

The Mysterious Tracks





THE MYSTERIOUS TRACKS

Sawyer sat on a fallen log, carefully whittling a stick with his pocket knife. The sun was just beginning to rise, casting long shadows through the trees. Nearby, Brooks was crouched down, totally absorbed in watching a line of ants march across the forest floor. The rest of their family was still asleep in the tent, but Sawyer and Brooks were up early, as always, ready to start their day.

"Look at this, Sawyer!" Brooks called out, pointing at the ants. "They're carrying bits of leaves!" Sawyer looked up from his whittling and smiled. "That's pretty cool, Brooks. Ants are strong—they can carry things much bigger than they are."

Brooks nodded, fascinated, but his attention quickly shifted when he spotted something else. **"Sawyer, over here! There are new tracks in the dirt."**

Sawyer put down his knife and walked over to where Brooks was pointing. Sure enough, there were tracks in the soft earth. "These look like deer tracks," Sawyer said, crouching down to examine them. "But look at those over there—they're much bigger."

Brooks followed his brother's gaze. "What did that?"

Sawyer's eyes lit up with excitement. He pulled out his field guide and quickly flipped through the pages. **"These might be moose tracks, Brooks! Let's find out! Come on, let's see where they lead."**

The boys grabbed their gear and set off into the forest, following the trail of prints. As they walked, the trees grew denser, and the morning sunlight filtered through the thick canopy, casting dappled light on the forest floor. The air was cool and fresh, and smelled of pine and earth.

After a short while, Sawyer noticed something unusual about the trees around them. Several trunks had been gnawed at the base, their bark stripped away, and the ends of some branches were sharpened to a point. "Look at these trees, Brooks," Sawyer said, crouching down next to one of them. "See how they're chewed? That's the work of a beaver."

"A beaver? Where is it?" Brooks asked, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Probably nearby," Sawyer replied. He opened his field guide to the section on beavers.



"Beavers chew down trees like these to build dams. The dams block streams, creating ponds that give them a safe place to build their lodges and store food for the winter. Let's follow the trail and see if we can find where they've been working."

As the boys moved deeper into the forest, they spotted more signs that beavers had been busy—trees knocked down and dragged toward the water, and trails made in the bushes.

Suddenly, a soft gnawing sound reached their ears.

There, not far from them, was a beaver munching away at the base of a small tree, its sharp orange teeth making quick work of the wood.

Brooks' eyes widened in amazement. "It's actually cutting the tree down!"

The beaver paused for a moment, then continued chewing, completely focused on its task. The boys watched in awe as the tree wobbled, then with a loud crack, it tipped over, falling to the ground with a soft thud.

"Wow," Sawyer breathed. "That was incredible."

Brooks nodded, too excited for words, as they continued on their way, eager to see what other beaver work they might find.

Finally, the trees opened up to reveal a sparkling pond, and at the edge of the pond was a beaver dam made of sticks, mud, and stones. The dam stretched across the stream, stopping the water and creating the pond. On the other side of the pond, partially hidden by the water and reeds, they spotted a beaver lodge.

Brooks gasped when he saw it. "Wow, they built all of that!" he exclaimed, his voice full of awe.

Sawyer nodded, admiring the structure. "Beavers are amazing builders! They use their strong teeth to cut down trees, then drag the branches to the water. They pile up the sticks and pack mud in between to make the dam watertight. The pond keeps their lodge safe from predators."

The boys moved closer to the dam, standing on the bank as they looked at the intricate weave of branches and mud. They could see how the water flowed around it, creating a calm, still pond on one side while the stream trickled on the other. The beaver's work was impressive, and both boys admired the clever design that kept the water in place.

As they studied the beaver's handiwork, Brooks suddenly darted off again, spotting something through the trees. Sawyer followed, keeping a close eye on his little brother, when all of a sudden-**SQUELCH!** Brooks came to an abrupt stop.

"Uh-oh, Sawyer!" Brooks called, his voice rising in panic. "I'm stuck!"

Sawyer spun around. Brooks was **knee-deep** in thick, sticky mud, his hiking boot firmly lodged in the muck. "Hang on, Brooks!" Sawyer rushed over, grabbing his brother's arms and pulling with all his might.

But the mud held tight, sucking at Brooks' leg like a hungry creature. Every time they pulled, Brooks sank a little deeper.

"Come on, Brooks, you've got to get out!" Sawyer said, worry creeping into his voice. He glanced around, feeling the forest grow eerily quiet. Then, a sound came from behind them-a **DEEP rustling**, followed by the **SNAP** of a twig.

Sawyer's heart skipped a beat. **Was it a wolf? A bear?** His mind raced. He needed to get Brooks out of here, fast.

Brooks looked at his brother with a hint of fear in his eyes. "Sawyer, what was that?"

Sawyer tugged harder, his mind racing. "I don't know, but we have to get out of here. **NOW!**"





With one last heave, Brooks' foot slipped free from the boot, sending both boys stumbling backward. They fell onto the forest floor, panting, just as a shadow moved through the trees. Sawyer's eyes locked on the figure—towering antlers emerged from the underbrush.

IT WAS A MOOSE.

Relief washed over Sawyer as he realized it wasn't a predator. "It's a moose," he whispered, his voice filled with awe. "We're okay. It doesn't see us."

The moose moved slowly toward the pond, its huge hooves making soft thuds on the forest floor. The boys stayed crouched, hearts still pounding, as they watched the giant animal approach the water's edge. Brooks stared, his fear slowly melting into curiosity. "What's it doing?" he whispered.

"It's probably thirsty after walking through the forest," Sawyer replied, keeping his voice low.

"Moose need a lot of water, and they like to eat plants that grow in ponds."

Brooks glanced at the beaver dam, then back at the moose. "Is it going to eat the beaver?"

Sawyer shook his head, a small smile forming. "No, moose are herbivores. They only eat plants, not animals. It's here for a drink."

After a moment of watching the moose at the water, Sawyer nudged Brooks. "Come on, we should head back. We've got to tell the others about the moose and the beaver dam—and then maybe we can build a fort!"

Brooks's eyes lit up with excitement. "Let's build it like the beavers do, with sticks and mud!"

Sawyer grinned. "Yeah! We'll make the best fort ever."

Before heading back, Sawyer glanced at the mud where Brooks' boot was still stuck. 'Let's grab your boot first,' he said, pulling it free. With the boot in hand, the boys started to retrace their steps, eager to get back to their siblings and start building.

But the thick undergrowth and towering trees all looked the same. The forest seemed endless, and the morning light was getting brighter, making it harder to tell which way they had come. But Sawyer stayed calm, using his memory to guide them back.

After what felt like forever, they finally noticed the trees beginning to thin out.

"Look, Brooks, the trees are getting less dense! We're close," Sawyer said, his voice filled with relief.

Sure enough, soon they spotted the clearing where their campsite was. They rushed back, their hearts still pounding from the adventure, bursting with excitement to share what they'd learned.

Back at the campsite, Sawyer and Brooks couldn't wait to tell their family all about the moose, the beaver dam, and how they had almost gotten lost but managed to find their way back. They felt proud of everything they had handled together, but also relieved to be back with their family, safe at their campsite. As they sat at the picnic table eating breakfast, they excitedly shared everything they had learned about beavers and their incredible engineering skills. They could hardly sit still, finishing their food as fast as they could so they could get started on building a fort of their own, **just like the beavers.**