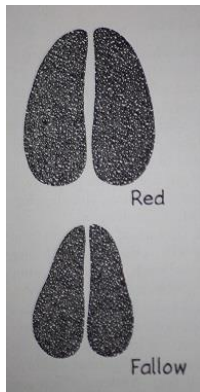


Nature Notes 16: Snow in Swannington Reveals Wildlife That is Usually Hidden and Can Also Lead to Unexpected Excitement.

As I write there is a warning of another icy blast of Siberian weather. The "Beast from the East" did not quite cut the village off completely but cars were still getting stuck in Kett's Lane three weeks later. However, what may be a nuisance for travellers can be a bonus for naturalists.



Deer hoof prints

Of the four species of deer recorded in Swannington, the one I have seen least is the red deer but when I crunched through the snow on Ugate Common I was fascinated to see tracks of a lot of hooved animals between the enclosure fence and the eastern boundary of the common. What made these tracks? Prime culprits had to be a substantial herd of either fallow or red deer but which? Red deer hoof prints are larger (stags: 8.5 x 6.5cm, hinds 5.5 x 4.5cm) than those of fallow deer (buck 7.2 x 4.5cm, doe 5.5 x 3.5 cm) but size can be deceptive in snow due to the "yeti footprint" effect of tracks expanding as the snow melts. If there is a clear fresh footprint in mud, the two species are easier to distinguish. Hoof prints of fallow deer are slightly outwardly *concave* on the anterior outer edges, whereas the anterior outer edge of hoof prints of red deer are outwardly *convex*. The "Beast from the East" revealed the activity of a herd of red deer larger than any I have ever seen previously in the parish.

Another sort of very distinctive track is that made by foxes who somehow manage to leave their four-toed paw prints in absolutely straight lines in the snow. They can be so straight that it seems as if the fox was walking along an invisible tight rope. What I cannot work out is why foxes in the snow do not topple over sideways at the first puff of wind? I certainly would if I tried to walk a tight rope while up to my knees in snow!

It was not so much the amount of the recent snow that disrupted travel, rather the very strong winds blowing the snow off the fields into drifts which then blocked the lanes. I can remember Swannington being cut off completely, for some days at a time, on several occasions for this reason. During one such event we went to fetch supplies on cross-country skis, but for me the most memorable snow experience happened 39 years ago in mid-February when my wife, Sue, was expecting our second child. She was due to be born the day after we were completely snowed in by a blizzard. The very strong winds drifted snow across all the access lanes, blocking them all bank to bank.

We busily prepared for a home delivery but unfortunately Sue had a history of high blood pressure, so the doctors started preparations to airlift her out by helicopter. I had the tomato ketchup bottle all ready to mark out a large red "H" in the snow behind our house, when Michael Jones arrived at the front door from Attlebridge, having sawn holes through the intervening hedges and fought his way across the fields on a tractor towing a trailer full of straw bales in which Sue was immersed. Michael took her back across the fields to the A1067 to meet an ambulance escorted by a snow plough dedicated to clearing the roads from Attlebridge to hospital in Norwich. I was really looking forward to that helicopter ride, however sticking to terra firma was a far better option but only made possible by Michael's extraordinary kindness, initiative and determination.

That snowfall was remembered for a long time, the more so because Mick Evans christened our newborn daughter, Rachel, "The Snow Baby". She has now had babies of her own (in somewhat less dramatic circumstances). They sit in awe when told of the excitement caused by their mother's somewhat unorthodox arrival in the world.

Mark Hassall (March 2018)



Snow drifting in School Lane



A fox "tight rope" walking
(onebigphoto.com)



The "Snow Baby" with her two sons.