tracking

what is it?

Tracking is the art and science of detecting, identifying and following signs left by animals. A ‘sign’ is anything that indicates that an animal is or has been in the area, or tells you about its behaviour. Some examples of signs (or 'spoors') are: tracks (footprints); trails or runs (pathways made by animals); scat (poo) or urine; beds (resting or sleeping places); calls or cries; burrows or dens (living or breeding areas); rubs (fur, hair or feathers left by intentional or accidental rubbing against objects such as trees); shed skins; evidence of feeding; and scratches or bite marks on trees or vegetation. The animal being tracked is sometimes referred to as the ‘quarry’, particularly when hunted. Expert trackers are able to ‘read’ the ground to identify a specific animal, get information about its activities, hypothesise about its movements and follow its trail for several days - all from the signs it leaves behind. Tracking is used in hunting, conservation or research - or simply for the sheer pleasure of finding and observing animals in their natural habitat.

For early hunter-gatherer societies, the ability to find food or detect threats literally meant the difference between life and death. Tracking was necessary not just to find the quarry in the first place, but also to follow the trail of a wounded animal if it wasn’t immediately killed. Over the millennia, tracking skills have gradually been lost by most cultures as technology has allowed us to evolve past subsistence living, culminating in the near-total disconnection from our food sources in the developed world today. While many cultures still practice hunting, technologies such as telescopic rifle scopes have removed the need to get close to the quarry, and today only very few indigenous cultures still use tracking for survival.

Like human fingerprints, every animal has a unique footprint that can be used to determine its species (whether it's a hoof, paw or claw, how big it is, what shape, how many toes, claws etc.), the direction, speed and purpose of travel (whether fleeing a predator or stalking prey), how it moves (gait), when it passed through (by how fresh or degraded the track is), and sometimes even its sex or state of health (abnormal gait may indicate an injury, for example). The size of the tracks can also indicate whether it’s young or fully grown and smaller tracks alongside larger ones may mean a female with young. Trackers primarily follow these footprints, scanning for other signs along the way to confirm their impressions (scat, evidence of feeding, broken or bruised vegetation caused by the animal pushing through, whether the bruising is still fresh and wet or older and scarred, etc.). Experienced trackers can also tell the difference between paths made and used by a number of animals (the superhighways of the forest) and species-specific runs. Runs are particularly useful to hunters as you know which animal you are likely to encounter. Any natural surface responds to an animal’s footfall, but soft mud or sand hold tracks really well, whereas hard ground or leaf litter are much more difficult to read.

Roe deer and tracks in the snow.

The droppings of different species vary greatly in size, shape, composition and quantity. The freshness of scat also tells you when the animal was there and holds a wealth of information on health, diet (e.g. carnivore or herbivore), seasonal variations and whether food is plentiful or scarce at that time (i.e. whether a predator has eaten every morsel of a kill or not). Scat and urine deposits are a key form of communication for many animals which have scent glands in their anus and use strategically placed droppings to communicate territorial boundaries or availability for mating. Animals may also be able to tell what predators are up to from smelling its scat or urine.

A good tracker needs patience, perseverance, keen observation skills and most importantly, to be able to put themselves in the animal’s position to extrapolate about its activity and intentions.

Some cultures, like these San people of the Kalahari, have retained ancient tracking skills.

Some animals, like snakes, leave evidence of their proximity when they shed their skin.

what are the benefits?

Apart from connecting us to our past, being able to interpret signs and follow a trail is hugely enjoyable and it's really gratifying to see an animal in the wild that you would have missed without tracking skills. Being able to 'read' nature fills in the blanks in our understanding of our environment and gives us an increased appreciation of and connection to it. Understanding animals can also help conquer the innate fear and ignorance that sometimes leads to them being needlessly killed, harmed or otherwise interfered with. Like any outdoor pursuit, tracking is great for getting you up and moving and keeping you in shape. It teaches you discipline and patience and provides great mental stimulation.

Tracking is an important part of sustainable hunting practices, not only to find the animal in the first place, but also to follow it and finish it off if wounded. Along with other bushcraft skills, the ability to track and hunt provides you with the means to survive from the land and is potentially lower impact than other methods of hunting such as baiting (artificially providing a source of food alters the behaviour of other animals nearby).

Tracking can also be useful in conservation or research. Data on animal behaviour and migrations provided by GPS collars or direct observation are a vital part of ecology and climate change studies. However, fitting a collar usually involves trapping and/or tranquilising the animal, which can cause stress, while direct observation runs the risk of detection and/or influencing the animal's behaviour.

what can I do?

There are loads of printed and online resources, or attend a course (see resources). You might find binoculars useful, plus camera, tape measure for sizing tracks, magnifying glass for discerning details, and a torch. Once you've picked up some basic skills you can practice them anywhere, from forest to local park, or even your back garden. Think about what kind of animals might live in the area and what signs they might leave. Ground varies in terms of 'readability', so start off by looking for 'track traps' - areas of soft ground that easily take and retain a footprint, such as snow, mud or sand. Winter or autumn are good times to learn as the ground is likely to be softer after rain.

Most animals have senses of hearing and smell far superior to ours and are easily startled, so it's important to be quiet. Avoid stepping on noisy surfaces like dead leaves or dry grass. Whether hunting for food or just observing, respect your quarry and other animals by being as non-intrusive as possible. Getting too close or damaging foraging areas can cause distress and disturb behaviour, potentially leading to abandoning young or territory, interrupting breeding or even death. If you come upon an animal unexpectedly, try to stay downwind of it, move slowly and carefully to avoid disturbing it further and under no circumstances damage its den or other areas it may be using.

Be aware of what can harm you (e.g. stinging plants or insects, or snakes like adders). Some trackers recommend not handling scat with bare hands, though it can yield a lot of information. As with any outdoor activity, take plenty of food, water, map or GPS, appropriate clothing and footwear, check the weather forecast, keep your phone charged and let someone know where you're going and when you expect to be back.

resources

- lowimpact.org/tracking for info, courses, links & books, including:
- Ray Mears, *Animal Tracks & Signs*
- Liebenberg, Louw & Elbroch, *Practical Tracking*
- Tom Brown, *Nature Observation & Tracking*
- britishwildlife.wikia.com/wiki/Tracks_%26_Signs - UK wildlife tracks
- naturetracking.com - US site with lots of info
- bear-tracker.com - ditto