

# **Fish and Wildlife Law Enforcement Man Tracking Awareness**

**Charles M. Radcliff, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Resources, 17 Ken Drive, Beaver Dam, KY 42320**

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*Abstract:* Fish and wildlife officers are trained in most aspects of law enforcement, arrest, search and seizure, all types of criminal investigations, fish and wildlife identification, firearms, drugs, interrogation, driving, and so on, but fewer may be trained in something they do just about every day and which could be life saving: tracking.

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By simple definition, tracking is following evidence left by someone or something. Tracking is both the application of investigative strategy and operation tactics. It is virtually impossible for a person to pass through an area without leaving evidence of his passing. The key is being able to recognize these signs and apply their meaning. Tracking is an acquired skill.

As a wildlife enforcement officer, how many times have you found a truck parked and walked up to it, walked all around the truck, looked inside, the walked over to look up and down the road or out in the fields or woods before you finally look down at the ground only to find your own tracks all over the place? Already, it's harder to tell how many people were in the truck, which way they went, and what type of shoe or boot they were wearing. How many times have you driven down a dead-end dirt road and said to yourself, "no one is in here," then you turn around to start back but find you can't see your own tracks?

An untrained person stepping on a good track or sign is unfortunate, but a law enforcement officer doing the same is inexcusable. Is this the officer's fault or the lack of some very important training?

Any track or sign is considered evidence until proven otherwise. Once a track is destroyed it cannot be reconstructed. If the objective is to find a lost person, destroying a sign can literally mean the difference between life and death. If the track is at a crime scene, and if it is destroyed and later you get a suspect, you will be unable to match the print with the suspect's boots or shoes. This could have been the turning point in your case.

I once assisted the Kentucky State Police in a murder investigation on a body I found on the Peabody Wildlife Management Area. The measurement and drawing I

made of the shoe prints at the crime scene helped the state police obtain a confession from the suspect.

In law enforcement, we are taught to get the job done correctly, and as fast as possible in order to resume patrol or answer other calls. But in tracking, you need to slow your mind down to pick out details normally missed.

A complete print is not always possible to find. More times than not, only fragments of prints are seen. A walking person leaves signs every 18 to 20 inches, 3,000 times per mile (Michael 1994). Finding a small percentage of sign should not be difficult. The problem is learning to determine what is relevant and what is not.

Depending upon the environment, a tracker may look for bent grass, broken twigs, flattened soil, disturbed brush, compressed stones, and many other signs. At times you look for what is not there, not just what is.

As wildlife officers, we often find a vehicle parked back in the woods. A vehicle and footprints can tell a story if we will take time to read it. We can look at the ground to tell the number of people who got out of the vehicle and what kind of foot gear they have. We can learn their direction of travel. We might be able to tell if they are carrying or dragging something, or perhaps set something down then picked it up.

We can also be careful to look at the truck. On dusty vehicles we can look for handprints and notice which door was opened and the one that was not. We can tell if they opened the tail-gate or trunk and whether they had a 4-wheeler or boat. If there's a boat trailer we have some idea of the type of boat. If the truck has a dog box in the back you might be able to tell the type of dogs. Dogs will leave tracks and signs. We may be able to tell whether the person is commercial or not.

You may be able to tell how long the truck has been there. Is the engine hot? Is there dew on it? Is there water dripping off it or wet mud? Is it broken down? (I once made the mistake of watching a vehicle for four hours unaware that it had no drive shaft.)

The inside of the vehicle tells a lot about the person we are looking for. We can usually tell if the person is hunting or fishing. Empty shell boxes and other items left in the vehicle may indicate the species hunted. We can tell whether he is a trapper by certain equipment left behind or a mussel shell diver from small pieces of shell in the bed of the truck. From looking inside the vehicle we can find out if the individual smokes, chews tobacco or gum, eats candy, what he drinks, and the brands of all of these. This can help a lot when tracking. Sometimes you can tell if the individual uses drugs or has gone into the woods to check on his marijuana patch. From just taking a little time and not destroying evidence you can learn a whole lot about the individual you are looking for.

You should also run the license plate so you have the owner's name and address. Now you should have some information about the individual you are looking for.

Now to follow the track, take your time and look before you step on something and destroy it, or, in the case of a booby trap, it destroys you. You may also want to be careful not to leave any tracks so you won't be detected later, for example, if you are checking on a marijuana patch. You will need to walk to the left or right of the track you are following so you don't destroy the track. Do not advance beyond a print

until you find the next one. You may need to mark the track and move to your left or right to get a better angle. You may need to do a half circle and look. If you are working with a tracking team, tell your left or right flanker—or both—to move around so they can get a better angle on the tracks.

The angle of available light (sun or artificial light source) plays an important part in tracking. Signs and tracks are easiest to see while facing the light at a low angle to the ground since this casts long shadows. This will bring out the details of any depression on the ground, making signs easier to see. When moving around, be careful not to trample evidence. You may have a better view to look at only your own foot prints and nothing else. Always remember where you walked.

Consider this situation: A hunter comes out of the woods without a gun, but you heard a shot. All you do is backtrack the person, with the step-by-step method. If it is nighttime, no problem. Most times, tracking at night is easier because you can control your light source. Just remember the best light is from a diffused source, such as a Coleman lantern with deflectors (no spotlights).

Finding evidence is where tracking can help the most. As a fish and wildlife officer, I've tracked and caught a number of marijuana growers on wildlife management areas. I have also been asked by the Kentucky State Police and other law enforcement agencies to assist them when looking for fugitives in the woods and finding reported marijuana growers. Tracking has taught me to look more closely at everything.

With the tracking skills I have learned over the years from schools and on my own, I have been able to make or assist in making several arrests, involving out-of-season deer, turkey, and squirrel hunters, illegal musselers, and even murderers. I have found turkey bait, all kinds of hidden illegal wildlife, guns, fishing gear, 2 stolen 4-wheelers, and much more. I was also able to find the shell casing from a rifle that was used to try to kill a deputy sheriff, plus one time I found a handgun for a sheriff's department that the subject hid in the woods. Several people had looked for the gun unsuccessfully. They called me the next day and I found it in less than an hour.

Tracking and luck does work for fish and wildlife officers. I once got a call on a 10-point buck killed out of season. The landowner wanted me to come out to look at the big deer. He said he had seen a squirrel hunter with a shotgun in the area, but he didn't know the hunter. He didn't see a car or truck in the area. I didn't have any other calls so I went out to meet the landowner. He showed me the deer. No one was around, but there were some tracks in addition to the landowner's. I back-tracked the deer and the footprints about a half mile. I found the place the deer had been shot by the blood and hair on the ground. I also back-tracked the subject tracking the deer and found where he was located when he shot the deer, plus a fresh 20-gauge slug shell casing. I returned to the deer and after taking some pictures, I asked the landowner to take the deer back to his house. I also asked if he knew the type of shotgun the squirrel hunter had. He said a single shot. He also told me what the squirrel hunter looked like.

I then followed the footprints leading away from the deer. They were the same as the ones that tracked the deer to begin with. Over 2 farms I followed those tracks and they ended at the door to a trailer. I knocked, and the subject came to the door wearing the shoes I had been tracking. Before it was all over I had the deer, the

20-gauge slug, the 20-gauge shell casing, the 20-gauge shotgun, impressions of the footprints and shoes. The subject pleaded guilty in court.

I know I have been telling “war stories” but I want you to know that tracking has worked for me and it will work for you and your department. Tracking should be the first thing you think of, not the last.

A very basic track awareness course can be taught in about 24-hours with no prerequisite training, or it can take as long as you are willing to learn. A very good basic man tracking course takes about 50 hours. This would include classes on map and compass, basic survival, stealth movement, booby traps, equipment needed for tracking, how a sign cutting stick works, detecting sign, aging sign, sign cutting, jump tracking, tracking the evader, lost person questionnaire, how a tracking team works, water crossings, plus many hours of field work, including day and night tracking. However, each department’s training may be different because of prior training. New officers’ training would be longer.

Tracking can also be very important to your department in the area of public relations. Catch or track down a poacher and it may get in the newspaper somewhere. But track down someone’s lost child or grandmother, then see what happens. Also, if a member of your department tracks down a murderer, the story will get in the paper and on television.

Wildlife officers spend more time in the woods than any other law enforcement officer, so we should know more about the woods and be the best tracker in the country. But we could be better with proper training.

I have worked as a wildlife officer for over 23 years. In the last few years I have seen our department’s name go from not being mentioned in the newspaper to “Department of Fish and Wildlife Officers make arrest, assisted by federal, state and country police.” Don’t get me wrong—I’m a fish and wildlife officer and proud of it. But with my knowledge about the outdoors and tracking, I’ve gained the respect of other federal, state, and county law enforcement officers when it comes to catching someone off the blacktop. They call me and ask for our assistance now. In return, our department gets good public relations. I get to have fun catching someone, while the other agency’s officers get most of the paper work.

I can also pick up my county sheriff’s radio or my county hand-held radio (bought and paid for by the county sheriff’s department) and call for help from members of the sheriff’s office or the Kentucky State Police on fish and wildlife cases and get it, because we now work together.

Perhaps your state has tracking dogs. They work well with man-tracking teams. Example: a wildlife officer sees someone kill a deer out of season. The suspect runs off in the woods. The officer calls for help. The first officers there look around in the woods before the dog gets there: a tracker can help the dog and handler find the right track to get started on. Plus, along the way, a tracker can watch for tracks or characteristics of the trail that the dog is following, giving the dog and handler confidence to finish the chase. What happens if the nearest tracking dog is three counties away or the handler is on leave or out of town? In most places every county has a wildlife officer.

Your state has search and rescue teams. I have met some of them. They do a great job and work for free. I have attended one of their tracking schools, and believe me, if I'm lost or hurt in the woods and can't get out, I would rather have six well-trained wildlife officers—that's two tracking teams—looking for me than 200 half-trained search and rescue personnel.

There have been many studies done on lost person behavior. Most people are found within three miles of the last point seen. A lost person capable of going 5 km in any direction creates a search pattern covering 78 km<sup>2</sup>. To cover an area this size with traditional search methods would take 264 searchers 12 days (Michael 1994). With the use of a well-trained tracking team and certain methods of analysis and prediction, trackers should cut the time frame and certainly the manpower.

The emphasis must be on these two areas for two reasons. First, manpower to initiate large scale searches is usually not available. Second, the longer a search continues, the less likely of finding the lost person alive.

You may say your department can't afford to train and equip every officer. But in most cases, the fine from one good fish and wildlife case will pay for the officer's equipment and training. Also, what if you save one lost child?

The cost of training would be different for each department, but the cost for basic equipment is very little and most officers have it already. The equipment list consists of clothing appropriate for the terrain and weather. A walking or sign-cutting stick, you can cut in the woods, it just needs to be light and durable. A stick approximately 40 inches in length is best, but longer may be preferred. This stick, which is used to focus the attention of a tracker should have at least two "O" rings or rubber bands on it for measuring distance and stride of the person you are following. A small tape measure for measuring print size or stride. A small note pad and pencil are needed to record measurement and fill-out track reports. A good drawing of a print will be indispensable. Trail tape can be carried to cordon-off evidence or sign, or to prevent the trampling of a good track. An artificial light source, such as a Coleman lantern works best for night tracking (but a flashlight will work), a small pen light, plus a mirror for redirecting natural light.

Some other equipment an officer may need from time to time would be: canteen and cover, side knife (fixed blade, minimum six-inch blade, should be of full tang construction suitable for hacking limbs for survival), poncho (military type with snaps), 100 feet of parachute cord, hat, ground cloth, food and snacks, extra batteries, compass and maps, good boots and socks, small backpack, extra Coleman fuel and mantles, and a small first aid kit.

Why all this type of equipment? If you are in the woods and have to stay over night or you find the lost person or child they may need first aid, food, water, or some type of shelter because they are wet, cold, or hurt. If someone's loved one is in the woods lost, you will not want to come out without them.

Wildlife officers for the most part are fair trackers, but with training they could be much better. All wildlife officers need to be trained in: day and night tracking, how some people will try to cover their tracks, the use of tracking to help reconstruct a crime scene, how tracking can aid in officer safety, how to preserve tracks for

evidence, how to photograph and make drawings of tracks, how to testify in court on tracking and/or tracks. With the training certification and field expertise most wildlife officers should qualify as expert witnesses in court.

In summary, as wildlife officers, we should promote tracking and share our experience and knowledge within the general law enforcement and emergency service communities. If possible, officers should provide on-site assistance upon request as needed. We, in Kentucky, welcome your ideas and will assist you in any way possible with your training.

### **Literature Cited**

Michael, P. R. 1994. Mountain Trackers Association Manual. Mountain Trackers Assoc., Union City, Tn. 120pp.