

THE LEARNING CIRCLE: NOTES, THOUGHTS & PROJECTS

I. The Yupik Owl Dance

Last September's Traditional Skills class featured food and culture of native Alaska, taught by our friend Jacque Condor who spent some of his early years in Nome. He shared with us the owl dance that was traditional in Yupik villages in southwest and central Alaska. "The first time I saw the dance," Jacques told me, "was in 1957 and 1959 at the Fur Rendevous in Anchorage." Jacques had made a mask and performed a dance from his memory of those times.



Dressed in a white tunic and wearing white gloves, and holding a feathered hoop in each hand, he swooped and rose and swooped again, accompanied by traditional drumming. The snowy owl he portrayed, "oopik" in the native language, pursued two ptarmigan, female dancers who tried to evade the owl by darting behind him and hiding. This dance was not itself a sacred spirit dance equivalent to the wolf dance, Jacques explained, but rather one of numerous depictions of the spirits of animals present in the Yupik world including wolverine, crane, and ermine.

Jacques referred to a reference, Dorothy Jean Ray's *Eskimo*

Masks. Art and Ceremony (see below) that describes a multi-day Bladder Festival of which the owl dance was a part. Ray writes, "The Bladder Festival...was actually a memorial service for all food animals that had been killed the preceding year...the seal was the principal animal so honored although caribou, sea lions, and beluga (white whale) were also included. The Eskimos believed that an animal's soul resided in its bladder; therefore seal, walrus and caribou bladders...were saved during the year to be inflated, painted with various designs, and hung in the kazgi during the long days' festivities. On the last day of the festival the seal bladders were ceremonially put back into the sea through the ice where they were reborn to tell the living seals how they had been treated." The ceremony intended to insure good hunting in the following year because of the respect the hunters showed.

In one description of a Great Dance that is part of the festival, a shaman orchestrates masked dancers representing hawks, wolverines, foxes etc., calling them to appear from the edges of the dance house and move toward the center, accompanied by drumming. A hawk swoops upon an ermine, a bear appears growling, another dancer flops around as a fish. There are calls of birds and cries of the animals being imitated. As the festival continues, there are walrus and red fox and crow dances as well. The owl dance, apparently, fit somewhere in this four-day ceremony. After the animal bladders have been returned to the sea, one account describes a shaman's journey under water to see how the living animals received the gestures of thankfulness.

Resources: Dorothy Jean Ray, *Eskimo Masks. Art and Ceremony*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1967.

II. How Not to Look for Tracks

by Mary Brooks



During our introductory tracking classes, I usually have the luxury of sauntering around the wash at Malibu Creek State Park at a wonderful time of the morning, marking tracks for our students to work on when, in an hour or so, Jim brings them there to begin their dirt time. Often I am asked, “How did you find these tracks?” or almost as frequently, “Did you make these tracks yourself?” Anyone who has ever overheard Jim and me discussing some of the mysteries of the wash would know well that if I made those tracks...I’d make it easier to identify them! Regardless, it is a job I’ve come to adore.

I don’t think I have any particular talents in finding tracks, but I have come to recognize a process that I go through. When I am doing so for our beginning students, I am looking for particular kinds of tracks, with particular characteristics and, sometimes, even particular animals. When it is for my own pleasure or my own dirt time, I may be looking for something else. Regardless, one thing I don’t do...is actually look for tracks. If you are working on your own dirt time, you will undoubtedly discover for yourself a way of finding tracks. Here’s mine.

A bad attitude will ruin your day. Most folks won’t believe this, even if they pretend to, but I know for certain that the single most important thing in finding tracks is attitude. As I am walking toward the wash (or anywhere else I am tracking) I clear my mind and imagine the area without me there – in fact, without any human there. I make a point of being thankful. In my heart, I feel how glorious the area is. I admire the day, the sun and the breeze. Each time of day has a unique smell to it. I listen for the birds who are always commenting on something going on. I pay attention to how grasses move, how the trees are greeting the day.

This may be even harder to believe, and I myself even rarely take note at the time, but recognize later that I often thought of an animal while walking toward the wash whose tracks I find when I’m there. Then I remember, “yes, I was thinking of a bobcat earlier.” Although it isn’t really thinking, it is more like dreaming. Almost as if I had seen it walking through the wash. Although I am somewhat methodical in the way I choose to walk through the wash, I am very often led to certain sections where there are tracks. Who knows how easy tracking might be, if we would just stop thinking for a while.

Don’t look for tracks. The second point is that I really don’t look for tracks. I find when I do look for tracks, I am stopping at every indentation in the ground and get overwhelmed by marks that often aren’t very useful for our students. So then I quit actively looking and focus on something else...a hawk in flight, a plant I never noticed before, the clouds moving across the sky, the smells of a newly flowering bush...something that doesn’t require my mind to function...and then I go back to not looking for tracks.

It’s all in pattern and texture. I make a point of noticing what the soil, in general, looks like for that day at that time. It will have an overall flavor or texture to it. Feel it. Take a good close look. It may differ in the shade or in the sun, whether it is moist or dry in certain areas, but it will have an overall quality to it. Soil, in general, ages, just like tracks do, of course. Have a good feel for what it is like right now.

Then, I look specifically for patterns and texture. This is how I find tracks. Tracks are always in patterns and those patterns are regular and quite different from everything else you see on the ground...rain drops, dew marks, old shoe prints, displaced rocks, etc. The track pattern will be visible as you scan an area. And the texture will differ from what you have determined to be the overall quality of the soil for that day at that time. The tracks may be a few hours old or even a few days old...but they will differ in texture from the soil around them in some way. By texture I mean that the soil inside the track will be a different color or have a different feel to it from the soil around the track. It is the difference between velvet and corduroy or between cotton

and wool. It is the difference between the skin on the bottom of your feet and the skin on the back of your forearm. Patterns and texture are the first things I notice and what usually draws me to look at a set of tracks.

There are a few other things that help. In a way, animals have a personality. Foxes and bobcats walk along the side of trail, rarely down the center. Deer and coyotes may walk down the center or along the sides. When their view changes, because of an opening or a junction, they will generally exercise some kind of caution. Squirrels may walk down a trail for a short distance, but often cross trails. Skunks go where they want. And so on. Transition areas can be an important place to look for tracks because most animals are moving through and may well leave a good set of tracks. Pay attention to the area, look at the big picture and take some time to notice how animals would move through the area. More often than not, it will be along the sides.

In an odd way, finding tracks has taught me a lot about tracking. We have been teaching beginning tracking classes at Malibu Creek State Park for years. Generations of bobcats have regular paths down one side or the other of this wash. While they may cross the wash in different places, if there are bobcat tracks there, they are so very often in the same place. Raccoon tracks, too, tend to be in one of two areas where they are moving toward an opening near the creek. Rabbit tracks and wood rat tracks are often in the center of the wash, but always where cover is nearby.

So while now my finding tracks for our students is clearly a combination of knowing the area and practicing what to look for, the tracking itself varies from wonderfully easy to quite difficult. Regardless, I go through the same process each time. And without failure...in every class I am astonished with finding tracks I somehow knew would be there as if it were whispered in the early morning breeze.

