

**W**e're not talking about the popular reality show on the Outdoor Life Network, but real tracking where evidence is collected and lives are at stake. I'm not trying to knock the TV show. After all, I would love to get paid to ride my horse through new country and chase down contestants when the odds are stacked against them. But let's face it, what makes for good TV isn't usually reality. What I discuss here is the art of learning to see what others look at but do not see: to recognize what human sign is and to understand that wherever a person walks, he creates sign.

Most of us in the wildlife conservation profession think we can track. We grew up in the outdoors and spend a large amount of time dealing with wildlife and recreational users. Everybody expects us to be "trackers." I thought I was a pretty good tracker. I grew up hunting and fishing, had a bachelor's degree in wildlife management, graduated from the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy, passed the SARTECH II class through the National Association for Search and Rescue and had been a game warden for ten years before I took my

first class with Joel Hardin Professional Tracking Services (JHPTS). I quickly realized I was walking over more sign than I was seeing. I struggled at first and doubted the claims of the instructors when they told me where the sign line progressed because I just couldn't see it. After my second class, my eyes were opened.

I got a taste of what was out there that I was missing and realized the potential this skill has in our profession. I have since taken many classes through JHPTS, and the more I learn and put to use in crime scene evaluation and search and rescue missions, the more I realize how valuable this skill is for wildlife conservation officers.

Let's be honest: if you've been a game warden or conservation officer for more than a year, you've found yourself in a situation like Willoughby the dog from the Warner Bros. cartoon *Of Fox and Hounds*, saying "which way did he go?" Whether it's following someone going to suspected illegal bait, wanting to know which direction an angler traveled on a stream, or locating a lost child, the ability to read sign can make or break a case.

It's easy to track a man through fresh snow or mud, but that's not usually what we're dealing with. So if not a perfect shoe print, what exactly are we looking for? We're seeking those subtle clues that indicate a person has passed through an area at the right time, in the right place, and with the right characteristics. Some of those things might include, but are not limited to, flagged vegetation, interlaced vegetation, nesting, broken twigs, bruising on vegetation, compressed areas, dislodged objects, socketing, scuff marks, toe digs, or transfer. Not all of these signs are evident in every footfall, but you should be able to find at least one.

How does a tracker begin? A tracker must have a Place Last Seen (PLS) or a Last Known Place (LKP). For example, this location could be a vehicle, campsite, fishing access point, or crime scene, and is the point at which the tracking team will start looking for sign. Other information that can prove helpful is type and size of footwear worn by the subject of the search, the subject's knowledge of the area and experience/comfort in that environment, the reason he went missing, and whether he wants to be found.





**Bull elk mistakenly shot for mule deer buck.**

Once the sign line is located, a trained tracking team consisting of three persons will measure and sketch the track [track card image here]. If a clear and complete track is not available (and it rarely ever is), the sketch can be updated as the line progresses and more signature tracks are found. To advance the

sign, the point person will carefully look for sign in the prime sign area, which is an arc of approximately 60 degrees and an appropriate distance from the last footfall in the direction of travel. The other two trackers act as flankers and cover the area on either side of the point person. Using the step-by-step method of

tracking, the team will not move past the last sign until the next one is found.

To help guide the trackers' eyes to the prime area for locating sign, a tracking stick is used. When properly employed, a tracking stick or other suitable object helps measure, mark, and locate the next footfall. A flanker's job is to see any intersecting or contaminating sign that may enter the prime sign area from either side. As the line of sign is advanced, the team will need to take breaks to rest their eyes and prevent tracker blindness. They periodically switch positions, giving each team member time as point person. Now, I know you are all saying, "I don't have the privilege of having two other people on hand to help me track every day." I don't either, which means I do a lot of tracking on my own. Don't overlook your local sheriff's department personnel and civilian search and rescue team members as potential additional trackers.

Those of you who are photographers understand that taking proper advantage of the direction and quality of light is extremely important in bringing out the colors and details of your subject. The same holds true in tracking. The colors

on a bruised leaf or aged piece of grass show up much better in the morning and evening. The shadows cast by a dislodged pebble or toe dig are also more evident in low-angle light. Low-angle light can sometimes be replicated by shadowing an area and casting light across it with a mirror or flashlight, which brings up the subject of night tracking. Can it be done? Definitely! The concepts are all the same, except you control the light exclusively.

As a tracking team progresses along the sign line, each step they find is marked with a flag or chalk. Using this step-by-step method forces the team to maintain continuity of the sign and thus the chain of evidence. Marking every step also helps with the aging process. Periodically, you can go back and see how the sun, wind, moisture, and other weather elements affect the appearance and texture of the soil and vegetation you are analyzing in the tracks. You can even track after major weather events. During training in Wyoming, we commonly experience high winds, thundershowers, and severe hail. We have even tracked

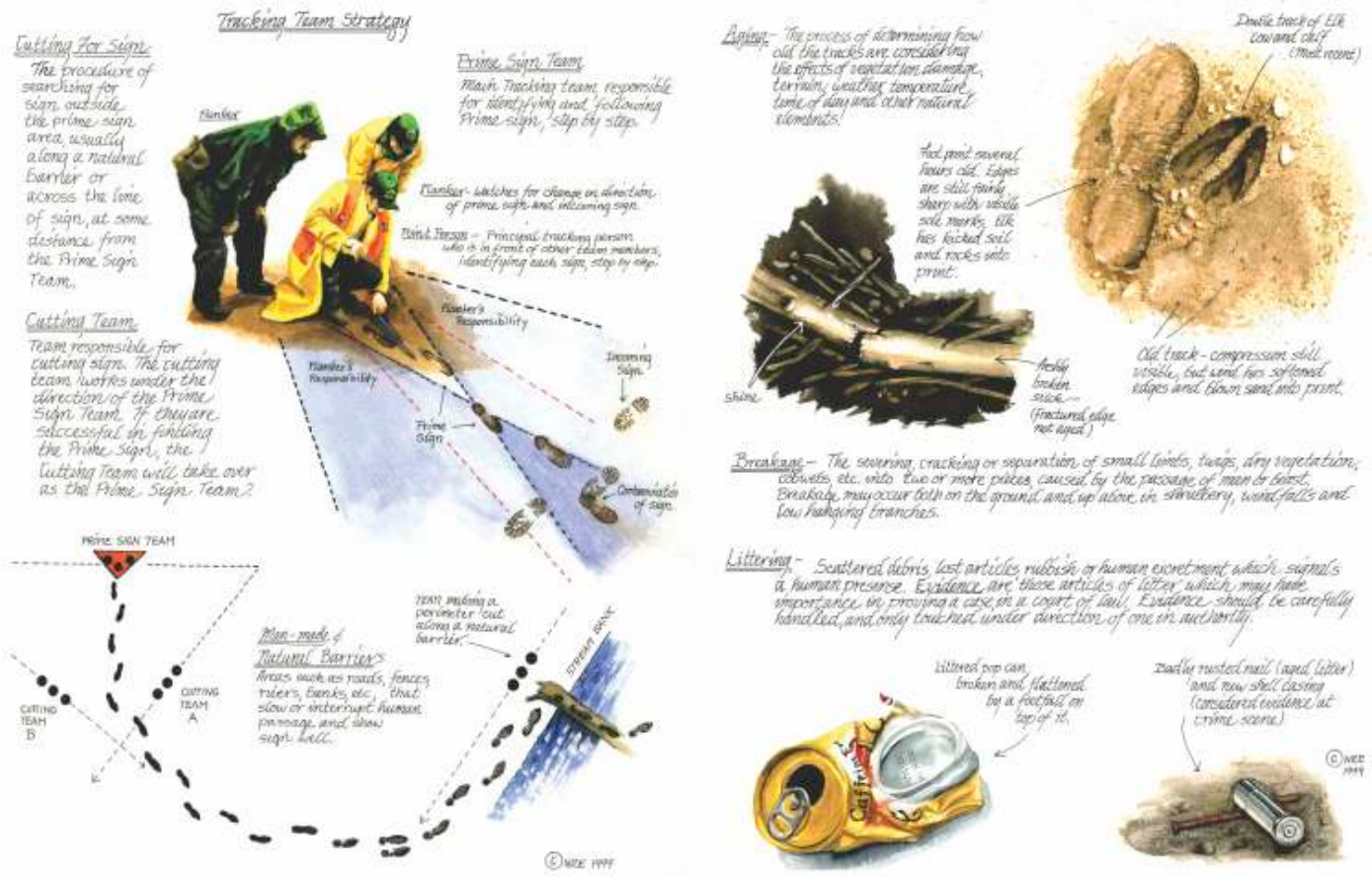
after a six-inch snowfall. How long after a person passes through an area can you track them? The upper limits remain to be found. It's common for novice trackers to see sign that is a year old and be confused by it.

I mentioned before the "chain of evidence." We all know what this is and immediately we think of going to court with that evidence, but can tracking be used in court? Absolutely. JHPTS has more than thirty years of tracking training and mission experience and has gone to great lengths to bring their tracking program to a truly professional level. The JHPTS program teaches documentation and preservation of evidence, and has certified trackers who frequently take tracking evidence to trial in everything from missing persons to murder cases.

As with any skill, tracking is perishable and we must practice and train regularly to stay proficient, just as we do with firearms or custody and control techniques. Practice can be accomplished every day of the week. While on patrol,

you will find yourself watching the roadside and fields for signs that someone passed by. When at a gathering, you may notice the footwear or unique gait of certain individuals and the sign they leave. You can even make your office time more tolerable by looking for sign on the carpet or linoleum floors.

You can take this skill as far as you want. The JHPTS program has four certification levels: basic, apprentice, journeyman, and sign cutter. Some people are happy to achieve basic tracker certification. This ability to see and recognize the evidence of a person's passage and to understand how, when, where, and why sign was created is the foundation of all tracking. I believe this level is essential for all field law enforcement officers. We need to recognize the existence of this kind of evidence, know when to call in help, and be able to participate as tracking team members. Some people get the fever and progress all the way to sign cutter. The sign cutter or master tracker has acquired the respect and recognition of peers through-







Suspect track in soil near elk

out many years of active involvement, public demonstration of advanced tracking knowledge, and skills in successful accomplishment of the broadest spectrum of tracking missions. By the time a tracker reaches this level, he has demonstrated the ability to resolve even the most extraordinary and unusual incidents.

Tracking evidence can prove beneficial even when it is not the foundation of a case. Quite often, I use tracking evidence to corroborate or refute suspect or wit-

ness testimony. Once you have this evidence in your arsenal and evaluate the truthfulness of your suspect's statement, you can then use your interview and interrogation skills to pull out the truth. Does the tracking evidence show the suspect had an accomplice and he claims to have acted alone? Does he claim to have never been at the abandoned carcass when tracking evidence shows he was? Does the suspect claim he has never been at the baited field before, but the tracking evidence shows he's

been there repeatedly over several weeks? The possibilities are endless.

I often use my tracking skills in everyday work. While checking spring turkey hunters, I can approach an empty pickup and determine how many persons left the vehicle, which direction they went, and whether or not they have already returned to the vehicle that day and left again. I have commonly used this skill at fishing access sites along a stream. I can quickly determine which direction people traveled and how many there are.

Flapping - Vegetation swept or bent into the direction of travel by a passerby. Leaves and grass blades are often twined over revealing a dirt floor or lighter under side.

Grass trail - The bending and intertwining of grass blades with thorn selves and other vegetation, indicating the passage of humans or animals. In tall grass, human and other long legged animals will flag the grass in separate clumps (where their foot-step land) while low slung animals tend to push the grass down evenly with their stomachs.

Grass trails over frosty or dew covered ground will appear darker than the surrounding turf.



Flapping in dry grass. Bent grass blades reflect more light, making the grass trail appear brighter.

Grass Trail - (Flapping with intertwining grass blades)



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Scuff Mark - A scrape-like disturbance caused by footgear slipping, jamming or shuffling over the ground, rocks, logs etc. Scuffs caused by animals will often show claw or hoof impressions.

Textural Change - A change in the appearance or feel of the ground surface - rough to smooth, fluffy to flat, soft to compacted etc. Textural changes often indicate the presence of signs.

Shine - An area of intensified light reflection caused by human foot fall, damage and compression. (Compacted areas become smoother which in turn increases the amount of light being reflected from their surface.)



scuff mark on rock surface

Hoof

Textural change - (rough area scraped smooth)



Shine on bark of old log caused by a footstep.

scuff mark where bark has been peeled away.

Mass disturbed from log with underside showing

The Dig - A disturbance in which a portion of ground cover is pushed forward and partially lifted, due to the forward movement of the front of the shoe.

Brushing

Low Mark

The dig in mossy ground cover.





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If I'm looking for someone specific, I can match the sign found at their vehicle to that found at the trailhead. When working on cases involving abandoned big game animals, tracking evidence can establish whether or not someone approached the carcass. This indicates whether it was a case of abandonment, or just a wounding loss the hunter was unaware of. The benefits of tracking skills are obvious for working trappers and baiters. As your skill develops, you will find yourself noticing lines of sign leaving a backcountry campsite which may lead to the Forest Service "meat pole," or which may lead you to an illegal elk stashed in the timber.

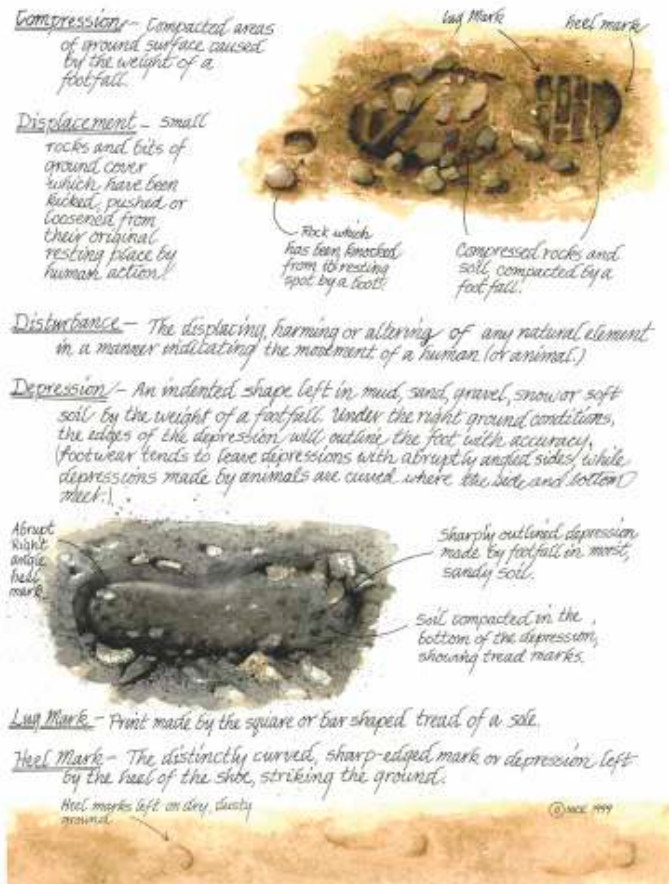
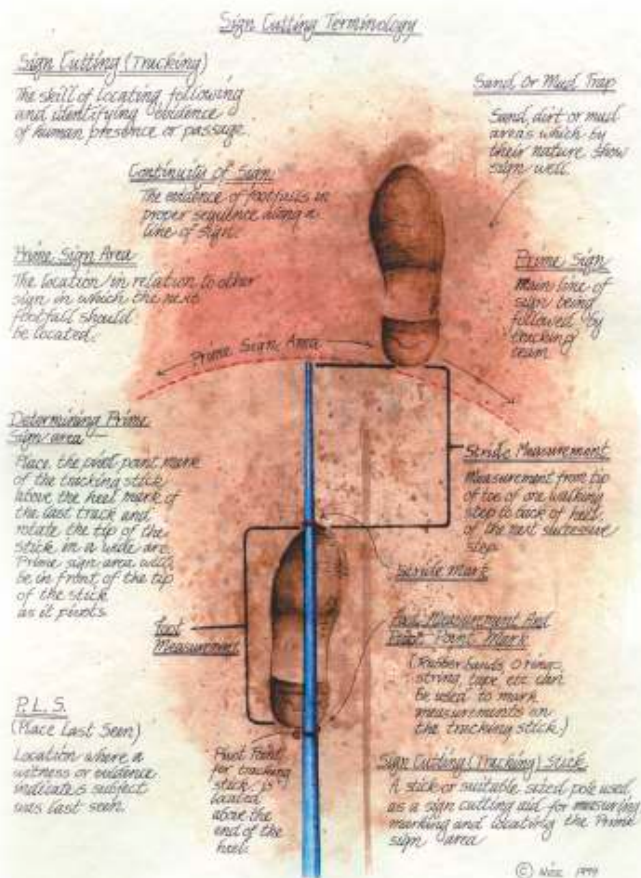
I wasn't around for the JFK shooting, but I did work a case where shots were suspected to have been fired from a grassy knoll. The case involved a hunter claiming to have shot an antelope from a grassy knoll about 50 yards off a county road. The sign on the gravel road showed that his vehicle stopped on the roadway, then pulled forward and off into the barrow pit. The sign also indicated that

he and his partner left the pickup and walked across the pasture directly to the antelope. A search of the "grassy knoll" showed no sign that any person had walked up it in at least several months. When confronted with this evidence, the suspect confessed to having shot from the roadway. Further interrogation resulted in a confession to shooting from his vehicle.

Recently, Wyoming officers solved a case where a suspect shot and left a bull elk in an area where the season had closed for elk but was open for deer. Witnesses had provided a description of a pickup that was in the area the day of the shooting. Wardens Aaron Kerr and Daniel Beach worked the scene and located the place where the vehicle had been parked. They used their tracking skills to locate the site from which the suspect shot, and retrieved brass there. They also showed that the suspect walked to the elk, spent some time there shuffling around, and then walked back to his pickup ¼ of a mile away. Good old-fashioned game warden work resulted in

an identification of the vehicle and possible suspect. The next day, wardens Kerr and Beach interviewed the suspect, who denied having anything to do with the elk. When asked for the shoes he was wearing that day, he produced footwear that did not match the type of shoe that left the sign at the scene. The officers then asked to see the boots he was wearing. Bingo! They used their interview skills to obtain a confession. The suspect had been shooting into the sun (first mistake) at "the biggest mule deer he had ever seen." When he approached the animal, he realized his mistake and paced around nervously while making a phone call. The suspect then chose to leave the area and not tell anyone (second mistake).

Another case I worked involved a gut pile I discovered along a county road during routine patrol in September. By carefully analyzing the sign around the gut pile, I determined that the deer had not been shot there nor had it been dragged there. All of the footprint evidence indicated that two suspects exited



a pickup, unloaded a deer, field dressed it, and then reloaded it. Weeks later, a photograph surfaced showing an archer with a large mule deer buck – I had been watching this particular buck for several months in town. The gears started to turn and sure enough, an interview resulted in a statement that the deer had been shot with archery equipment (which was perfectly legal) and the hunter, not wanting to draw undue attention to the kill, chose to take the deer out of town to field dress it.

This case did not result in a violation or conviction, but tracking evidence did help solve it and take another open case off the books.



JHPTS track sketch card.



establish a time line detailing when the crime occurred and when the head was removed days later. The suspect is being held on an outstanding warrant for a felony charge and will be charged with crimes involving four stolen firearms as well as the killing of the mule deer.

Tracking skills can also prove instrumental in locating stashed evidence. For example, officers have used tracking evidence in

Recently, I spoke with another officer working a case involving tracking evidence: a mule deer buck was shot out of season and without a license. Tracking evidence, including aging of sign, is being used to refute the suspect's statement about when he was at the scene, and to

situations when heads were sawed off big game animals and hidden for later retrieval.

Some of you reading this article have duties that routinely include searches for lost or missing persons. The advantages of tracking are enormous here. Tracking

# WORKING ON THE WILD SIDE

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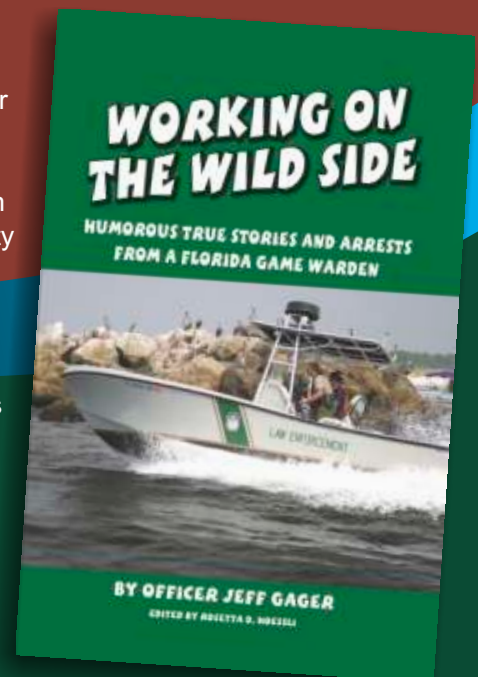
Officer Jeff Gager recently retired from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission after twenty five years of service. Over that length of time, Jeff has seen it all. He has chosen to write a book containing sixty short stories. The stories are

all true and reflect the more humorous arrests and incidents that Jeff was involved with over the years. Jeff now works in the business he regulated for so long as he owns and operates his own charter fishing business (somedayladyfishingcharters.com).

5 1/2 x 8 1/2, soft cover, 152 pages

Jeff's book can be purchased for \$14.95 plus shipping at the following website:

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is compatible with aerial searches and use of dogs. In some searches, personnel in a plane closely observed trackers on the ground to determine direction of travel so they could narrow the search area. Also, some dog handlers are certified trackers and frequently use both methods together: in certain circumstances, they will kennel their dogs and rely totally on tracking skills.

Hopefully, I have given you an idea of the wide range of situations where tracking skills are valuable in our profession.

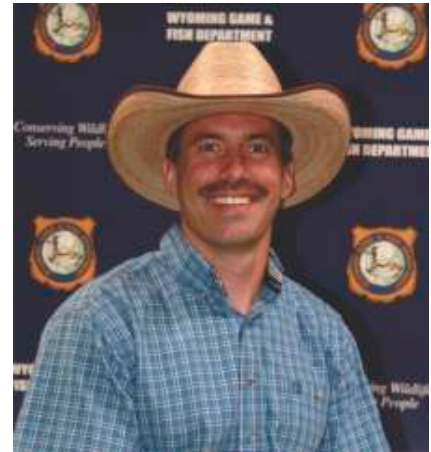
As criminals become more aware of crime detection techniques and go to greater pains to hide their activity, we need to seek ways to keep up with them. It is impossible for a person to pass through an area without leaving sign, unless he figures out how to levitate!

As officers, we need to be aware of this fact and develop our skills to be able to track them not only through mud or snow, but also under more difficult circumstances. At the very least, I encourage your department to provide

training so that every officer is aware of tracking techniques and can call in help when needed. JHPTS offers training for military, law enforcement, and search and rescue personnel, but the bottom line for all applications is learning to see sign.

Some portions of this article were taken from JHPTS materials with permission. Illustrations by Claudia Nice. All other photos courtesy of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. For information on training and/or tracking consultation in relation to any incident, please contact Wyoming Game Warden Brady Vandenberg at (307) 334-3281, or P.O. Box 60, Lusk, WY 82225. For interest in training or professional consultation services, please contact:

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*In his 17 years as warden with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Brady Vandenberg has worked as a case management coordinator and commercial operations coordinator, and currently serves as wildlife damage coordinator. A member of the WGFDP predator attack response team, Vandenberg has been tracking and training under JHPTS since 2006 and is a designated trainer for JHPTS through Niobrara County Search and Rescue.*

## Security Guard

I was working as a Conservation Officer in the small northern British Columbia town of Chetwynd. Another officer and I shared a second floor office above one of the banks in town. I presume office space in town was hard to come by, so you took what you could get. They weren't bad digs, but public access to our office required our clients to pass through the bank lobby. As our district was pretty rough-and-tumble, it was commonplace for us to seize a high volume of rifles and shotguns from hunters who chose to violate the law.

On occasion, after the conclusion of an investigation or court proceedings, we were required to return these rifles to their owners. One can imagine that the sight of an armed man (very rarely did we apprehend female poachers) walking through the lobby of the bank might be somewhat unsettling to the customers, so the bank required us to carry the firearms to the subject's vehicle and turn it over to him outside. This exchange usually occurred on the sidewalk in front of the bank, which faced the main street in town.

Although our main duty was law enforcement, we had agreed to assist the Pollution Prevention Branch by maintain-

ing an air quality station on the roof of the building. The monitoring equipment was accessed through a hatch in the roof. As this task was usually a quick job, we always carried it out in uniform, often still wearing our revolvers on our hips. From time to time, when the weather was nice, I would stroll around on top of the building to get a top-down view of the town before changing the filter in the rooftop equipment. There was another two-story building beside ours, the top floor of which housed a dentist's office. I could clearly see the dental technicians cleaning patients' teeth from my vantage point, and occasionally one of them glanced up at me and smiled or waved.

One day, I took some time off work to have my own teeth cleaned at that same dentist's office and didn't bother to change out of uniform. The dental hygienist, a friendly and talkative African-American woman, was telling me about recently moving to our small town from New York City of all places. It was basically a one-sided con-



versation as my mouth was otherwise occupied with fingers and dental equipment. After telling her tale of moving to Canada to get away from crime in the big city, she took a long look at the patches on the sleeves of my uniform shirt and a puzzled look came over her face. She asked me what a conservation officer was and I gave her the quick explanation: "We are basically police officers who chase after people who hunt and fish illegally".

She immediately let out a big sigh of relief, then proceeded to explain her unusual reaction. It seems she had seen my co-worker and me up on the roof next door on many occasions and had assumed, because the building was a bank and we were in uniform, that we were security guards. At first she had been impressed with how well guarded the bank was. She said that she'd never seen any bank that well protected back in the US, even in New York City, which is chock-full of criminals, unlike our small northern Canadian town.

*Submitted by Gerry W. Lister*