

# AND THEN THERE WERE TWO: THE ART OF TRAILING

**L**et's start by clarifying the language being used here: "Trailing," in this context, refers to the act of following an animal's tracks for a distance across the surface of earth. The semantics really don't matter—some might call it "tracking", others "following", but none of that is of any importance as long as we all know what particular practice we're talking about. A "trail" in this article refers to a string of animal tracks, and not a path we follow through the woods. Good?



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Deep in the shadow of a temperate rainforest, trackers work a fresh bear trail, Washington State.

## Here's something to ponder:

Say we're following the trail of an old female black bear through the high desert. She's wandering among the piñon trees, drifting from cactus to cactus to munch on their plump burgundy fruit. As we follow her trail across hill and canyon, we are in fact following *two* animals. It may sound odd at first, but hear me out: one animal, of course, is her—the old gray-muzzled bear. The other animal, then? Her *trail*.





A fresh track showing distinctive shine, a change in the ground color that stands out to the tracker from afar.

Consider this for a moment. The trail—a long string of tracks laid out across the land—is itself a physical thing. It has its own personality, its own changes in “behavior” as it moves from damp forest duff to sun-baked clay, from shadow to light, from night to day, from fresh to weathered... all of which the tracker must learn to read. The trail hides from us, takes unexpected turns, tricks us, pulls us smoothly forward or leaves us lost, unable to orient to ourselves, to where we are, or to what we’re following.

The trail is a creature independent of the species that created it—the better we know the trail, the better we are at following any variety of wildlife across varied terrain.

There is a flip side: obviously, the more we know an animal the better we will be at trailing it. But as beginners we’re mostly limited by our ability to see subtle sign and to gracefully predict where the trail should go. As we advance in those two areas, the easier it is to follow any species. The two bases of knowledge—that of animal behavior and that of trailing—will eventually combine to be mutually beneficial. In other words, it is difficult to follow a bear and learn about its behavior when we lack the skill to do so. In time, though, knowledge of bear will help direct us through difficult sections of its trail.



Here are a few things to think about as we start the trailing journey:

## Do Less, Better.

Trailing, like any skill, is overwhelming in the beginning. The practice demands that we see challenging tracks, stay connected to the landscape ahead, efficiently recover the trail when we lose it, listen and watch for natural alarms, look for the animal we're following, move quietly, and consider the terrain to anticipate where the animal might be and what it's doing. And like any skill, high-level competency is often achieved as the practitioner becomes more skilled at knowing how to focus on less, better.

When a trail spills into large, open areas, beginners often search the ground at their feet, instead of noting where the trail was headed and looking for gateways, or pinch points, on the landscape ahead and checking them immediately for sign of the animal's passing. By doing the latter, we become more efficient at "flowing" down-trail, more easily predicting the animal's movement and at detecting very subtle tracks where we expect them to be. We narrow our search to the smaller, logically pinpointed areas and thus focus on less, better. As we become proficient at this we can instead spend our time looking ahead, watching for wildlife, and enjoying our stroll. We begin to *follow the trail, not the tracks*.




Gateways, or pinch points (to the left and right of the trees) allow the tracker to efficiently overlook open or difficult areas, saving time and energy.

## Anchor.

A common difference between beginners and more experienced trailers is their consciousness of an "anchor" they mark in their mind occasionally as they follow a trail. The beginner, having lost the trail,

will wander farther and farther from the last track, nose to the ground, searching through brush, stands of trees, over knolls and down gullies. Suddenly, they'll lift their head and have absolutely no idea

Photo: Casey McFarland



where the trail was. Why? Because they had no anchor—a known track in their trail that orients them to the trail itself and to the larger landscape. It is the track they can easily return to if needed, no matter how distant a search they just conducted. I've watched phenomenal trailers wander far and in their search—out of sight—and then return to one single

track in a thick forest as if by magic. They know that keeping track of the trail is as much a part of trailing as following. As in life, an anchor is a place, a position, that we can return to when we need to reorient to ourselves after casting out into the unknown.

Trailing requires the eye to look across the track from a distance. Here the tips of a deer track are what the tracker mostly sees.

## Find Fresh Trails.

Whenever possible, follow fresh or “live” trails, those that were made within a few hours. This requires that we stretch our ability to distinguish fresher trails from older, a skill unto itself. It's good to follow trails of varying ages, but when we aim to follow for distance, a fresh trail often makes the difference

between staying on your animal or getting lost in a maze of crisscrossing tracks of similar age. Remember too, that the goal of trailing (at least within the CyberTracker system) is to see the animal itself; very often it may take us as long to find a fresh trail as we can spend following it.



## Kick Tracking (Scuffing).

If we're drawn towards the art of trailing, what's most important to remember is that practice is accessible to us. It's easy to get caught up in exotic stories of trailing bears and wolves, rhinos and leopards. Those experiences are fine and dandy, but keep in mind that the trail itself—that dynamic animal that teaches us so much—is out there waiting in the backyard or that scraggly patch of woods down the street. We can't let a false notion of trailing, difficult substrate, or home turf that lacks larger animals bar us from the satisfaction of a trailing practice. Many folks may live in areas with only deer, and lots of them. Their trails are often a chaotic tangle that overpowers the tracker's ability to cover any meaningful distance.

A remedy? Follow yourself. It may sound somewhat unromantic but it's a priceless practice. It's straightforward, and always at your disposal. Walk out into

your area, and where earth is resistant to leaving sign of your passing, kick lightly, twist, or scuff the ground as you go (hence my fairly lackluster term "kick tracking.") The key is to create just enough of a disturbance that your eye can pick it up and calibrate the brain to see what had been previously imperceptible. Make the trail follow-able, but challenging. It can be useful to bring along a GPS if you've got one, walk for a half mile, a mile, or whatever you can (short bursts of practice are great, too) and trail yourself back. Trail time stacks up, and it's rewarding to watch. Imagine how your ability will have grown when you've logged 5 miles of trail. Or 10, or 15. This practice will also automatically increase your ability to follow other animals in your region.

## Embrace the Search.

Lose the trail. Find it, and lose it again.

Losing trail is not failure in any sense, it's an integral part of the process. Losing and finding in this art reflects the natural rhythm of graceful give and take, of continuum or discontinuity, of connection to self and connection to others. When we stray from the trail—when the thread that keeps us connected to that which we're following is momentarily severed—we are given the opportunity to hone and demonstrate our skill the most: our ability is defined by how we find the trail again, not whether we lost it in the first place. Remember that the best trackers in the world lose the trail... they're just exceptionally good at getting back on it.

## Learning.

You'll learn a ton by getting out on your own, but like anything, getting out with someone who can streamline your practice is of major benefit. There are a variety of approaches to trailing, ranging from man-tracking to animal oriented practices. There's something to be learned from each philosophy you encounter. If you're interested in following and finding animals, learning to flow on trail, and want to better know the wildlife in your area, I'd suggest looking into the CyberTracker system. Take courses with competent folks with good training, or jump in on a Trailing Evaluation once you've got some time under your belt. I don't recommend you start your trailing journey by taking an evaluation, however. They're far less discussion-based than Track and Sign Evaluations. You'll receive feedback, but only at the end of two days. Much better to take a solid, interactive course to get started!

Lastly, this is a life long practice—we'll never stop learning or getting better. Enjoy, and don't take yourself too seriously. This expression of our particular sensory and cognitive ability is a major constituent of our lineage, a trail unto itself that wanders back through our evolutionary development as Homo sapiens.

So head out and satisfy the deep urge of our early hominid selves to follow and learn from the others, to read track and sign, and to watch our sense of self blend with the animal we pursue. There is always a trail out there, whether we create it or it's made by something else. Find it, and start following.



Photo - Casey McFarland

Trackers on the trail of elk. Note that they're looking ahead, not at their feet, despite the difficult substrate. New Mexico.

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