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VOL. 21 | NO. 1 | 2014

Man Tracking: An Extraordinary Law Enforcement Tool

by [Carmen](#) • November 3, 2014 • [Comments Off](#)

Law enforcement officers base their careers and their safety on the assumption that they are seeing everything they need to see in order to stop crime and protect themselves from possible threats.



This is a something that is reinforced each and every day as we go about our duties. It applies to traffic stops, building searches, contacting people on the street, crime scene investigations and so much more. We expect of ourselves that when we look at something we will see the important things

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that are there to see. It would stand to reason then that we would take issue to anyone that claims we aren't seeing something that is right in front of us. It would be even more insulting to hear them tell us that we have missed many pieces of evidence and clues that are all around us.

Unfortunately, this is just what I am about to do.

You aren't seeing all that you can see. In fact, some of this evidence may have been instrumental to a case you were working on, but you didn't see it, didn't recognize it, or could not appreciate it for what it was. We are trained in so many skills and have so many new technologies that offer us a multitude of tools to handle the great variety of aspects in police work, and yet too many of us lack one simple, even "primitive" skill that could help us to see and interpret these missed clues that are all around us. This primitive skill I am referring to is visual tracking, or man tracking. Sadly tracking is a greatly misunderstood skill.

My first encounter with tracking was in junior high school in my bio-earth science class. The substitute teacher showed us a method of recognizing animal prints and how they moved (their "gate"). I was impressed and asked my teacher for more information on the subject. He gave me primitive survival skill books and tracking books to read. This led me to eventually attend a wilderness survival school. I learned many skills, from tracking and flint knapping, to how to process a deer hide into a brain-tanned buckskin and much more. I find that many people see tracking in this same sort of light. They think of the old west movies and expect to see a tracker like Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* wearing a loin cloth, or Daniel Boone wearing a 'coon skin hat. However, tracking in its simplest

form is purely finding and interpreting the discoverable evidence left by the passage of a person. It isn't some sort of magic or mysticism. It is learning to know how and what to look for and to understand what it means. Unfortunately most don't even truly look because they don't think anything could even be there to begin with. William Bodziak, a retired Supervisory Special Agent in the Laboratory Division of the FBI, pointed out this issue of law enforcement failing to search for footprint evidence in his book when he stated, **“What is not looked for will not be found.”**¹

My journey from that first wilderness survival class has come a long way. I have attended multiple schools, or programs, where I have learned much about tracking. I have attended wilderness survival courses, tactical tracking courses, anti and counter tracking courses and just plain man tracking classes. This pursuit started as an interest in survival skills, but quickly turned into a passion as it became obvious how it directly relates to law enforcement work.

In order for tracking to be useful to law enforcement it must be professional. It can't simply be a hobby or something someone uses while hunting. The tracking evidence provided by a tracker would need the credibility to stand up in court. What standard of excellence is required as a tracker? What level of certification is needed? Whether it is an Intoxilizer certification or proper training for the use of an aerosol defensive tool, we are expected to be trained professionally and maintain certifications in the many things that we do. If we go to court and are found to be lacking in training or certification it could mean the loss of that criminal case in court. By having a standard of excellence and certification

of tracking training from a criminal court recognized program we achieve the professional status to have tracking evidence be admissible in court to bring about convictions. Although I have found many teachers of tracking, I have not found many programs that rise to this level of professionalism. Most programs only offer certificates of completion.

The one program that has offered the needed, higher level of tracking training is the Joel Hardin Professional Tracking Services (JHPTS). Joel Hardin is a former police officer and Border Patrol Special Agent with forty years of tracking presentations resulting in successful convictions. Joel has been involved in numerous man hunts as well as many capital crime scene investigations and prosecutions in which his tracking expertise has proved instrumental. He has even been recognized as a tracking evidence expert by several state and federal courts. Joel has been training professional trackers for over 40 years. Many of his students have qualified and presented tracking evidence successfully in criminal cases. JHPTS trains and qualifies law enforcement officers, search and rescue and military Special Forces personnel as professional trackers.

One such investigation is talked about in Joel Hardin's book *Tracker: Case Files & Adventures of a Professional Mantracker*. He tells how he located prints that weren't seen by other investigators. He was able to follow where the suspect had left and gone back to his own house. Police were able to arrest the suspect. Not only was his finding and following the prints extremely useful, but his analysis of the tracks allowed him to determine: 1) when they had been made; 2) that only one person committed the crime; 3) that the person was

familiar with the house; 4) that the person ran upon leaving the house, but was not fleeing or panicked, only crossing an opening as quickly as possible; 5) that the person was very familiar with the areas between the victims' house and his own; 6) that the person was fully aware of his commission of the homicide.²

Officer Kathleen Decker, a 29-year career deputy sheriff with the King County Sheriff's Office in Washington State and long time student of Joel Hardin's Program, has utilized tracking in over 300 cases and has presented testimony as an expert witness in many cases in court. Officer Decker recounted one such murder case in 2006 where Nicole Pietz was found dead in field of overgrown blackberry bushes. Her husband, David, quickly became the suspect, but due to a lack of evidence, no arrests were made. Officer Decker examined the scene where the body was found and discovered evidence that suggested the suspect knew the victim, and even possibly cared for the victim. She was also able to determine how long the body had been there. Eventually, with Officer Decker's testimony, David was arrested, tried and convicted for the murder of his wife.³

These are only some of the many situations in which tracking was exceptionally helpful by locating and documenting tracking evidence in a case. In fact, tracking can help in just about any investigation by helping to identify and document footprints, identify the number of scene participants, identify the ingress and egress, corroborate or invalidate statements, validate time factors, and even identify the characteristics of the people involved. **Physical footprint (tracking) evidence provides the most numerous clues at**

most crime scenes, yet it is the most overlooked and undiscovered.

Tracking is also particularly helpful in search operations. Search operations can be anything from a missing person to a manhunt. Any sort of search operation can quickly become a large scale event that requires a large amount of man power, resources and time. The 2002 Elizabeth Smart case⁴ is the perfect example of a massive search. Tracking can help in these situations by helping to identify the last known place of the person(s) and assist in determining the direction of travel, or vector. This may not sound like it would help that much, however, Search and Rescue managers learn with modern search training that a search for a person in a wilderness area who has been missing for 5 hours (assuming a walking rate of 2 mph) could end up being a search area of 314 square miles. If the subject is moving faster or has been gone longer then the area will be much greater (10 hours walking at 2mph is 1,256 square miles, and 20 hours is 5,026 square miles). Finding that one person in this area can be daunting. In order to increase the chances of finding them you have to add more people inside that perimeter to search. A tracker being utilized in a search like this, however, isn't primarily looking for that missing person, instead they are looking for the evidence left by the person. It is generalized that a person takes 2,000 steps per mile. The tracking evidence left by the person is much more plentiful and, with professional tracking training, is more likely to be seen than the person making that same evidence. Once a vector, or direction of travel, has been determined the search area can be reduced significantly. This then will reduce the time to

search the area and the resources and people needed to search it.

Another great example of how tracking helps in a search is given in a case in Washington where two other law enforcement trackers, trained by Joel Hardin, located a murder suspect's bunker. The man, Peter Keller, killed his wife and daughter in 2012 and disappeared into the mountains. A manhunt ensued but no one was able to find him. Peter was heavily armed and had a bunker where he was hiding. The trackers searched the mountains disguised as hikers. They located his very subtle trail in a remote area going to and from his camp. They were able to mobilize a large group of officers to close in on him. Peter eventually killed himself in the standoff.⁵ Fortunately manhunts like this one are quite uncommon. Large scale searches, in general, are far less common than the daily routine of crime scene investigations where tracking could be utilized more often. In spite of this, it is clear that having tracking as a search resource can be tremendously useful.

Tracking training is valuable on many levels and in many aspects of law enforcement. I am not suggesting that tracking is the answer to all law enforcement problems. Tracking cannot do everything, but it is a simple and effective tool that we have at our fingertips. Even the most rudimentary understanding of this skill will help responding officers to identify more evidence and better preserve it. Tracking will help investigators more thoroughly analyze a crime scene and locate more evidence. Tracking will help to find missing and lost people. Tracking can and does save lives.

I highly recommend you attend any tracking

training that you are able to go to. If you aren't able to go to a class somewhere I would strongly suggest you read more about tracking. There are many books on the subject that are quite good. Obviously I have my preferences about the sources one would go through to get this training, but I know that anything will help you to get started and to begin to see how tracking will be helpful. If you have any questions or would like to hear more about tracking I would be happy to meet with you or speak with you. I will be assisting with a tracking training class at this year's upcoming Utah Peace Officer Association Summer Convention in Price, UT. For questions contact me at 801-809-3289 or email richard.chipping@slcgov.com.

(Endnotes)

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