



The Katharine Ordway
Natural History Study Area

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ORDWAY BULLETIN
No. 108

MACALESTER
COLLEGE

located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

A FOX-TROT at ORDWAY.

It was the forenoon of Christmas Eve when I decided upon a walk in the woods. It had snowed during the night, not much more than a dusting of perhaps $3/4$ inch and the winds had died down although the mercury had plunged to about -3° ; it was very good weather for a quiet walk in the woods.

About twenty meters from the building there appeared a set of tracks in the trail, clearly defined and shaped like the footprints of a small dog but obviously the spoor of a fox. It was apparent before long that the fox was on a hunting foray for in a short distance his prints left the trail and made a short loop-shaped sortie through the meadow grass, soon rejoining the footpath. About a hundred meters ahead the fox prints left the path and I felt compelled to follow and observe just where his meanderings might lead.

Up the railroad track through a cut-bank and then down a footpath toward the small pond in the woods I followed the trail. About halfway down the slope to the pond he had veered to the left and up through some fallen aspens into a thickly-wooded hillside. He had stopped occasionally, perhaps sniffing under a small fallen tree but in general he continued at a rather uniform gait as shown by the even spacing of his footprints. He followed a rather meandering route, coursing somewhat but not deviating greatly from his general path along the hillside at the north end of the pond. He seemed to be pursuing a definite destination but doing some sporadic hunting in the process. Twice he had stopped and in both spots there was evidence of mice, the tracks of deer mice in the woods; at the second such location the fox had probably been successful in obtaining a morsel for breakfast although there was no remnant either of fur or of blood. From this scuffle-spot his route continued to the far side of the pond and headed southward along the east shore of the frozen pond. His path now seemed much straighter and it appeared he might be "high-tailing" it for his lair. By this time he had progressed beyond Ordway's property limits and so I broke off my sleuthing with some interesting thoughts about this winter denizen of our woods.

He must eat every few days since he has not adopted the practice of hibernating. So, he has become a "constant predator", engaged at it throughout the year. He very likely has a "route" which he traverses frequently and it is quite common for voles and mice to surface along the cleared footpaths. These are the most likely sources of food for him and his trace while walking is usually quite straight, i.e. he places his feet straight-forward so that one could draw a fairly straight line-of-centers through the prints of his left and right feet. He deviates into a more meandering pattern when he courses back-and-forth in search of prey. His path this particular morning indicated that he may have satisfied his hunger or may have carried his prey to his lair, perhaps for his mate, who at this season is likely to be preparing a den for her motherhood in March or April.

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jb/

R J CHRISTMAN,
Naturalist