

The Clear Print

The San Diego Tracking Team Newsletter



I Never Had a Grandfather (But I'm Still a Tracker)

By Gary Seiser

"All the great trackers had grandfathers who taught them."

John was right. We'd just heard Nate Kempton speak of how his life tracking began with his grandfather taking him to a place where he could see a fox. At the Tracker School I've listened to Tom Brown talk of "Stalking Wolf," the Apache scout he called Grandfather, and of the many lessons Grandfather taught him. I've heard Mark Elbroch speak of the nature walks he took across the countryside with his grandfather. Even Jon Young eventually found Ingwe. All the great trackers had grandfathers who taught them.

I never had a grandfather. They both died before I was born, and no one ever took their place in my life. So I guess I'll never be a great tracker. Doesn't matter. I started tracking kind of late anyway.

But is that really true? Is being a great tracker really about starting as a child under a grandfather's tutelage? No. It's not about grandfathers and kids; it's about mentors and dirt time and most of all, passion. Let's take them in order.

We can learn a lot by taking tracking and nature awareness classes, and those classes are important, really important. There's a difference, though, between having teachers and having a mentor. Teachers teach, often giving us the answer; mentors guide and challenge, mentors question. That questioning leads us to examine and to find the answer ourselves, which helps us grow and understand more fully. Interestingly, it helps the mentor too. So if you don't have a tracking mentor, get one. If you're not a tracking mentor, be one.

Dirt time is also essential. I remember Barry, my mentor, telling me I needed to spend time in the dirt more than I needed to sign up for additional classes. He was right. Nothing replaces dirt time: getting down on your hands and knees and looking at tracks in the sand, the dirt, and the mud. That's where you learn that few prints are clear prints. That's where you learn to identify scat, recognize partial impressions, age tracks, and a hundred other things you only thought you learned from the field guides. Need more dirt time? Go on more tracking walks, sign up for more transects, collect more deer scat, and spend time at your sit spot. Don't burn yourself out, but do it regularly.

Passion is what helps with the first two and what sustains you. Your passion for tracking and nature awareness is what will make your mentor want to work with you. Your passion is what will get you out of bed in the morning, into your tracking clothes, and out on the trail, rather than sleeping in and missing half the day. Your passion for being outdoors and learning about nature is what will keep your inner fires going, what will keep you growing and learning week after week, month after month, year after year. Learning to track is a life long process and it takes the same passion and love of life that any other great art takes.

So what do Tom Brown, Mark Elbroch, Nate Kempton and other great trackers have in common? It isn't really grandfathers and childhood. It's mentors, dirt time, and a passion to learn.

Will I ever be a Tom Brown, a Mark Elbroch, a Nate Kempton, or a Jon Young? No. They started as kids and kept right on going. I won't be a Barry Martin or a Mike Kresky either. I didn't start tracking until my fifties, and even now my life's work is in another direction, making time for tracking scarce. But that doesn't mean I can't be a tracker. I am. And that doesn't mean I can't strive to be as good as I can possibly be in the time I have available. I will. Even now every time I go out I readily identify tracks and sign I wouldn't have even recognized were tracks or sign a few years ago.

I never had a grandfather. I wish I had. And I wish he had taught me about tracking. But that doesn't mean it's too late or that I can't learn. And it doesn't mean you can't either. That's one of the nice things about tracking and nature awareness: everyone is welcome and everyone can learn. I like that. So let's get tracking. I'll see you in the dirt.

***Vulpes vulpes necator*, California's Other Red Fox**

By Rick Botta

Most of us know about the non-native red fox that inhabits many parts of North America including portions of California. What isn't so widely known is that California has a native red fox, *Vulpes vulpes necator*, or Sierra Nevada Red Fox.

The Sierra Nevada Red Fox is smaller and darker in color than the non-native red fox and is about the size of a house cat. It is extremely elusive and rarely seen. The Sierra Nevada Red Fox inhabits portions of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, typically at elevations between 5,000 and 7,000 feet, but they have been detected at elevations as low as 4,000 feet and as high as 11,000 feet. They use habit similar to that used by martens and wolverines.

Studies were conducted on the Sierra Nevada Red Fox in the 1930s, but not many additional studies were performed after that until about 1980. Even then, that research was limited. There has been significantly more research conducted since the late 1990s. The first photograph of the Sierra Nevada Red Fox was taken in 1990, although specimens exist from the 1930s and earlier.

Specific behavior information isn't widely available on the Sierra Nevada Red Fox, but it is believed they have the same basic behavior traits as the non-native red fox. Recent studies have shown that they tend to be opportunistic feeders with an average summer territory range of 4 square miles and move to lower elevations during the winter. Whether this is related to availability of food sources or the movements of other large predators isn't clear.

The exact size of the Sierra Nevada Red Fox population isn't known, but it is small enough that it was listed as a threatened species by the State of California in 1980. This was predominately due to fairly drastic declines in both population and available range since the initial studies of the 1930's. Some focused studies of the Sierra Nevada Red Fox were performed in the late 1990's around the Lassen National Park area. However, there are references in the literature which suggests there is some disagreement whether these foxes are genetically different from the non-native red fox.

The Sierra Nevada Red Fox has been an interest of mine since I first heard of it. Unfortunately, there appears to be relative little information available about this particular fox. Additional study data is available through the California Department of Fish and Game archives, so as I continue finding out more, I'll pass it along in future editions of the Clear Print.

Field Sketching and Journaling (part 2)

By Rick Botta

In last month's article, I provided a short overview of both field sketching and journaling and their benefits to us as trackers and naturalists. In this article, I'll discuss a few of sketching techniques I find useful.

In our Tracker Naturalist courses, we teach "minds eye" (aka memory) sketching, a technique many of us learned either directly or indirectly from Jon Young. Using this technique, the sketch is made from an image formed in one's mind of that subject rather than from direct observation of the subject. The basic process for minds eye sketching is:

- Look at the subject for 10-15 seconds, focusing on the general shape and any important details that you observe. If possible, look at the subject from various directions.
- Close your eyes and recall the subject in as much detail as possible
- Open your eyes and look at the subject again for a minute or so, filling in your mental picture with additional details associated with things such as shape, color and texture. If you can touch the subject consider details such as feel and smell. Ask yourself questions about the subject.
- Close your eyes again and visualize the subject again in your mind.
- Open your eyes again, but don't look at the subject. Then close your eyes again and let the image reappear in your mind. "View" that mental image for 10-15 seconds.
- Open your eyes again, look at the subject again, turn away from the subject and then start sketching.

This entire process should only take a few minutes. Remember, your sketch doesn't have to be a work of art. As long as it captures the essence of what was in your minds eye, you've done it!

Another type of sketching technique is observation sketching. When possible, examine the subject in as much detail as possible and many directions, then sketch while directly viewing the object. This type of sketching typically takes a much longer time to perform, particularly if you are sketching wildlife or plants in the field.

Recently, I have discovered a technique called contour sketching which I find very useful. With contour sketching you never look at your paper. You look only at the object and then sketch it without ever lifting your pencil or pen from the paper. In essence what you are doing is making a sketch of the contour of the object using a single continuous line. This is a great technique to capture the basic shape and geometry of an object without worrying about the fine detailed. I find this technique very useful when sketching plants, rocks or other stationary objects that have a significant amount of contour and texture. Once I get the basic structure and shape captured in my notebook while in the field, I can later re-sketch the object using minds eye technique or observation sketching from a field guide. In most cases, contour sketching is done within a minute or so.

Next month, I'll finish this series with a discussion on journaling. Until then, get outside and try some of these sketching techniques.

Upcoming Events

The **Spring Wildlife Survey** period begins April 22 (transect schedule will be sent to SDTTLIST at that time), and the **Spring Deer Scat Collection** period is already underway. Plenty of volunteer opportunities remain for both as well as for the **outreach events** listed below. If you are interested in helping with any of these activities, or if you have any questions, please call or e-mail Lani at 760-715-4102 or noreke@sbcglobal.net.

Saturday, April 8: Monthly tracking walks, 8:00 am to 10:00 at the Peñasquitos Preserve Ranch House. Beginning and Intermediate/Advanced levels offered.

Sunday, April 9: Introductory tracking walk, 8:30 to 9:30 am at the MTRP visitor center.

Saturday, April 22: Spring Wildlife Survey Volunteer Training, 9:45 am to 4:00 pm at the Ranch House in Peñasquitos Canyon.

Saturday, April 22: Earth Day, noon to 3:00 pm at Ocotillo Wells. **Volunteers are needed for staffing a table.**

Sunday, April 23: Earth Fair, 9:30 am to 3:30 pm at Balboa Park. **Volunteers are needed for staffing a table.**

Friday, April 28: The Great Dance, 7:00 to 8:30 pm at the Ranch House in Peñasquitos Canyon, refreshments from 6:30 PM. Please RSVP to Lani at noreke@sbcglobal.net.

THE GREAT DANCE: A Hunter's Story (75 min.)

"When tracking is like dancing . . . this is the Great Dance."

The Los Peñasquitos Tracking Team is pleased to bring you the international award winning movie of the Kalahari bushmen. The !Xo San of the central Kalahari have been a part of the vast desert landscape since ancient times. !Nqate is one of them. Together with his friends Karoha and Xlhoase, they track and hunt as their ancestors have for thousands of years. These are the three bushmen Mark Elbroch talks about and this is their story. Through their eyes we see a world invisible to outsiders where tracks in the sand are only the beginning. The skills of the San hunter are virtually a sixth sense, a complex bond between man and animal. As !Nqate says, *"When you track an animal - you must become the animal. Tracking is like dancing, because your body is happy - you can feel it in the dance and then you know that the hunting will be good. When you are doing these things you are talking with God."* Join us for a showing of this very moving and special movie.

Sunday, April 30: Dirt Time at MTRP, 8:30 am, for those who wish to improve their tracking skills. See www.mtrp.org/events or call Betsy Brack (619-469-0628) for details.

Saturday, May 13: Monthly tracking walks, 8:00 am to 10:00 at the Peñasquitos Preserve Ranch House. Beginning and Intermediate/Advanced levels offered.

Sunday, May 14: Introductory tracking walk, 8:30 to 9:30 am at the MTRP visitor center.

Saturday, May 20: Explore Mission Trails Day, 9:00 am to 4:00 pm at Mission Trails Regional Park. Explore Mission Trails Day is an annual celebration of all the park has to offer and includes activities for people of all ages. This year there will be special activities for children including pony rides, trail walks, and arts and crafts activities. Go to Explore Mission Trails Day on the MTRP web site (mtrp.org) for more information. All activities are free to the public. **Volunteers are needed for staffing a table and/or leading a walk.**

Sunday, May 28: Dirt Time at MTRP, 8:30 am, for those who wish to improve their tracking skills. See www.mtrp.org/events or call Betsy Brack (619-469-0628) for details.

Saturday, June 3: National Trails Day, 10:00 am to 4:00 pm at the Peñasquitos Preserve Ranch House. **Volunteers are needed for staffing a table and/or leading a walk.**

The LPTT Gaits Workshop (previously scheduled for April 8th) has been postponed.

Are you a donor member of the SDTT? It's not too late to send in your 2006 membership contribution. Don't forget, you can help support SDTT in two important ways—volunteer your time and/or contribute financially by becoming a donor member. Call 760-715-4102 to volunteer and go to www.sdtt.org for a membership form.

Please send submissions to the Clear Print to Lani Noreke at noreke@sbcglobal.net.