

Tracking Stick

By Kim A. Cabrera

A tracking stick is a useful aid to seeing tracks. Although it is not really necessary to always use a tracking stick when tracking, it is helpful to use one when you first begin learning to track. It helps train your eye to look for tracks and subtle sign by focusing your attention in the proper search area. Here's how it works.

A tracking stick can be made from any available stick, even a fallen tree branch. An inexpensive and easy-to-make tracking stick is simply a piece of doweling about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in diameter and about 3 or 4 feet long. For markers, you can use rubber O-rings, or rubber bands. More expensive tracking sticks can be purchased from search gear retailers, or you can make your own from an old ski pole with the basket removed.

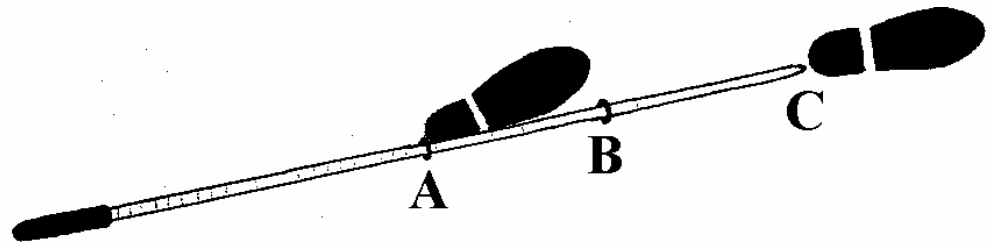
First, it is helpful to find a line of tracks where you can clearly see the individual prints. Then, measure the stride using a tape measure, or your tracking stick. Stride is measured from heel to heel. If you were tracking a person, you would measure from the heel of the left track to the heel of the right track. That distance is one stride. When following animals, it is best to measure from the point where a foot touches the ground to the point where that same foot touches the ground again. That distance is one stride.

Some trackers measure from the toe of one print to the heel of the next. I think it is best to use heels as the starting point for measurement since the heel usually impacts the ground with more force than the toes do (when tracking people). Therefore, the heel will leave a deeper and clearer imprint. In animal tracks, often the most easily visible part of the track is the claw marks.

Once you have the heel-to-heel stride measurement, mark it off on your tracking stick using one of your O-rings or rubber bands. This marker is labeled A in the drawing below. Then, measure the length of the footprint and mark this on your stick. Marker B in the drawing corresponds to the footprint length measurement.

Looking at the drawing, you will now see that the distance between A and B is the size of the footprint and the distance between B and C is the stride length. (The distance from A to C is the step interval.)

To use your tracking stick, find a heel mark and hold your stick at point A directly over that heel mark. Be careful not to rest your stick on the ground, as doing so will make more marks, or sign, on the ground and possibly cause confusion. While holding your stick at the pivot point A over a heel mark, pivot the tip of the



stick in an arc. Keep your eyes on the area immediately in front of the tip of the stick. You are looking there for the very subtle clues that will tell you the track is there. This could be something like a bent blade of grass, an overturned leaf, a pebble pressed into the ground by the weight of a footstep, a broken pine needle, bruised vegetation and more. Keep looking and you will eventually find it. If you lose patience, take a short break and rest your eyes by focusing on more distant objects. After a few minutes, come back and try to find the sign again. Sometimes a short break is all your eyes need. It takes a lot of patience to learn to track this way and you have to force yourself not to "jump track." Jump tracking is finding the easy footprints, then jumping ahead to the next obvious footprint. This is not tracking. Tracking is following the very subtle signs of tracks and staying on the trail of your quarry. If you find every step and learn as much as you can from each track, you will be a better tracker. Skipping the difficult tracks teaches you nothing about how to see them.

The tracking stick helps you learn how to track by focusing your attention on the ground where the next track should be. Stride doesn't vary drastically when walking on even terrain. Running, walking uphill or downhill, could change stride and this is something to be aware of as a tracker.

As with any skill, practice helps you improve. The more time you spend with your nose in the dirt, the better tracker you will be. Patience and perseverance are traits of good trackers. You have to be patient to find very subtle signs and you have to stick with it and not give up when it gets difficult to see the tracks. Learn as you go and keep at it and you will find that tracking is a very enjoyable thing to do. Soon, you will find yourself tracking and examining the ground everywhere you go. Every day there are new stories written on the landscape by the wildlife that live there. Finding and interpreting these tales is the joy of tracking. Good luck and happy tracking. And remember, animals don't cover their tracks!