

# Wily wildlife

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## Trackers use ancient art to assess their surroundings



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**S**ituation: While meandering in the mountains of west Boulder County, you happen upon the remains of a deer near your chosen campsite. It was obviously killed by another animal for food.

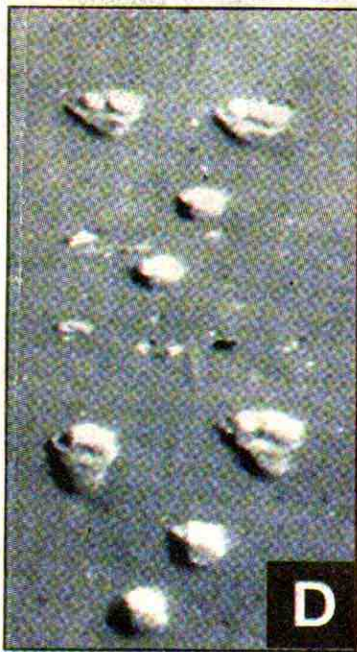
Important questions: What is the predator? Is it still in the area and skittish about having you as a visitor, or are you safe to stay put and roast marshmallows later in the evening?

A brief investigation of tracks or other signs left behind by the beast could give you answers.

Far from being an outdated method of chasing down one's dinner, animal tracking is still a skill that is practiced by people all over the world. Its purposes have merely broadened.

Although it may seem like a lost art heard about only in books of the old West or encyclopedia entries on cave men, tracking remains useful today among scientists and naturalists who want to keep tabs on wildlife and learn about the environment.

Early trackers and hunters, says Jim Halfpenny, were the world's first professionals.



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Halfpenny spent 17 years in Boulder from the late 1970s to the early '90s and worked at the University of Colorado's Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research. Considered the authority on tracking in North America, he now runs an ecological education company in Livingston, Mont.

Halfpenny says early man became astute in the sciences of biology, ecology and behavior in order to become a good tracker so he could feed his family or others. Nowadays,

### Key to tracks on 9B

tracking is used largely to learn about the behavior of animals and their interaction with the environment.

"Now those things have become a goal in and of themselves, to be able to study biology, manage animals," says Halfpenny, whose books on tracking include "Scats and Tracks of the Rocky Mountains."

"They were a means. Now they're an end."

Whether used for behavioral or ecological studies, finding rare species or determining whether it's a coyote or your neighbor's dog killing your livestock at night, modern-day trackers vary widely in their identity and level of skill.

By analyzing an animal's gait, its scat (a.k.a. feces), its dens and other signs it leaves, such as broken branches from rubbing against trees, experienced trackers can tell what an animal was eating, whether it was fleeing or hunting, and how many of a given species are in an area — especially in the winter and spring, when



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snow and mud are easily imprinted.

While Halfpenny uses tracking for intense scientific scrutiny of the environment, plenty of weekend naturalists use it simply to observe what they cannot see.

Dave Hoerath, a wildlife specialist for Boulder County Open Space, says his department uses tracking primarily for knowing what animals are in Boulder County over long periods of time so that they are aware of when there is a change in the county's inhabitants.

"We always want to know what animals are where and what areas are important to what animals at what time of year," Hoerath said. "You want to keep track on an ongoing basis such that you know what the conditions are and whether something's changed. It's one way to keep your finger on the pulse of whether things are the way they're supposed to be."

While hunters still use tracking to get into close range of animals, Hoerath said he believes there is an increase in people who try to get close to animals such as mountain lions or coyotes to photograph them in their natural surroundings.

BCOS has volunteer naturalists who offer tracking training to the public along with other skills for venturing out into the wild.



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Tracking has remained relevant in the wake of technology largely because of the fact that it is more thorough than many technological advances.

While radio collars and video cameras can be more convenient than labor-intensive tracking, the information they provide can also be limited, often just giving the location of an animal at a few set times per day. Plus, one needs to catch an animal to fit it with a radio collar. A proficient tracker can record an animal's every action by observing the signs it leaves behind.

Boulder resident Marty Colon has been teaching tracking for more than 20 years, including for the City of Boulder's Mountain Parks and Open Space Division, Rocky Mountain National Park, the Colorado School of Mines and the Denver Museum of Natural History, as well as

other places around the United States.

He has also helped agencies with environmental impact studies ranging from placing a tunnel under a highway for animals to use to just seeing which animals inhabit a proposed building site.

"You can put a camera in a tunnel and see which animals use it but you can't see which ones don't use it," Colon says. "(Tracking) is very relevant because it's very high-skilled but low-tech."

Both Colon and Halfpenny say they've seen a resurgence in tracking in recent years. For one thing, Colon says, the average citizen in Boulder County and Colorado as a whole is into the outdoors, and many are curious about what tracks they're seeing while out and about. Landowners also have a natural curiosity about what is roaming around on

their property.

"When I was a kid, there were really very few resources available," says Colon, who is a teacher at the Boulder Watershed School. "I think there are a lot more people interested in it now and there are a lot more resources now."

While a highly technical trade, both Colon and Halfpenny agree that tracking is less complex to learn than many might think.

Colon's emphasis is on teaching students a systematic approach to tracking that allows people to identify tracks by a sort of process of elimination even if they aren't familiar with a certain animal or its signs.

Both men assert that a person can learn in just a couple of days the basics of tracking. After that, much of becoming proficient is just getting out and practicing.

"One of the biggest myths out there is that it takes decades to become a tracker," Halfpenny says. "If you were an early person, you couldn't take decades to pass on your skills. It doesn't take long. It takes doing it. My goal with my classes, when people leave there, is that they have skills they can use immediately. Somebody who has a little bit of training can become very good very quickly, especially to the rest of the world."

To learn more about tracking, go to Jim Halfpenny's Web site, [www.tracknature.com](http://www.tracknature.com)

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A. Hopping pattern left by a squirrel showing drag marks into, and out of, each hole.

B. Galloping trail of a cat showing groups with intergroup spaces between them.

C. Hopping gait pattern left by a mouse.

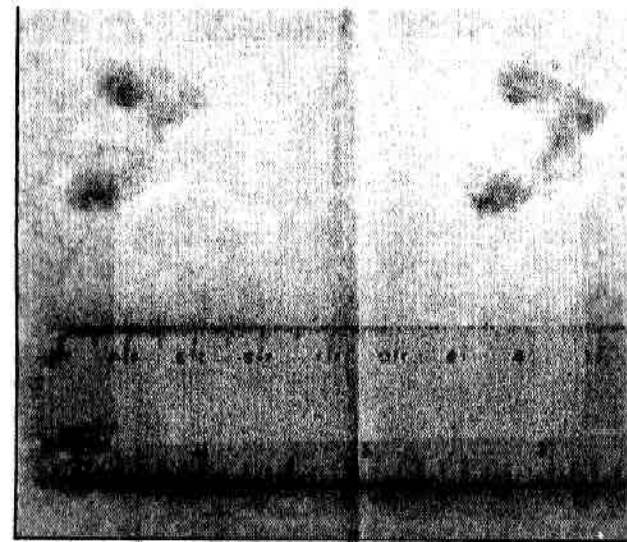
D. Hopping gait pattern left by a rabbit.

E. Deer trail showing tail and foot drag marks.

F. Walking gait left by a porcupine showing tail and foot drag marks.

G. Walking trail of a coyote showing alternating right / left holes.

H. Hopping gait of a shrew in which it takes two hops to go 6 inches.



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