



Tracking and the Art of Seeing *By Steven Hanton*

We hunched over a mound of discoloured snow, breathed hard on the ground to release the scent and smelled hard. It was familiar to Dan and I, a faint odour of pine trees and musk, reminiscent of the urine of domestic cats but more pungent. In typical tracker style we gave away none of our thoughts as we discussed what we had found. 'What do you think it is?' I asked. A long pause preceded his reply, 'I don't know, what do you think it is?' This kind of questioning can be a lengthy process with Dan, and I have learned that it is pointless to push him. Dan is a tracker, and by definition he has learned to consider all factors, eliminate possibilities rather than jump to 'obvious' conclusions, and be patient and focused. 'What would your best three guesses be?' he asked without looking up from the ground. 'Coyote, Bobcat and Lynx', I replied. 'Why?' he asked. I gave my reasons, and so it went on.

Following Canada Lynx can be hell on earth. They inhabit the northern boreal regions of the North American

continent where they feed almost exclusively on Snowshoe Hares. Hares seek out the thickest, young stands of coniferous trees for food and cover. Following Lynx as they pursue their prey through this tangle of spiky vegetation can be a real test of one's patience, and after ripping my trousers for a third time, I paused to remember why I was there. Dan had invited me to track with him on a citizen science program in Maine, where scientists

value the ancient art of tracking as the most unobtrusive and reliable way to collect data on Canada Lynx. This form of non-invasive wildlife monitoring is gaining ground in scientific circles, and is one way that tracking is enjoying a renewed sense of purpose.

Images: Top. L - R. Lynx Tracks in snow, Maine; Red Fox, England; Badger hair, England; Nest, Maine; Below: Lynx track , Maine



I had met Dan while apprenticing at 'White Pine Programs' in Southern Maine, USA, as an outdoor education (OE) student. White Pine run an array of outdoor programs but natural history and tracking is their bread and butter. I remember waking up on my first morning, peering out from behind the flap of my tipi home, and being confronted by what looked like a pair of giant, black chickens with red mohicans. Running through the forest I burst into the office to confront ornithologist Dan. 'What are they?' I blurted. Dan smirked and threw a tatty old field guide at me. 'Look it up' he said. Typical.

Tracking is like learning to read. You start with the basics - letters, progress to words, and finally increasingly complicated sentences. I see the letters as your senses - the information gathering tools you must attune first of all. Natural history information represents the language specific words - the weather, plants, trees, insects, mammals and birds specific to the environment in which you are. Finally, once your senses are attuned and you have built up a natural history library inside your head, you can begin to understand how everything fits together. To follow a Lynx in the boreal forest requires the same skills as following a fox through the woods behind your grandma's house - you must know your letters, words and sentences.

I should offer here that tracking is not only the process of following an animal using visual signs. I consider that a narrow definition. Interpreting bird language is tracking, which leaves no visible sign but contains inherent wisdom. Tracking is a holistic process, requiring a combination of skills, experience and intuition. It is about understanding what is going on and why - a deep relationship with a place and its inhabitants, made possible by the senses, body and brain, and fostered through experience.

When good trackers are out in the woods, they do track, rather, they never stop tracking. They do not, as with



canoeing, tie up their boat and turn to other matters. They can't afford to - there's too much to see, too much to listen to, and one never knows when the most subtle piece of information will come in handy. It is almost a childlike state of uninterrupted inquisitiveness, developed through necessity by our ancestors to perpetuate survival. This does not mean that you cannot do anything else while tracking, but that good trackers remain remarkably observant at all times.

I think tracking is fundamentally different to most outdoor pursuits, as it is better described as a way of being rather than an activity. For some it is indivisible from outdoor life; when one is outside, one is always tracking. In my work, tracking underlies almost all I teach. I always try to encourage a deep relationship with a place and its inhabitants, and I am an avid exponent of experience. I teach, for example, that to know a plant you must watch it through the seasons, noting its



location and its characteristics, and importantly ask why these things are what they are. In essence I teach that you should track the plant.

Britain seems to be increasingly disconnected with the natural world. I think it stems from the fact that most of us no longer directly rely on it in such a way which forces us to learn about and respect it. Local plants, gathered by hand, are for most people no longer a larder, tool-shed or medicine cabinet. Our resources often have an unknown origin and we know nothing of their harvest. The result is that a connection is inevitably lost, and with it a respect for what those things mean to us. I think this leads us to take them for granted, which contributes to overexploitation, and that we're seeing the effects of this globally in deforestation, overfishing and climate change among other issues.

What is the link between tracking, OE and environmental issues? The OE programmes I experienced as a child were not place specific, and I can remember the fear of the abseil but not the name of the cliff. I'm not suggesting that this trivialised the experience, rather missed an opportunity. The position we find ourselves in as outdoors people presents an abundance of opportunities to re-establish a connection, but we should not assume that this will be an automatic by-product of an outdoor experience. We must foster it.

Tracking has been tested and refined rigorously over time. It was the outdoor activity of our ancestors. It was a mindset required for survival for most of our history. And yet it has been discarded in the blink of an eye; considered un-required, primitive, worthlessly antiquated. It has rapidly made way for new forms of wholly modern outdoor activities, which often

Images: Top - Black Bear, Aspen, Colorado. Bottom - Soft Rush Beetle by Shirke



compliment modern values. I'm not trying to nullify these pursuits, only suggest that we may not be so quick to ignore our traditional relationship with the natural environment. It has served us well.

I present tracking as a way of being in the outdoors, and I see a benefit to its central principles permeating throughout OE. Tracking, whether acknowledging local bird calls, watching how the weather affects the presence of insects, or trailing deer for a mile over difficult terrain, strongly encourages a connection to that landscape. In a sense, who could be better connected to the natural world, than indigenous people who know their place so intimately, that they can actually live there permanently and in comfort? Just think for a moment about what that means. Now consider that tracking in its most broad sense is a pillar of this ability. Is there not some learning to be taken from this type of relationship, a demeanour worth preserving in our modern OE?

Tracking requires no equipment other than your body and simply requires that you pay attention. You need to trust your senses' information gathering potential and be inquisitive and curious. Make predictions and



follow things up when you can. It is my belief that the extra effort spent in observation will be rewarded by a deeper sense of knowing, and help to foster a respect for the natural world in you, and others around you. I have witnessed this in myself and in others I have taught tracking skills to.

Tracking has become an integral part of all my outdoor life. On passing my mountain leader award last year, I persuaded two cousins to join me for a day on An Caisteal, near Crianlarich in Scotland. Not five minutes into the walk, I found a Great-Diving Beetle impaled on the tip of a stem of Soft Rush, by what I believed to be a bird

called a Shrike. Excited with my find, I collected the specimen, tucked it into an old film capsule I always carry, and set about exploring the rest of the wetland for more wildlife signs, completely forgetting the aim of the day and my role as 'mountain guide'. My cousin Jennifer looked on puzzled as I crawled around the bog, and joked, 'most people walk with their eyes closed, you walk with yours open'. We did not make the summit that day, but such is the life of a tracker. ■

References

The title for this article is shamelessly lifted from an excellent book - 'Tracking and the Art of Seeing', written by Paul Rezendes. For those interested in British track and sign identification see the seminal 'Animal Tracks and Signs', by Preben Bang and Preben Dahlstrom. 'Practical Tracking', by Louis Liebenberg et al. is an excellent guide to finding and trailing animals.

Author's Notes

Steven Hanton is an instructor for 'Woodsmoke' and teaches a broad range of survival and wilderness subjects such as botany, wild food, wood carving, shelter building and tracking. He has expedition experience in arctic, desert and jungle environments and is a certified 'Track and Sign Level III Interpreter' for North America.

Photographs - all by the author

Images: Top, L-R, Teaching tracking, England; Mountain Hare, Scotland; Bushmen Trackers, Namibia.