

Track Evidence in Anomalous Biological Reports: Substrate Constraints, Taphonomic Processes, and Interpretive Risk

Daniel H. Kegley
holstonia-investigations.org

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Abstract

Tracks and trackways are frequently cited as among the strongest forms of physical evidence in anomalous biological reports associated with Bigfoot. Because footprints appear to offer direct morphological information, they are often treated as more probative than audio or visual media. This paper evaluates track evidence as an evidentiary modality rather than as proof of organismal identity. Drawing on ichnology, sedimentology, wildlife tracking, and taphonomic research, the analysis examines how substrate properties, formation processes, and post-depositional alteration shape track appearance. The paper identifies dominant failure modes in track interpretation, explains why apparent

anatomical detail can arise without corresponding anatomy, and outlines conservative conditions under which track data may retain residual analytical value.

1. Introduction: Why Tracks Feel Compelling

Among forms of claimed evidence, tracks occupy a privileged psychological position. A footprint appears to be a direct physical trace left by an organism interacting with the environment, seemingly bypassing perceptual and narrative ambiguity. This intuitive appeal has made tracks central to many claims involving rare or disputed animals.

In formal wildlife biology, tracks are used routinely, but almost never in isolation. Professional tracking relies on substrate knowledge, patterning across multiple impressions, and corroboration with ecological context (Elbroch, 2003). This paper situates anomalous track claims within that broader scientific context and examines why tracks are both informative and uniquely vulnerable to overinterpretation.

2. Defining Track Evidence in Analytical Terms

For the purposes of this analysis, **track evidence** refers to impressions or disturbances in substrate alleged to result from the locomotion of an anomalous biological agent. This includes:

- isolated footprints,
- trackways consisting of multiple impressions,
- partial or degraded impressions,
- casts or photographs of impressions.

Track evidence must be distinguished from:

- interpretive overlays (e.g., inferred anatomy),
- witness testimony about the track maker,
- secondary representations such as enhanced images or diagrams.

The physical trace is the datum; anatomical inference is a hypothesis layered on top (Lockley, 1998).

3. Why Track Evidence Is Appealing

Tracks offer the promise of morphological information: size, foot structure, gait, and direction of travel. In ichnology, such inferences are made cautiously and always with reference to substrate mechanics and formation processes (Lockley, 1998).

In anomalous contexts, tracks are often perceived as superior to audio or video evidence because they appear tangible and measurable. However, this perception frequently underestimates the degree to which substrates deform dynamically and overestimates the fidelity with which impressions preserve anatomical structure.

4. Substrate Mechanics and Track Formation

4.1 Substrate Variability

Natural substrates vary continuously in grain size, moisture content, cohesion, and layering. Small changes in water content can dramatically alter how impressions form and persist (Allen, 1997).

Tracks formed in mud, sand, snow, leaf litter, or mixed substrates cannot be interpreted uniformly. The same foot can produce markedly different impressions within a few steps as substrate properties change.

4.2 Dynamic Pressure and Load Distribution

Footprints are not static stamps. They result from dynamic loading as weight transfers through the foot during locomotion. Pressure distribution, slip, and rotational forces can elongate, compress, or distort impressions (Manning, 2004).

Consequently, apparent toe length, arch depth, or heel shape may reflect substrate response rather than foot anatomy.

5. Taphonomy and Post-Depositional Alteration

Once formed, tracks are immediately subject to **taphonomic processes**—the physical and biological factors that alter traces after deposition.

These include:

- drying and cracking,
- rain erosion,
- freeze–thaw cycles,
- animal overprinting,
- sediment infill and collapse.

Such processes can enhance, erase, or generate apparent features over time, sometimes increasing perceived anatomical detail rather than reducing it (Allen, 1997; Lockley, 1998).

6. Common Failure Modes in Track Interpretation

6.1 Isolated Impressions

Single impressions are especially vulnerable to misinterpretation. Without a trackway, it is difficult to assess gait, stride length, or consistency, all of which are critical for inference (Elbroch, 2003).

6.2 Substrate-Induced Feature Illusions

Certain substrates can produce ridges, voids, or pressure artifacts that resemble toes, arches, or dermal ridges. These features may arise from sediment collapse or differential drying rather than from anatomical structures (Manning, 2004).

6.3 Overreliance on Casts

Plaster or dental stone casts are often treated as faithful replicas, yet casting can exaggerate fine surface irregularities and obscure formation context. Without detailed substrate documentation, casts preserve shape but not process (Lockley, 1998).

6.4 Confirmation Bias

Once a track is framed as anomalous, subsequent interpretation often converges toward expected features. Experimental and observational research shows that prior belief strongly influences morphological interpretation under ambiguity (Nickerson, 1998; Kahneman, 2011).

7. Why Tracks Fail as Standalone Evidence

Despite their intuitive appeal, tracks rarely meet standards required for organismal identification. In paleontology and wildlife biology, track evidence is used to infer presence, movement, or behavior—not to diagnose unknown species without corroboration (Lockley, 1998).

In anomalous biological contexts, the absence of:

- controlled substrate analysis,
- repeated trackways across conditions,
- independent replication,

renders track evidence insufficient as a standalone indicator.

8. Statistical Expectations if Tracks Indicated a Novel Organism

If tracks reliably reflected an unknown large terrestrial organism, several expectations would follow:

- consistent morphology across substrates,
- stride and gait patterns incompatible with known fauna,
- geographic clustering aligned with habitat suitability,
- repeated occurrence documented with standardized recording practices.

Reported track claims exhibit partial alignment with some expectations but substantial variability that undermines strong inference.

9. Where Track Evidence Retains Residual Value

Track evidence is not analytically useless. Residual value emerges when tracks are treated as **process data** rather than anatomical proof.

Tracks may contribute meaningfully when:

- multiple impressions form coherent trackways,
- substrate properties are documented in detail,
- impressions recur across conditions,
- and tracks are evaluated comparatively against known fauna.

In such cases, tracks constrain hypotheses without resolving them.

10. Using Track Evidence as an Analytical Filter in Practice

Applying track evidence conservatively requires shifting emphasis from morphology to formation.

10.1 Trackways Over Isolated Prints

Analytical weight should favor trackways rather than single impressions. Consistency across multiple steps is more informative than apparent detail in any one print (Elbroch, 2003).

10.2 Substrate Documentation

Detailed recording of substrate type, moisture, layering, slope, and disturbance history is essential. Without this context, morphological interpretation is unreliable (Allen, 1997).

10.3 Comparative Controls

Tracks should be compared against regional fauna under similar substrate conditions. Absence of an obvious match does not imply novelty (Lockley, 1998).

10.4 Pattern Over Precision

Fine-grained anatomical claims should be weighted lower than broader pattern features such as directionality, spacing, and recurrence. Precision without process is misleading (Manning, 2004).

10.5 Ethical and Interpretive Restraint

Analysts should avoid attributing species identity, intelligence, or intent to tracks. Track evidence constrains possibilities; it does not adjudicate them (Kahneman, 2011).

11. Interaction With Other Explanatory Filters

Track interpretation is especially sensitive to interaction with hoaxing, cultural transmission, and expectation effects. Once particular track features become culturally salient, interpretive convergence accelerates.

Treating tracks as one filter among many—rather than as privileged physical evidence—reduces false positives and preserves analytical discipline (Nickerson, 1998).

12. Synthesis: Constraint Without Confirmation

Tracks are real physical traces shaped by complex interactions between organism and substrate. Their apparent detail often reflects environmental processes rather than anatomy. When treated conservatively, track evidence can constrain hypotheses and support pattern analysis. When treated as proof, it reliably overreaches.

13. Implications for Future Analysis

Bounding the evidentiary role of tracks complements similar constraints applied to audio and visual media. Subsequent papers examine image and video evidence and then integrate residual patterns across modalities, culminating in research-design frameworks that treat weak signals collectively rather than individually.

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