it was thought to be the neat secretion from the anal gland with which the otter coats its excretion, hence the name. Now it is thought to be the mucus lining of the gut, which acts as a lubricant and protection against all the sharp bones and undigested bits.



Otter spraint

4. OTTER SIGNS (cont).

PADDING

An otter's footprints are very distinctive, its feet are large, as befits a swimming animal, over 50mm wide (2 inches), and a big dog otter's print can be 90mm wide (3.5 inches). Otters have 5 toes, as do badgers, polecats and mink (all mustelids), whereas foxes, dogs and cats have only 4. If the 5th toe does not leave an impression, an otter's padding is asymmetrical and therefore recognisable. All the toes are rounded, (teardrop shaped) and they are arranged in a semicircle round the foot, with the first toe opposite the fifth along the diameter, a pattern you can make with your fingers in a "piano-playing" posture. Otters have blunt, short nails, so frequently these leave no mark. The foot itself is similar in outline to a frogman's flipper, a cone shape tapering towards the heel, but in firm mud the heel portion does not always show. Remember that an otter's back feet are larger than its front feet, as are yours, and do not therefore suspect two otters too readily.

Otters usually bound, or canter, rather than walking or trotting left, right, left, right. This means that you find four pad marks close together, then a space, then another four, etc.

A badger too has big feet and five toes, but it has a quite different arrangement and foot shape. Its foot is a broad digger bucket, with all five toes, with long nails, arranged in a line along the front of the foot. The ball of the foot is a wide bar, at right angles to the direction of travel. You can make a similar pattern by running in bare feet across some wet sand, five toes at the front, and a broad mark behind them.

Mink, being much smaller, have smaller feet. Their toes are long and slender, useful for climbing trees, so the padding is rather star shaped, with the fingers spread.

SIGHTINGS

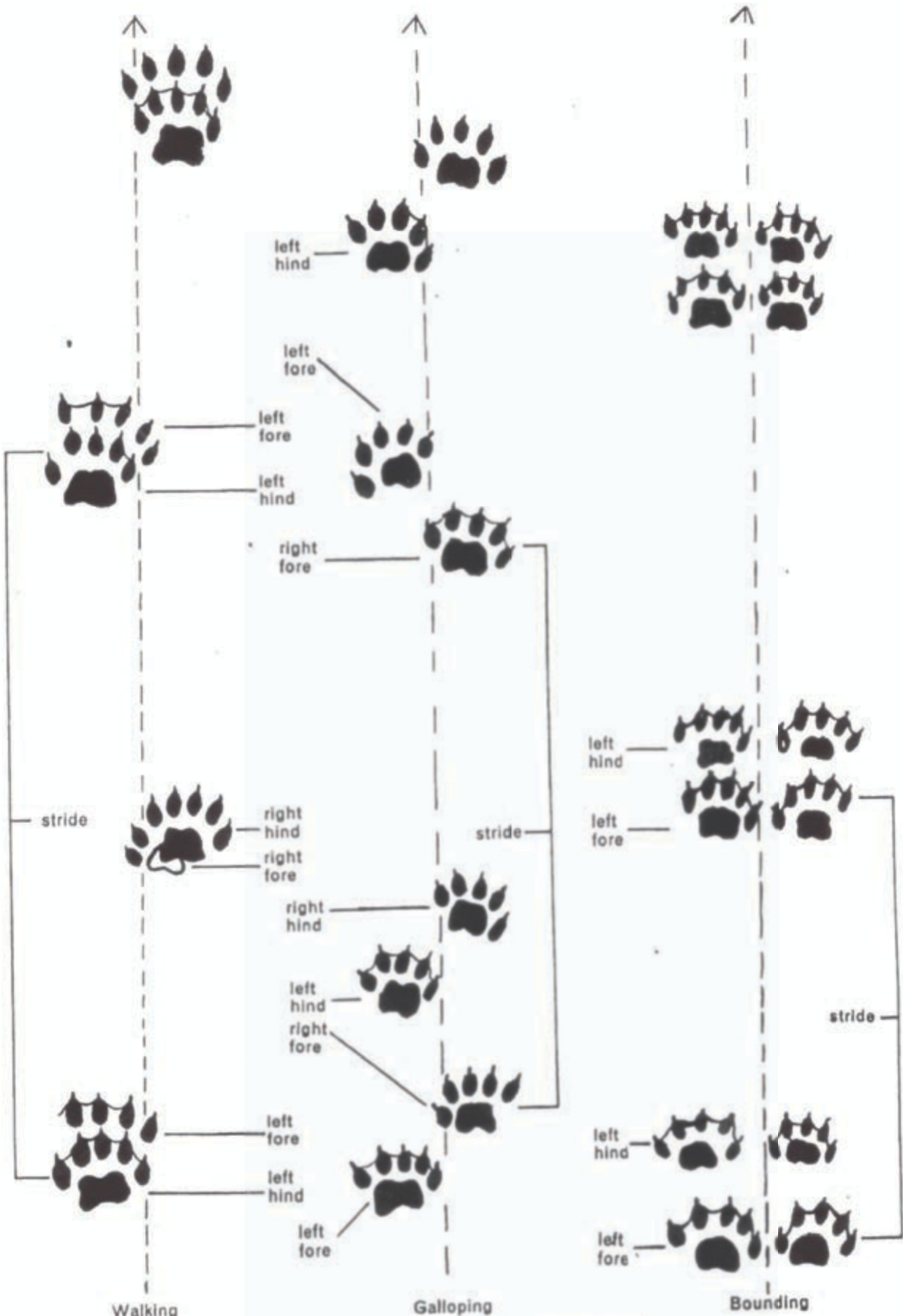
It should be easy to tell two so dissimilar animals as an otter and a mink apart, but you often get only a fleeting glimpse of a swimming animal in poor light.

An otter is a meter long, and is proportioned like a dog on short legs. A mink is in stature merely a dark version of a ferret. It has a pointy head with minimal skull, and its tail is so small as to leave no impression. An otter has a broad skull, like a terrier, and its tail is 45cm (18 inches) long, and as thick as a cricket bat handle. In the water, an otter swims very low to the surface, often with most of the back submerged, so that all you see is its head and its bum. Mink, being dark, seem bigger than they are and the fur (the coat for which they are famous) makes them more buoyant on the water, so they again seem larger. Both animals can dive well, and both leave a chain of bubbles on the surface as the air leaks from their coats, but the chain of the bigger otter is more substantial.

PATHS AND SLIDES

Otters keep to their own distinctive narrow paths when crossing a bend in a river. They almost always spraint at one end or the other, and the passage through summer vegetation forms a neatly circular tube about six inches in diameter. Where they go back into the water there is sometimes a slide.

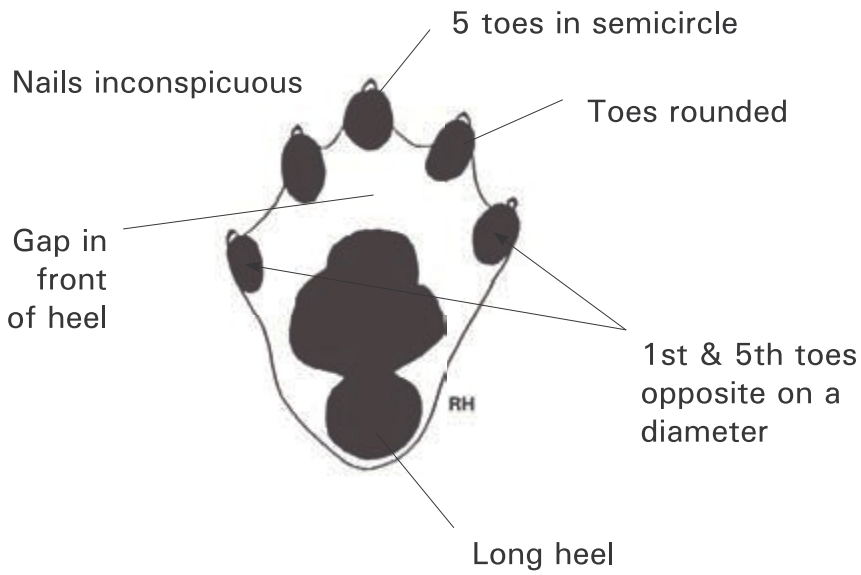
Padding Diagram



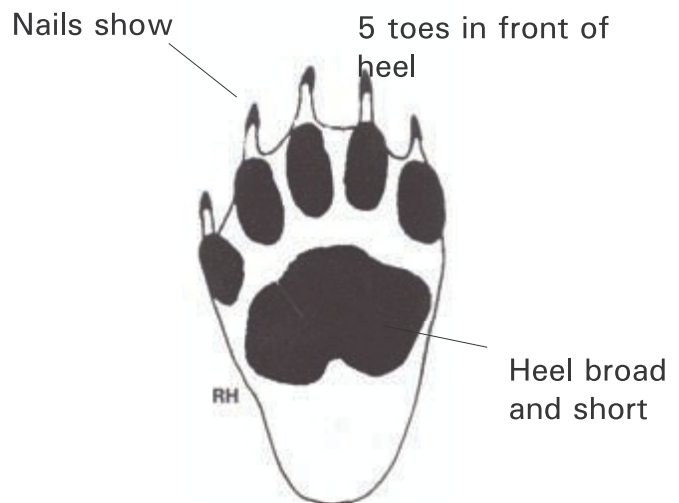
Trails of otter (greatly reduced in size).

Annotated Pad Marks

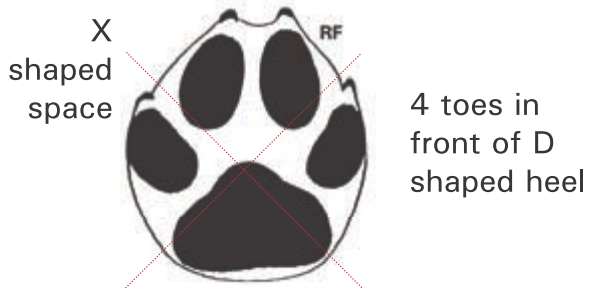
Otter



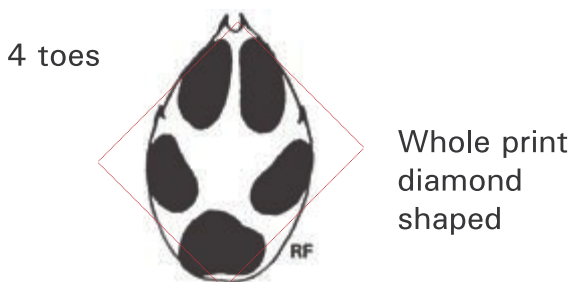
Badger



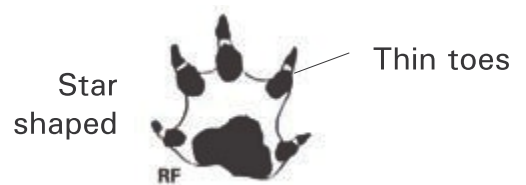
Dog



Fox



Mink



NB. If the mud is hard an otter's print may show only 4 toes but you can still tell it apart from a dog because the 4 toes will be off centre to heel mark.