

THE LEARNING CIRCLE: NOTES, THOUGHTS & PROJECTS

I. Walking with the Animal

We will soon begin the second season of our Walk with the Animal series, a set of in-the-field classes to deepen the tracking experience and increase the skills we modern trackers can use to “walk with the animal.”

You could call this approach “intuitive tracking,” or “connected tracking.” In recent years, stories about indigenous trackers’ “spirit tracking” or whatever it might be named, have become popular. I remember an Earth Skills student from South Africa telling me how native trackers there “don’t follow individual tracks, they follow the picture of the track...if you imagine looking through infrared binoculars that allow you to see a heat trail, it’s like that...” This was twenty-six years ago.

But, I must make a distinction. In our WWTA series, we’re not trying to recreate or imitate what indigenous trackers have done or can still do. Rather we work to own the skills ourselves, practice them, integrate them, and understand their place in our modern relationship to nature.

In “walking with the animal,” there is a qualitative difference from our other tracking classes, or from tracking that focuses on identification. The best way to understand it is through stories—your own especially but others’ also. When you walk with the animal, you can follow a trail intuitively and access the mood and personality of the animal.

Cutting to the chase, from our experience practicing and teaching this skill, it is entirely about your attitude and state of mind at the point of contact with the trail, and your relationship to the animal. Any techniques used to access your intuition or gut feeling flow from these things.

I can anticipate some questions from our fellow trackers: How does walking with the animal relate to technical tracking? Does an intuitive approach negate the technical and scientific? Can a tracker comfortable with the technical get anything out of an intuitive approach?

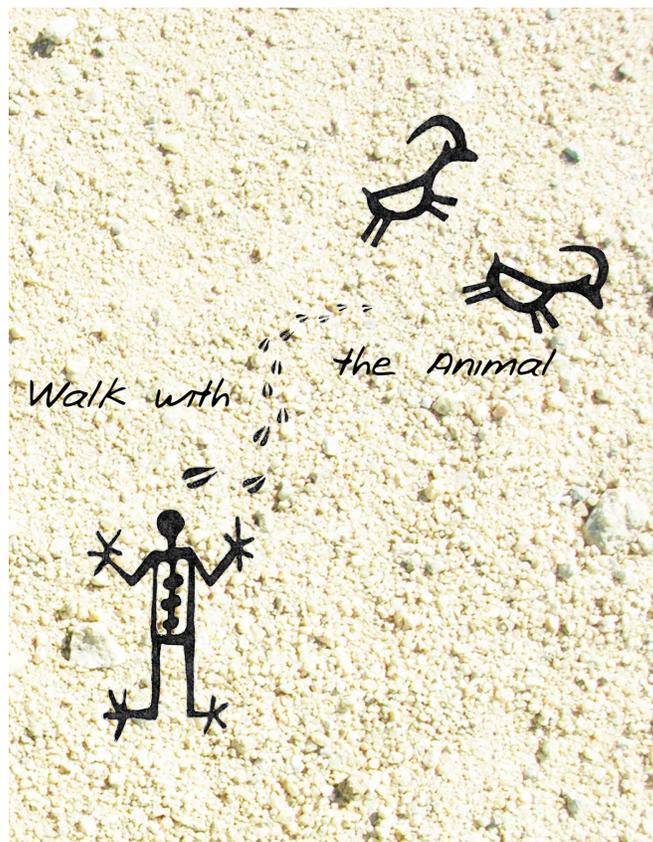
In my experience the technical / scientific and intuitive go hand-in-hand. In the first place, looking at the trail before you, examining details from track size to varying stride lengths, to lead changes in the gait, to pressure releases, begins that process of introduction to this animal, and anchors you in that trail. Spending dirt time visualizing the gait, leg movement, and how the feet touch the ground, often leads directly to a deeper sense about the animal, and it’s a key part of how we teach walking with the animal.

Second, the technical skills—measuring prints, trail widths and strides, looking for indicator pressure releases, and tedious back-tracking—are often engaged to validate an intuitive impression, for example when you sense your animal went to a certain spot up ahead, and need to verify from tracks there that it’s the same individual at the same time.

“It’s just healthy to talk to the animals...because of society’s insanity. You’ve got to get your feet in the dirt and just connect.” - Hannah, WWTA student

tracker shouldn’t be able to depend on it, and b) a blindfolded tracker without visual cues shouldn’t be able to sense where the animal went. We’ve found both cases to be untrue in our WWTA sessions.

I’m a very grounded tracker, so when I undertook what I call my Wall Project, a two and a half year effort to learn trailing, I tested and catalogued how and when my intuition worked. (All of us, I venture, have had intuitive impressions in some part of our lives, but the



This brings us to another question you might have: What is intuitive tracking anyway? Isn’t it just the wisdom of field time emerging in the guise of intuition? I don’t intend to embark on a philosophical or semantic discussion, because really your own experiences comprise the only meaningful answers for you. But I will say this: if intuition is only experience, then a) a novice

money question is, can we depend on this tool when we need it?) I discovered that in this project, my intuition was reliable two thirds of the time, and approached eighty percent when partially correct readings are included. I think that a commitment to learn, for yourself, what intuition is and how to rely on it, is important, also in ways that extend beyond trailing animals to your relationship with all of nature. I often spent a lot more effort validating my intuitive readings through focused and tedious dirt time, than I spent getting the readings in the first place.

A sample assignment

Here is one example of the many practice exercises we use in our Walk with the Animal series.

Find a trail whose tracks are pretty clear to see. (Actually you don't even need to identify who made the tracks.) Settle down into a quiet mental place, that is, push distractions aside, silence that busy questioning mind, and take some deep breaths. Perhaps walk around in a relaxed manner for a little while, taking in and appreciating your environment.

Begin with the tracks. Touch one or two of them. See how the foot hit the ground and pushed off. Step back and look at the track pattern. Imagine the gait, picturing the leg movement and speed of your animal. There's a rhythm and mood to it. If you have some experience in this, check some of the tracks to confirm the animal's posture and speed, but don't be too analytical.

Now, sense that movement that the animal's tracks have shown you. Picture it or feel it along the part of the trail you see before you. Then, allow it to extend forward; you may experience it going straight, or perhaps to the right or left. Pick a place up ahead where you've sensed that movement go, walk up there and look for tracks that will verify your impression. Whether successful or not, journal the experience.

Resources

We are beginning to compile the stories and methods we found to be successful. In the meantime, our WWTA series is open to trackers with at least some basic experience. And my book *Walk with the Animal* is available at www.earthskills.com.

Excerpt from Walk with the Animal, ©Jim Lowery, 2013



Looking for a small animal to track, I drove along a two lane highway in the national forest. I had a general destination in mind at the edge of a huge burn area from several years before, in a piñon-oak woodland. I slowed, sensing where I should pull over and begin looking for tracks. Being within ten assignments of completing my project, I was choosy about what I wanted to track, needing a few more relatively small animals to meet my goal. From the moment I'd left home twenty-five minutes earlier, I'd been thinking of gray fox, confident I'd find one's tracks even though such straightforward success sometimes eludes me. Rejecting a couple of turnouts, I suddenly stopped on the right shoulder, got out of the car, and walked thirty yards downhill to a patch of fine gravel in the gully below, where I immediately found fresh gray fox prints.

The fox had come down a little two foot slope toward an animal trail that ran east-west, generally perpendicular to its direction of travel. As the fox approached this trail, one of its hind tracks showed a little plate pushed up from the rightmost toe, as if the fox anticipated going right or at least considered it. This choice, going west gradually up a draw between two steep slopes, was the easiest route for the fox and also afforded several side trails a little farther up the gully. Besides, a fallen log paralleling the east-west trail on its far side, with a scrub oak and other shrubs behind it, lay directly ahead and would funnel animals either left or right.

I went back to the first tracks I'd seen and silenced my mind, hoping to get a sense or pull where my fox had gone. Instead, I got a very clear image of the fox going straight, jumping up on the fallen log, scurrying along it to the right and hopping off the end of the log on its other side. I went over to find that the tracks did go straight to the log and furthermore a jumping-off track was exactly where I'd "seen" the fox step.

From there, rather than getting a subtle sense where the fox had gone, I suddenly knew there would be a fox track next to a stump on the steep hillside about 45 yards ahead. I confirmed that track also, then trailed the fox uphill, past a day bed of dried grasses, and around the curve of the slope. I spent the next hour verifying the fox's exact route from the fallen log to this stump and beyond it, so there would be no doubt about the accuracy of my intuition.

II. Fire and Earth: Caretaking the Land

by Jim Lowery
reprinted from *Dirt Times*, Winter
1993-94

If you have ever travelled on U.S. 101 from Ventura into Santa Barbara and beyond, you can probably picture the rolling tableland that slopes up from the coast to the foothills where the highway curves into Santa Barbara. Close your eyes, and try to imagine this landscape in the 1700's, even before the Mission was built on this plateau.

When the Spanish Portola expedition rode this route in 1769, with Father Juan Crespi its journalist, it found Chumash villages all along this coast, populated with about 15,000 people. The open areas in many places, such as just west of the downtown area of Santa Barbara, and a few miles farther west where Goleta now is, were described as broad grasslands, interspersed with huge oaks and sycamores. The native grasses stood taller than a horseback rider—where they had not been burned off by the Chumash.

In this time the local people, like many other indigenous people throughout North America, regularly used fire to manage and control local gathering and hunting areas. For the Chumash, the burned areas produced abundant amounts of wild grass seeds, including brome, chia and red maids seeds and probably abundant edible bulbs such as Brodiaea and Mariposa lily — all of which would have benefited from controlled burnings. Also numerous edible greens preferred by the Chumash but not such a major part of their diet, such as clover and miner's lettuce, would have flourished in burned areas after the winter rains. One such area, which Father Crespi had described as burned in the summer of 1769, was revisited the next spring. The location is north of Point Arguello, currently part of Vandenberg Air Force Base.

“At once after setting out,” Crespi wrote in 1770, “we commenced to find the fields all abloom with different kinds of wildflowers of all colors, so that, as many as were the flowers we had been meeting all along the way and on the Channel, it was not in such plenty as here, for it is all one mass of blossom, great quantities of white, yellow, red, purple, and blue ones; many yellow violets or Billy-flowers of the sort that are planted in gardens, a great deal of larkspur, poppy and sage in bloom, and what graced the fields most of all was the sight of all the different sorts of colors together.”

These lands which were altered to become the Chumash people's bread and butter — we don't know for how many generations — are similar to other areas of the country burned, irrigated or otherwise managed to provide food and materials for an indigenous culture. I don't know what the attitude of the Chumash was about their burning — whether prayers were said or ceremonies performed, or what other gestures of respect there may have been. By the time J.P. Harrington did his many interviews with the Chumash in the early 1900's, burning had not been done for 120 years. But maybe there is a suggestion in the description by Hector Franco, a Wukchumni (Yokut), of his people's burning of the Giant Forest and other areas of the Sierras east of Fresno, which continued into more recent times.

The Yokuts, he writes in *News from Native California*, knew that many of the plants they used for tools and food benefited from fire, including saltgrass, tules, clover, berry bushes, chia, black oaks, yerba santa, elderberry, pinon pine, mountain mahogany, manzanita, redbud, and dogbane among others. “The people would gather plant materials...make offerings of tobacco and make a little pile,” he writes. “One in the north, one in the south, one in the east and one in the west, and then they would stand in the middle and say prayers and do this ceremony to help clean the land. In the prayer the people would always talk to the animals and all the plants to tell them what they were doing. It's just our way of respecting them. Like asking permission because it was their land before it was our land.

“When they burned they wanted it to spread in four directions. It's Ceremony — this is all part of their religious beliefs. They didn't just go out there with a road flare like I've seen done with controlled burns. We, Indian people, talk to the fire. We've learned through religious

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Quotations in this article are taken from Jan Timbrook, John R. Johnson and David D. Earle, “Vegetation Burning by the Chumash,” *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology*, Vol 4 No. 2 (1982); and Hector Franco, “That Place Needs a Good Fire,” *News from Native California*, Spring 1993.



Above: Red maids, *Calandrinia ciliata*; below: Chia, *Salvia columbariae*. Photos by Sue Reinhart, used by permission



teachings that fire lives inside of us also. That would be the electrons that course through your body. Fire was thought of in a very reverent manner. It wasn't taken lightly at all."

The fires which probably represented life to the Chumash were annoying to the Spanish. Places where "very fine grasses...nearly everywhere had been burnt off by the heathens," as Crespi put it, did not provide good and easy forage for the expedition's animals. Six years later, the military governor of California, Fernando Rivera y Moncada, travelled the Santa Barbara coast, finding it difficult to graze his animals "all occasioned by the great fires of the gentiles, who, not having to care for more than their own bellies, burn the fields as soon as they gather up the seeds, and that is universal, although on some occasions it happens that it may be greater or less, according to the winds or calm."

By 1793, a new Governor, Jose Joaquin de Arrillaga, issued from Santa Barbara a proclamation "because of various complaints that have reached me about the serious damage that results from the fires that are set each year in the pastures by Christian and Gentile Indians." It was to "prohibit, for the future...all kinds of burning, not only in the vicinity of the towns, but even at the most remote distances." He ordered all of his *comandantes* to use whatever measures necessary to "uproot this very harmful practice of setting fire to pasture lands..." One person's pasture land, of course, is another's traditional seed gathering area. The enforcement of this proclamation was only one of many actions which tore local indigenous peoples from their traditional relationship with the land and replaced it with another relationship which is our legacy today.

This attitude which we inherited not only shows no respect to our non-human relations; sadly, it also knows the land so little to assume it carries an infinite capacity for satisfying our every dream and desire. Meanwhile the forces of nature, like fire, which earlier were understood and respected, have become only threats. Nervously each fall we watch for the inevitable fires, most of them set by individuals, part of our culture, who for distorted reasons do what they do.

"We've learned...that fire lives inside of us also."

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