

FLUENCY AND THE LANGUAGE OF TRACKING

PART 2

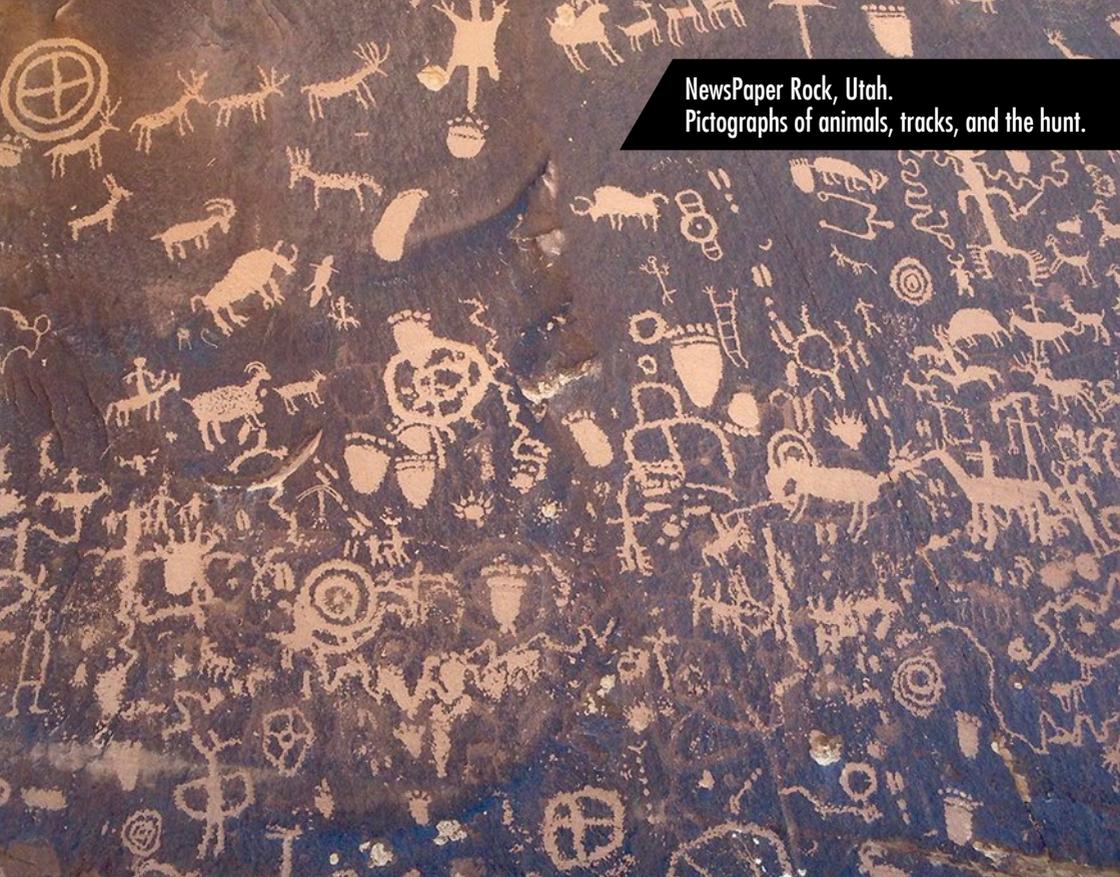
By Casey McFarland

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The familiar tracks of a dove,
wandering the hot sands outside Dubai

Photo - Casey McFarland



NewsPaper Rock, Utah.
Pictographs of animals, tracks, and the hunt.

THE PRACTICE

We know that the ability to read the wilds fluently—to easily and accurately soak up massive amounts of information about a landscape and its wildlife—is the product of massive amounts of practice. It comes from years of exposure to the passing of animals across earth's surface, and from long hours pondering animal lives.

Some folks believe that as the art of tracking died out around the planet we lost critical elements of tracking skill that could never be regained. But for myself and others that prescribe to the idea that we humans are who we are *because* of our long intertwinement with animals, and that our minds developed the way they did in large part because of our long history reading animal sign, I'd say we've only lost a bit of time, not ability. When we wholeheartedly apply ourselves again to tracking (or hunting, for that matter), two million years+ of doing just that comes back fast.

For thousands of centuries we learned to read and absorb the signs of animals, filling our minds with their physical bodies, their movements and their strategies for life. In turn we adapted their ways into our own. Track and sign was the storyboard that made up a massive portion of the matrix for our experience with ourselves as humans and our greater world; whether or not any of us thinks about it much, our cognitive makeup exists largely due to the beasts that roamed the earth back then. The modern world is still ripe with opportunity to tap back into that rich history, to tap into meaningful "relationship" with animals by investing our time into carefully examining the traces and stories they leave behind. We have a knack for this stuff, and it's good to remember that. But how do we most effectively develop that knack?

Photos - Casey McFarland

There are few tricks of the trade that make our journey more efficient and accelerate the growth or our skill. There's nothing magic here—no replacements for putting in a lot of hard work—but the following topics are concepts that I've found useful to trackers looking to become "fluent."

LOCATIONS

To start at the obvious, there's no substitute for getting out into the field (woods, bush, whichever overarching title suits you.) If we're not getting out and seeing track and sign we're simply not learning as fast as we could be. Reading and looking through field guides is an excellent supplement (I'll discuss that later) but can't replace wandering through forest and desert, mountain and grassland and exercising our eyes and our brains.

I often see folks flounder because *they don't have good spots to go*. Six months may pass, and all that initial inspiration to become an experienced tracker has waned because they only got out once or twice.

Think of finding good areas to practice tracking like finding *good hunting grounds*. In the beginning especially, we need to *put in as much time finding places to practice* as we do actually practicing. It's no use to buy a rifle or bow and all the right gear and then set off to hunt an overgrown parking lot. Put considerable effort into searching out those rich locations; if you're new to the skill or to an area, spend a few full days finding the best river banks, ponds, bridges, stretches of woods with a lot of deer, etc., that you possibly can. You want your life to be brimming with options.

TIME: SHORT, FREQUENT BURSTS

Avoid the pitfall that you need five hours to get a good day in. That's great to do when we can, but what we really need is five minutes. Five minutes to turn that part of the brain on. Five minutes to remind us of why we love "tracking" and to feel like we're learning. Swing into one of your many spots on the way home from work, be it a bridge or a patch of woods you know the deer hang out, and spend 15 minutes there. We always return home a better tracker than when we started, and it stacks up fast.



FIND THAT ONE LAST THING

Motivation is going to wax and wane. When we're out on a longer session we'll sometimes tire towards the end, becoming less attentive, even bored. That moment is an opportune time to recognize that feeling and decide to look for that "one last thing." Almost always there's *something* that will reveal itself and pull us back to full attention. Search for it, find it, and head home on a high note. The same goes if we're practicing trailing (following an animal's tracks across the landscape.) At the end of a day when we're exhausted and hungry it's easy to call it quits when we lose the trail. But if we push ourselves to find that one last track it gives us reason to stay on course and end on a success. Even if we don't actually find it, we know we've led our focus as far as we could.

DON'T OVERLOOK THE COMMON STUFF

A major pitfall we will encounter as our skill develops is the readiness to overlook things we've "mastered." In North America, raccoons are a great example. Being ubiquitous critters, they leave tracks by the gazillions across most of the continent and so we often pass them by to look for more "exciting" sign. And yet in the morphology of raccoon feet lies a distinct tool for understanding the morphology of countless other animals, and the abundance of their tracks allows us the opportunity to practice a larger concept over and over; we leave the raccoon more prepared for mink, badger, otter, skunk, or vole. Deer are another example—an animal whose dainty tracks can be easily dismissed. But deer are essential gateways to the woods in so many aspects—a door to learning behavior, natural history and larger use of a landscape. When we find deer tracks or beds for example, we want to stop and push ourselves; are these females and young? Or bucks? Did this bed belong to a buck or a doe? Our questions change as the seasons do, following the natural rhythm of land and ungulate. What has become simple to us is only an invitation to continue to peel back the layers for deeper skill and understanding.



READ. AND WATCH!

Looking through guides at track and sign is indeed akin to being in the field; we're able to discover things out there because we first saw them in a photograph. But reading about behavior is also paramount. It's one thing to know a track, it's another to know something about the animal that made it. Books specifically on the natural history and behavior of wildlife are excellent, as are academic articles (Google Scholar is an excellent tool for finding papers and reading abstracts), and will shape the way we look for sign and how we ourselves behave in the woods. What we're really doing on this tracking journey is immersing in animals, plain and simple. We're happily agreeing to learn as much about them and therefore from them as we can. Reading, watching documentaries, nature programs—whatever it is that keeps animals occupying the landscapes of our minds—will make us better trackers. And of course, if we're lucky, we can get out and watch the animals themselves.

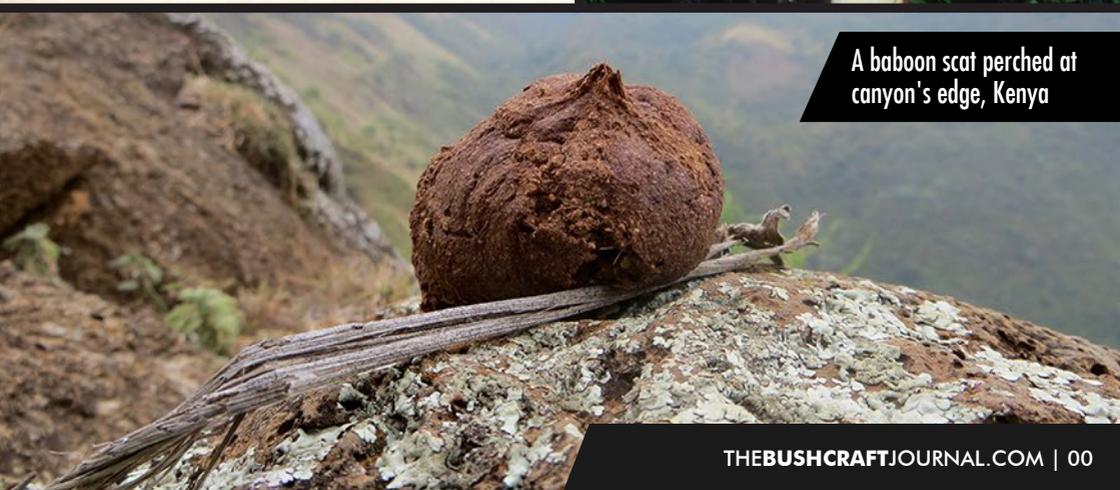
DON'T BEAT YOURSELF UP

Look, we may not always have the same level of enthusiasm that we did when first learned about the art of tracking. Life happens. There will be days you don't want to get out or times when you don't care as much as you once did. Keep in mind that doesn't mean you don't love the skill! This is a life-long practice—we'll learn until the day we die with ups and downs along the way. Sometimes it's not going to seem all that satisfying and that's okay. We acknowledge that and move forward.

Photos - Casey McFarland



Spring cambium feeding of a black bear, Washington State



A baboon scat perched at canyon's edge, Kenya



LEARN FROM OTHERS

And share what you've learned. Spending time in the field with trackers that are better than us makes us better, quickly. Be open with where you're at. CyberTracker Evaluations are great for this because not only do they give us a comprehensive look at where we're strong and where we have work to do, they encourage us all to be humble and open with our peers (and students) and eager to keep moving forward. We want to carry that attitude into the world—it makes us all better, faster.

The intricate elephant track headed towards camera, Kenya

GET OUT BY YOURSELF

Getting out with better trackers is of obvious benefit. But I often hear about a common trap; people don't think they learn as much on their own and so don't get out as much as they actually could. *This may be the single greatest mistake we can make.* Every one of the best trackers I know across the globe have certainly learned from others, but the biggest common denominator in their phenomenal skill level is the amount of time they put in quietly working through tracks and sign on their own. This will be the heart of your practice, and of your eventual tracking fluency.

A FEW FINAL TIPS

Photography is extremely useful. Take photos of things you find on your excursions; pulling them up on the computer later that day gives you a second tracking experience and is good for comparing directly to pictures in guides, etc. And if you're so inclined, draw tracks in the field—it's a wonderful tool for setting morphology firmly in the meat of our brain.

What's likely most important is that we enjoy this stuff. Marvel at it: we are in many regards the product of our ancestors doing this very thing successfully for a very, very long time. Don't get too caught up in particular nomenclature or philosophies. We will learn a lot from other humans, but in the end, it's the animals we turn to for that deeper knowledge.

Photo - Casey McFarland

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The nose marks of a Black-tailed Prairie dog,
firming up a burrow entrance after heavy rain, Colorado



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