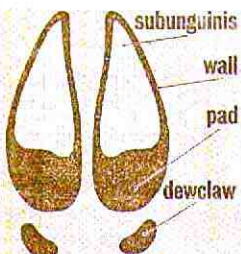


# Tracking savvy



## Defining tracks

The definitions for some unfamiliar terms used in describing tracks are:

**Clout** — Clouts are the toes that form the hoof.

**Subunguinis** — The soft material under the nails of humans. In deer and their relatives it refers specifically to the soft material between the pad and wall of the clout.

**Pad** — The hard, callus-like structure on the sole of an animal's foot. In deer and their relatives, there is a single pad separated from the wall by the subunguinis.

**Wall** — The hard material around the edge of each clout, technically the unguinis, which also forms human nails and animal claws.

## Locating game

Skills to define tracks, direction and the species of animal not only help when looking for a wounded animal, they can also be used before pulling the trigger to locate big game.

"Looking at the bigger picture, you want to use clues ahead of time to be prepared," Halfpenny said. "You want to know where the bulls hide out with the harem, where they feed, the ridges where they hide."

## Aging a track

Is that elk track you've just come across in the trail a day old, or a week? Knowing the difference could mean meat in the freezer, or a trip to the supermarket.

When scouting, Halfpenny suggests hunters sweep off a portion of a narrow trail or an area with lots of traffic to see what's new and moving through the area. Aging is not a problem then, every track is fresh.

If a hunter has just arrived in an area, Halfpenny suggested they talk to locals for "post casting" information. A postcaster, as opposed to a forecaster, is a person who can give a hunter post dating events such as when the last rainstorms, snowstorms, or windstorms took place.

These postcasting events can be used when conducting three tests to age a track — the blowing, ditch and step tests.

■ **Blowing:** Look for the most fragile edge of the track and blow on it. If the track is old and set up, the edge won't move.

■ **Ditch:** This tests the

The height of a broken twig may indicate how large the bull elk is that broke the branch. Trees that are used for such displays of machismo are not to be confused with smaller trees used to rub velvet off antlers.

"Where you find rubs early is not where the bulls will be later," Halfpenny said. "In general, velvet is rubbed off on smaller diameter trees in the summer."

Larger trees, from 4 to 12 inches in diameter, that have been beaten up are a sign of fall mating aggression by a bull.

Tracks can also give hunters clues to the sex and size of an animal.



BOB ZELLAR/Gazette Staff

**Jim Halfpenny suggests hunters talk to locals to get information.**

moisture level in the ground to see how much it has dried. If the bottom of the track is wet, it's fresh. If the track is dry, it is old. Drag a finger or knife through the track to see how far below the surface the moisture has dried. If the moisture is still near the surface, the track is probably fairly fresh.

■ **Step:** Put your fresh footprint next to the old track and reason out what would have made the new print look as old as the old print. Ask yourself what has happened in the last 24 hours.

Gardiner man gives hunters clues for finding big game

*BILLINGS GAZETTE*

By BRETT FRENCH

Gazette Outdoor Writer

10/18/01

Jim Halfpenny would like to help hunters find animals and big game they've wounded.

"Good tracking skills help to save animals from being wasted," he said.

Halfpenny is a soft-spoken man with a salt-and-pepper beard, his kind eyes shaded by a gray cowboy hat. Those eyes are also the keen tools of his trade. He's a professional tracker from Gardiner, author of tracking books and a tracking teacher.

Tracking skills have been used as long as man has followed game to find food.

Although fewer people may have such skills than 100 years ago, Halfpenny said the art hasn't been lost. He said that with practice and a little training, a novice tracker can do well. With an instructor to teach the basics, Halfpenny said, hunters can get a big head start.

## True measure

To understand tracks, hunters first have to know how to measure them for comparison. Although a bull elk track measures 4 inches in length, a cow can leave a 4-inch print in mud, Halfpenny noted.

Trackers use a technique called the minimum outline to measure tracks and avoid such confusion. He suggested a hunter lay his hand on a hard surface. The area of the hand that is pressed against the surface is the true size of the track, or the

# Tracking

## Continued from 1C

minimum outline. In mud the footprint sinks deeper and the track area expands, but the point at which the bottom of the footprint begins to curve up represents the real size of the footprint — the edge of the minimum outline.

Gait can also confuse trackers because animals will sometimes step in the same track with their back hoof, making the track look bigger, Halfpenny said.

Scat — animal excrement — can also give hunters clues to finding big game.

"Bull elk in the fall will be in moist, green areas," he said. "The scat will be large, composed of fresh, green grass similar to spring."

Tracking clues put together may help a hunter find an animal.

To keep track of the clues, Halfpenny said, "It takes a pencil, paper and a ruler to be a tracker."

Hopefully, a skillful hunter will make a one-shot, clean kill after locating their game. But even the best shooters can wound an animal if it moves just before the shot, or a twig diverts a bullet.

After pulling the trigger, hunters have to concentrate on understanding footprints, the blood trail and hair and the clues they provide about where the animal was shot.

"One thing I like to push, especially with snow, is understanding the gait pattern —

walk, trot, gallop, bound," Halfpenny said. "If the animal is wounded, the gait varies in a characteristic way."

A leg broken low swings out and around in a small diameter. A leg broken high will swing in a larger circle.

"A leg broken low is somewhat trivial, broken high there is a better chance to catch the animal," Halfpenny said. A veterinarian told him that wild animals are born with three legs and an extra, which is why it is difficult to catch an elk or deer with only a leg wound.

Blood color can indicate a lung hit — frothy pink in color, or an artery — deep, dark red.

Halfpenny also teaches his students how to make a hair card. Hair from the animal — deer, elk, antelope, etc. — is taken from 12 different parts of a hide and placed on a notebook-size piece of stiff paper, preferably a bright color such as orange. Each hair type is put on an outline of the animal showing where it comes from. Then the entire piece is laminated. Kinkos is one copy shop that offers laminating, Halfpenny said.

After shooting, a hunter can compare any hair found with the card to see where the animal was hit.

"That will give the hunter an idea of what situation they're into," he said.

Given the many different methods used in tracking animals, Halfpenny said the key is never tying a deduction to one clue. "Use as many clues as you can," he said.

## Halfpenny's background

Jim Halfpenny is a scientist and educator whose background is mammalogy and ecology. He has been tracking since 1957 and teaching tracking since 1969. He has authored many books and videos including "A Field Guide To Mammal Tracking in North America," "Scats & Tracks of the Rocky Mountains," "Scats & Tracks of the Pacific Coast," "Snow Tracking, Winter: An Ecological Handbook," "Discovering Yellowstone Wolves," "Living with Ice Bears," "A Celebration of Bears" and the six-part video "Tracking Elk for Hunters."

Since 1961, Jim has taught outdoor education and environmental programs for state, federal, and private organizations including Audubon, Colorado Outward Bound School, National Outdoor Leadership School, National Wildlife Federation, Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club, Smithsonian, Yellowstone Institute and Rocky Mountain, Grand Teton, Yellowstone and Glacier national parks.

Halfpenny offers tracking classes throughout the year. For more information on his classes, or for a copy of his video or books, log on to A Naturalist's World at [www.tracknature.com](http://www.tracknature.com), telephone (406) 848-9458, or e-mail him at [trackdoctor@tracknature.com](mailto:trackdoctor@tracknature.com)

For a copy of his video, "Tracking Elk for Hunters," send \$43.95 to: A Naturalist's World, P.O. Box 989, Gardiner, MT 59030.