Basics of Tracking

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Have you ever been intrigued by how professional Search & Rescue, Law Enforcement and Military trackers follow and find the people that they are looking for. Well, it's not that difficult with a little practice and its lot's of fun. The kid's love this one too. It's something active to do around camp when all the big kids are practicing battle drills.

Since this is the "Basics of Tracking", we'll assume that the tracker is a hiker or hunter and the subject being tracked is an animal and not a human.

Tracking Tips & Tricks

The first thing that you must do when attempting to track anything, that's right, find some tracks. At first, this is a lot easier than it sounds. Here is a trick that was taught to me years ago:

Drop a pebble into a pool of water and watch how the ripples run out in circles, one outside the next. A skilled observer's line of sight is similar to those rings of ripples. First, scan the area a few feet to the front of you, and then to the sides of you. Sweep your eyes along, taking in the whole scene rather than focusing on just a few highlights.

Then sweep your eyes to take in the next line of ripples - an arc about 20 feet away. Look out a little farther and make a third sweep. With practice, you can scan a wide area very quickly. Tracks, animals, interesting plants and other signs of wildlife will seem to pop out of the background. You'll also have a sense of the area as a whole, rather than seeing just one or two things within it. Sweeping with your eyes helps you to look beyond the obvious and see those animals, plants or wildlife that may be trying to escape your gaze.

Finding a track

Winter snows hold a surprising number of tracks. During other seasons, try the soft soil near ponds and streams. In dry country, scan the dust for prints and look for pebbles and rocks that have been disturbed.

Study a track

Drop down to ground level. At least get down on your hands and knees to study the shape of the track. Examine how hard the surrounding ground is and the depth of the imprint (if any).

Track early or late

Tracking is easiest early in the morning and late in the day, when shadows cast in the prints make them more obvious.

More than just a print

As you follow a trail of tracks, keep your eyes peeled for other evidence of the animal. Bent grass, broken twigs, and displaced pebbles or rocks are a tell-tale sign of the animal's path. Watch for places where the animal has rubbed against trees or rocks.

Droppings, or *scat*, give evidence of an animal's diet. Break apart scat with a stick. Hulls of seeds, skin of berries, and bits of leaves suggest the animal is a vegetarian. Small bones, fur, and feathers appear in the scat of carnivores.

Scat will dry from the outside in. If it is completely dry, you know the animal has not passed by too recently. If the scat is moist then most likely the animal is nearby.

Use your own instincts

Imagine yourself in the place of the animal. If you lose the trail, ask yourself where *you* would go. Look in all directions. Mark the last known track with a stick or rock, then explore all around until you find the trail again.

By all means these are only the basics. Tracking is a skill that you can learn only by doing a lot of it. Don't get frustrated if you spend an hour tracking and don't move more than a few feet. Practice in your own yards, vacant lots, fields and forests and above all else have fun