

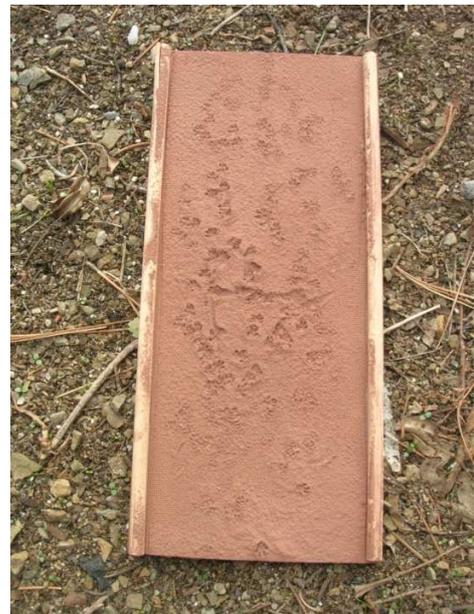


MAKING AND USING A PORTABLE TRACK STATION FOR SMALL ANIMALS

This track station is light and portable, suitable for capturing the tracks of small animals such as mice, chipmunks and woodrats. It is open on both ends but covered with a removable roof so tracks will be preserved from disturbance from wind and weather. It can be set in the brush, or among rocks where small animals live, and after the tracks are captured, it can be brought to a convenient well-lighted place where the cover can be removed and the tracks studied and photographed.

Setting your track station

Pick a spot where you are likely to find your target animal—near a burrow, next to a woodrat nest, or among rocks, fallen logs or debris that offers hiding and nesting places for small animals. When you are near your target area, dust the surface of the track station with a fine substrate, put a small amount of bait in the center of the station if you like, cover it, and carefully place the station.



About the substrate. Our favorite is powdered artist's clay that is reddish-brown. This seems to record very fine track details best for study and photography, and the tracks will last better than with other materials. You can also use diatomaceous earth (available at pool supply stores; it's used in pool filters), chalk used to mark sports fields, or very fine sand. You can even use regular flour, though animals recognize this as a food and "nose around" in it, disturbing the substrate a lot. Flour also doesn't hold tracks very well. We suggest *not* wetting the substrate, as it tends to crust over and will not record light tracks well at all. It's best to sift your material using a small fine-meshed kitchen strainer or a piece of window screening. Experiment with the depth of the substrate; we've found that a thin layer works best.

About baiting. You may try putting the track station out un-baited, as little animals may investigate or move through the station anyway, especially if you've put it on a regular travel

route. If you place bait, we recommend a very small amount, for example half of a peanut, a tiny dab of peanut butter on a twig, or a few seeds. We've found that overdoing the amount of bait doesn't attract animals any better, and besides, the more bait there is, the more trips your animal makes into and out of the station, creating a very confusing mess of tracks which are hard to isolate and study. Please avoid baiting with non-natural foods such as chocolate or salted & preserved foods.

Covering the station. In our experience, various species of mice, chipmunks, woodrats, and insects will come regularly into the covered station; a lizard even explored one. (Set the cover by placing one edge of the aluminum against the dowel on one side of the board, then carefully bend the aluminum so the opposite side is seated against the other dowel.) However some common rodents including kangaroo rats don't seem to be comfortable going inside a tunnel. So, you may want to set the station without the cover now and then, especially if wind isn't an issue, to see if you get different animals. It's best then to bait and set the station toward dusk so that birds don't take your bait (unless you're hoping for bird tracks).

Making your track station

This design uses a piece of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch hardboard or Masonite (formerly a brand name) that is smooth on one side and rough or pebbly on the other. (It is the same material used for peg boards, but without the holes.) Having at least one rough side is important because if the upper surface is slick, the clay or chalk will slide off.

The dimensions of the board, 14 inches long by $6 \frac{5}{16}$ inches wide, are dictated by the size of the cover material described below, in this case aluminum coil flashing that is 14 inches wide. (You can get 10 inch wide flashing, which would make your station shorter, but you want the station long enough to capture more tracks.) Glue one length of $\frac{3}{8}$ inch diameter wood dowel on the upper (rough) edge of each side of the board, clamping the dowels in place as the glue sets. You can use regular wood glue, but if your track station is to be used where it might rain, you should use waterproof glue instead.

As a cover we use what is called "aluminum painted coil flashing" or "trim coil" manufactured by Amerimax. This is a roofing construction material widely available in hardware or lumber supply stores, and the product with brown on one side and white on the other is perfect to make the track station as inconspicuous as possible. The size we use for this track station is 14 inches wide and comes in coils 10 feet or 25 feet long. The 10 foot coil costs just over \$10 and will make 12 track station covers. Cut a piece from the coil $9 \frac{7}{8}$ inches wide so that the cover is $14 \times 9 \frac{7}{8}$ inches. You can use metal shears to cut it or simply score a line on the flashing with a box cutter or knife against a ruler, and bend the piece back to snap it off. (The $9 \frac{7}{8}$ inch width is exactly what is needed to fit on the board with enough tension to stay in place and not pop loose.) After you cut the cover, sand or file the edges a little so you will not cut yourself when setting the track station or removing the cover.