

How can I make a plaster cast of an animal track?

Question

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Answer

With a little trial and error casting with some common dog **tracks** you can develop your skills for making good casts of wild animal **tracks**.

Plaster can be found at any arts and crafts store in your community. Spend some time reading the directions and figuring out measurements needed to do your castings.

Plan ahead when you go hiking or camping. Measure out some plaster into a few plastic bags and find a suitable container for measuring water and mixing your plaster when needed. Use a container that you don't plan to use for food storage or preparation. The sandwich or snack containers are ideal for this task. You can measure your water in a measuring cup, pour it into the container and then mark the container with a marker or tape to show the water level needed when you are ready to mix your plaster.

The other items to bring will help contain your plaster around the animal track. Cut up a cereal box into long strips about two inches wide. Find some large paper clips. You can then paper clip the cardboard strips together into ovals or circles depending on the size of the animal track(s) you want to cast. If the ground is soft, it is a good idea to push the cardboard circle into the ground.

Materials to bring:

Pre-measured bags of plaster

Measuring/mixing container (you can find a stick to use as a stirrer)

Cardboard strips and paper clips

Water container with water

Fluorescent marker tape or cloth strips to mark the track location.

Directions:

1. Locate a track that you want to cast.
2. Paperclip your cardboard pieces together to your preferred cast size - allow at least two inches around the track. Place the cardboard circle around your animal track.
3. Measure your water to the marked line on your container.
4. Add your dry plaster powder to the water and mix thoroughly until it has a

pancake batter consistency.

5. Pour your plaster into the animal track and cardboard mold.
6. Gently spread the plaster without digging into the ground below so that you don't destroy your animal track.
7. Mark the location with the florescent tape or cloth strip tied to a stick.
8. Check back in a half hour to see how the plaster is setting. If the plaster is still soft, check back in another half hour.
9. When your plaster has hardened, remove the cardboard pieces and lift out you track.
10. Smooth the edges of your cast and avoid touching the animal track area until the plaster has dried.
11. When the cast is dry (check the directions on your plaster container), clean off any debris and use a dry paintbrush to clean off the dirt or sand.
12. On the back of your cast, use a pencil to write the location where you found the track and identify the animal* species. Include the date and your name for future reference.

Note: Remember to pack out your mixing containers. These can be reused once the plaster has dried. Avoid cleaning these containers in sinks as the plaster will clog the drain.

*The Internet has a variety of sites that show the **tracks** of animal species. FWC has information posted on its critter pages. Have fun identifying the animal **tracks** you find. Animal casts are good educational tools at nature centers--consider donating your casts if you want to help others learn about wildlife.