

Tracking...

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To many people, the art of tracking is a mystery, all done with smoke and mirrors, available only to those who have served a long apprenticeship, or those with special powers. It is the stuff of Hollywood movies and not for them.

In this series of articles I would like to demystify tracking and show how we are all already trackers. Don't believe me? Then read on!

For me, one of the great things about tracking is that there is always more to learn, new things to see and new friends to make. If you always track alone, then you will always be right! That is why it is so good to be able to track with other people.

So where to start? Well, there are many options here; if you already know any trackers, ask them to take you out with them and start sharing their knowledge; you can buy books or find information on the internet and start teaching yourself; or you can always book on a course.

For me, it started with the books, and before long I found myself attending every course I could get away with!

Yes. I had become an addict. So what books should you use? That is a tough question, with there being so many books on tracking on the market now. Many of the books are based in North America, so whilst providing good information, they cover a lot of species we do not get here in the UK and could confuse. There are European-based books such as 'Bang and Dahlstrøm - Animal Tracks & Signs' - as reviewed in issue 7 - which are obviously more suited to us here. Even though this covers more species than we have in the UK. Ian Maxwell's book 'Animal Tracks ID & Techniques' - as reviewed in issue 10 - covers species that occur, or are likely to occur, in the UK and is pocket-sized and very easy to use. There are also various websites such as the BBC's Nature pages that provide worksheets on British mammal tracks.



Dirt time -
the bread and butter of tracking!

...IT'S A DIRTY BUSINESS!

Learn to distinguish a track!



Whichever resources you use, they will help you on your first steps as a tracker.

Once you have some reference materials, you need to go out and find some tracks! At these early stages I would recommend beginning in an area that is muddy or perhaps sandy, somewhere where it is easy to find and see tracks. Look at these areas closely so that you can see the shapes of the tracks, and then identify them, using your reference materials. Look at the tracks from different angles, as this will help highlight features due to the varying light angles. I will talk about the use of light (*back to the mirrors*) in future articles.

This process of getting down and dirty with the tracks is known as 'dirt time'. Dirt time is the bread and butter of tracking. We need it to help build up our experience which in turn is vital if we are to take our tracking further than just being able to identify a single track in isolation.

In the next article I will write about our senses, some techniques to heighten awareness and the influences of landscape on animals. Happy tracking!

Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)



Recognition:

A small & dainty deer, it has a white patch on its rump (bum). Black nose with a white spot on either side and a white chin.

Colouration:

Summer: reddish brown.
Winter: grey, pale brown or (occasionally) black.

Antlers:

Rugose, short (<30cm), 3 tines (points) on each.

Adult size:

10 to 25kg, 60 to 75cm at shoulder (Male Bucks slightly larger than female Does.)

Tracks:

Small narrow towards the front, the compression shape formed looks almost heart-shaped.