

The Clear Print

The San Diego Tracking Team Newsletter



A San Diego Wildlife Tracking Milestone

By Karen Larsen Gordon

The San Diego Tracking Team hosted a certification event for wildlife trackers based upon an internationally recognized format on February 4th & 5th. All 10 of the attendees earned certificates designating skill levels ranging from Tracker 1 to 3, a US record for competency.

Mark Elbroch, author of two award winning books on wildlife tracking, conducted the testing. Elbroch has earned a *Senior Tracker Certificate* in Kruger National Park, South Africa and offers the only rigorous system in North America for certifying field tracking skills and observer reliability. The Wildlife Tracking in North America program operates under guidelines of CyberTracker Conservation, a program developed 15 years ago by Louis Liebenberg in South Africa. The primary benefit of certifying trackers is raising the standards of research in conservation. By verifying observer reliability in data collection, sound recommendations for planning, monitoring and managing of native habitats can be made.



Pictured are, from left to right, top row: Jesper Pietsch, Lee Kirchhevel, John Richards, Mark Elbroch, Gary Seiser, Barry Martin (founder of the San Diego Tracking Team), Don Rowe and bottom row: Bonnie Hendricks, Mike Kresky, Phoenix Von Hendy, and Betsy Brack.

Martin and Kresky achieved the highest level of tracker certification, Tracker 3, Kirchhevel, Richards, Hendricks and Pietsch received Tracker 2, and Betsy Brack, at age 72, holds title to being the most senior holder of Tracker 1 certification in the world. Rowe, Seiser and Von Hendy also earned Tracker 1 certificates. Elbroch reported that the youngest Tracker 1 is Makai, age 14 and a member of the //Uruke Tracking Group in the Southern Kalahari.

For more information about the North American program see wildlifetrackers.com and CyberTracker.com for the international program.

Revisiting and Analyzing a Kill Site through the Minds Eye

By Rick Botta

Sometimes being away from nature and not having the opportunity to track gives one the time to reflect on their tracking experiences and revisit past events in the mind's eye. Such is the case as I sit here in a hotel room in New Hampshire waiting for the snow to fall and the temperatures to drop even more than the current 30 or so degrees.

During a recent monthly tracking walk, we ran across a bird kill site in the large open field east of the Peñasquitos Ranch House. Examining the feathers that were on the ground, the group and I applied our usual first test to identify a likely cause of the birds' demise – if the feathers predominately appear to be plucked and the feathers are generally arranged in a circular pattern, consider bird of prey as the possible cause. If the feathers generally appear clipped at the lower portion of the quill with relatively straight clean edges, think a member of the feline family. Finally, torn and matted feathers (matting is a sign of exposure to moisture, such as saliva) tend to indicate a member of the canine family. As we explain in our classes, the physiology and eating habits/mannerisms of particular species cause the feathers to be removed from a bird carcass in specific ways. Like most things related to nature and tracking, examining feathers for the evidence described above is only a general indicator and should not be considered an absolute certainty. The more evidence that can be gathered and evaluated regarding a kill site using ones' naturalist skills, the more accurate the assessment will be.

Although I am sitting in my hotel room, I clearly see those feathers in my minds eye, along with the surrounding area. As I revisit this area, I begin to recall the evidence and my initial assessment of what likely killed that Mourning Dove. In my minds eye, I reexamine the feathers for signs of being plucked, clipped or torn and then recall a reexamination we did in the Beginning Tracker Naturalist class a week later. Again, I'm convinced the feathers were predominately plucked.

Next I recall the landscape and the area around the kill site, and also remember how much consideration I didn't give them the two times I was actually there. Some characteristics of canines, felines and birds of prey pop into my mind and trigger a series of questions which I should have asked when I was at the site. The landscape my mind paints is fairly large and open, without much cover to hide a ground-dwelling (mammal) predator. If the bird was on the ground when it was killed, would it be likely that a cat (domestic or bobcat) would be able to stalk up on its' prey across a large open area without being detected and then pounce on it? Would a member of the dog family

be able to run down a bird in a large open space? Could the predator have been lying in the field, the Mourning Dove feeding on the ground nearby? Were there any lays or bedding areas nearby? Where there any tracks in the immediate vicinity?

I envision the trees along the Riparian area and the various species of trees in the vicinity of the Ranch House. Would these provide a perch for the Cooper's Hawks in the vicinity? If the bird was taken by a hawk, was it taken on the ground or in flight? Are the wires above the kill site a relevant piece of evidence to consider? Was the Dove perched on the wires when taken? Cooper's Hawks, like many other raptors, will feed on the ground or on a perch, with larger prey being consumed partially or entirely on the ground. Was the large pile of feathers caused by a struggle between predator and prey or during a feeding on the ground?

My mind then begins to think about how plentiful other food sources for canines and felines are in the area. There certainly is an abundant source of rabbits, ground squirrels and rodents in the area. How much energy would be expended by a member of the dog or cat family to kill a mourning dove when larger prey is in the area?

As I revisit the feathers and kill site over in my mind and answer these questions based upon my experiences, my conclusion remains that the Mourning Dove was taken by a raptor, most likely a Cooper's Hawk. However, this conclusion was made based upon my personal experiences, studies and reasoning and does not guarantee my conclusion is correct. In fact, someone else could ask the same questions and potentially reach a different conclusion. So who is correct if the actual kill was not observed? The answer is... it really isn't important. The important thing is the analysis that you performed to arrive at your conclusion. That is, playing nature detective, asking questions, gathering as much evidence as possible and then applying your naturalist skills to reach a conclusion that is well thought out and logical.

So, next time you find a kill site, spend time looking for clues and asking yourself a series of questions to help assess the situation. Then go home and revisit the event again in your mind's eye. Hopefully, you'll be able to substantiate your original assessment or think of something important you overlooked and change your assessment.

Field Sketching and Journaling

By Rick Botta

In last month's Clear Print, Barry Martin provided some insightful tips on journaling. Over the course of the next few editions of the Clear Print, I'll share some things I've learned about Field Sketching and Journaling which hopefully will inspire you to do more sketching and journaling of your own.

Before we go any further, let me differentiate between field sketching and journaling. Field sketching is the act of capturing something observed outdoors onto paper in a relatively short period of time. When I say "in a relatively short period of time," I mean on the order of a few seconds to a few minutes. There are various types of sketches you can do, each capturing a different level of detail. We'll discuss some of these in future editions of the Clear Print. Field sketches are just that

– sketches. They don't contain much, if any, additional textual information. Field sketches should capture key items of your observations and/or experiences. These can include things that are specific and detailed such as the indicator markings on the animal or bird being observed, very much like you find in field guides. They can also be items of a more general nature, such as a specific event that occurred within the overall context of what you are sketching. For instance, if your field sketch was of Fortuna Mountain and you saw a Cooper's Hawk chase a Mourning Dove across your field of vision, you could sketch the hawk and the bird as a key item.

Journaling is more of a way to record a set of related information and often contains both sketches and text. In Barry's tips on journaling, he discussed using sketches and text as a way to record a set of information related to a particular mammal, bird, or plant. In many instances, journals are used to record observations and experiences over some period of time (similar to a diary) or across a set of related items (for instance, a journal grouped by taxonomic order as Barry discussed).

In either case, the purpose of sketching and journaling is to help you learn and to enhance your recall, specifically by aiding in imprinting that experience and sketch/journal entry in your mind. They help you focus your attention and expand your perception. If you can create that sketch or journal entry, put it away for some time, look at it again and feel like you are back in the original moment that you captured, you've done it!

When it comes to field sketching and journaling, you don't have to be an artist. You only have to draw enough to capture your experiences and observations on paper – no one need see them except you. I suspect you'll find that the more you practice, the better you will find your artistic skills become. Like most things, practice makes (almost) perfect. A piece of sound advice is never to sketch or journal when you are not in the mood or if what you are observing doesn't excite you. Doing so will only lead to results you are not happy with and will likely dampen your enthusiasm for sketching and journaling.

In the next article, I'll discuss some basic types of sketches. Until then, I hope you pick up that sketch book and get outdoors.

Upcoming Events

Both the **Winter Wildlife Survey** and the **Fall Deer Scat Collection** period are underway with plenty of volunteer opportunities remaining. If you are interested in helping with either of these activities, or if you have any questions, please call Lani at 858-513-0359.

Saturday, February 11: Monthly tracking walks, 8:00 am to 10:00 at the Peñasquitos Preserve Ranch House. Beginning and Intermediate/Advanced levels offered.

Sunday, February 12: Introductory tracking walk, 8:30 to 9:30 am at the MTRP visitor center.

Thursday, February 23 and Saturday, February 25: Intermediate Tracker Naturalist Class, 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm Thursday and 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Saturday at the Peñasquitos Ranch House. Contact Rick Botta (858-672-0584, rmbotta@earthlink.net) to sign up as a student or to help out.

Saturday, March 11: Monthly tracking walks, 8:00 am to 10:00 at the Peñasquitos Preserve Ranch House. Beginning and Intermediate/Advanced levels offered.

Sunday, March 12: Introductory tracking walk, 8:30 to 9:30 am at the MTRP visitor center.

Friday, March 24 and Saturday, March 25: Advanced Tracker Naturalist Class, 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm Friday and 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Saturday at the Peñasquitos Ranch House. Contact Rick Botta (858-672-0584, rmbotta@earthlink.net) to sign up as a student or to help out.

Save the Date! Saturday, April 1: SDTT Recognition Event, at the Ranch House in Peñasquitos Canyon. 11 am to 4 pm. More details coming soon!

Training for Trainers, previously scheduled for March 29th, has been postponed. More information to come.

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.