

TRACKING AND THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

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If you have ever hit the wall of impatience, lack of focus, or frustration while tracking, then you've confronted a nasty truth about this art. It demands a total approach. It asks that you use every bit of your awareness and versatility. It seduces you to be the best person you can be.

None of us are born expert trackers, but we are each given some special gifts that are vital to the discipline. A person may be patient with details, or carefree with exploration, or joyfully open-minded, or easily analytical. All of these traits, and many more, are essential to tracking. Yet it seems that each of us is also challenged by what tracking demands. The more we practice it, the more we become aware of our individual limitations.

I began explaining this view in our Advanced Tracking classes more than 20 years ago by referring to the Native American Medicine Wheel which ascribes various characteristics to each of the Four Directions. The idea is that each person is born with one or two most natural ways of perceiving, associated with one or more directions, but that we must strive to develop all ways to become the best person (and the best tracker) we can.

Of course there is not one "medicine wheel" any more than there is a single "Native American" belief system. Some characteristics of the wheel I learned from Tom Brown, Jr.'s classes, some from Hyemeyohst Storm's *Seven Arrows*, and others from reading authors such as Evelyn Eaton and Ed McGaa.

More to the point, whatever ideas I started with have been shaped by our work with thousands of tracking students. We watch how you track, how you work through problems, where you hit obstacles and how you break through them. Understanding how people can fully develop their gifts is a passionate goal of ours.

My motivation in the following descriptions is not to typecast you, but rather to lay out possibilities for the evolving tracker. Think of them as tools in a toolbox. Why and how we learn to use the all of the tools, I'll get to after a while.

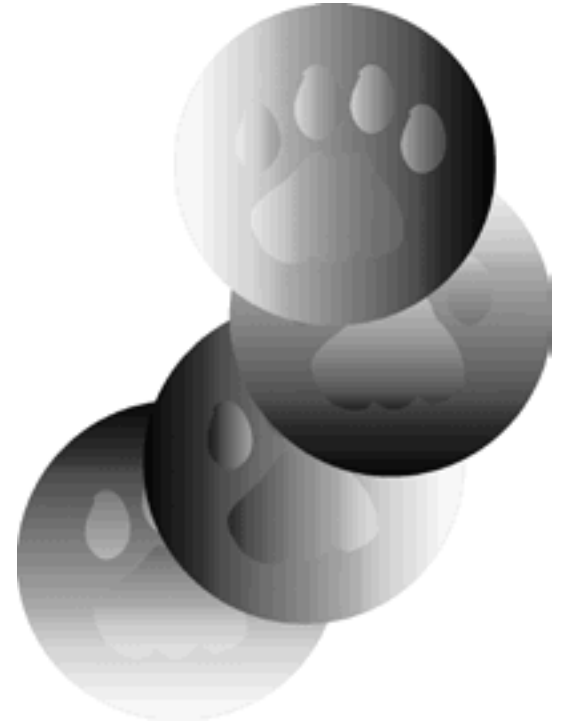
Tracking in the East: Wisdom & Perspective



The East is the place of the morning sun and of the eagle, and as the eagle flies, so do those people who have perspective. Unbounded, they easily see patterns all around them, and these images are stored for easy access.

The tracker of the east draws upon a host of details in many places and times, and like the eagle, twists and dips and dives and soars with the mind so that all of the relevant things are seen. Wisdom of the wide view emerges from this dance above the ground. The East tracker has a great gift. He or she loves to wander, to follow an animal's trail as far as he or she can, experiencing the landscape in many ways through the animal's eyes. The East tracker loves the freedom and exhilaration of high places.

As with every gift, the East tracker must honor it by using it often and pushing its limits. But there are also times when the restless soaring must be harnessed and one must give in to the other Directions.



For those who need to strengthen their East skills, I have a few suggestions. When you first come into an interesting natural area and before you get into any detailed tracking, savor the overview. Look at the habitat from a distance, seeing how parts of it relate to one another. Using this perspective, think about where animals would be bedding, feeding or traveling at this time. Second, keep a tracking journal with drawings and notes, then refer to it often to get that soaring overview. For example, go to all the pages in which you've recorded coyote tracks, remembering the landscape, the routes and any other details you can. Perhaps read some field guides or articles about coyotes and put this information together with your own observations. Let wisdom emerge from this process. Finally, to hone the East skills follow some tracks for as long as you can, whether it's a human or animal trail. Keep pushing. Resist the temptation to stay put.

If you find that these tasks seem daunting, or that you get impatient or frustrated while doing them, then the East skills are not in your comfort zone and you definitely need to work on them. Remember: The truth is in perspective!

Tracking in the South: Detail & Patience



Just as the mouse busies itself with what is directly before it, the person of the South is easily immersed in the moment, committing himself or herself to the present detail and willingly surrendering to all it might bring.

The tracker of the south easily stays with one track, or a short string of them, reading every bit of detail about the track pattern and pressure releases to really understand this animal in this moment. With every level of detail recognized, a finer one emerges and is joyfully explored. The commitment and loyalty to what is right before one is called a heart-connection and is a natural bridge to “becoming the animal.” The south tracker may also methodically track across difficult ground noticing the tiniest disturbances. Insects, flowers, stones or the bark of a tree may be other objects of this tracker's commitment to detail.

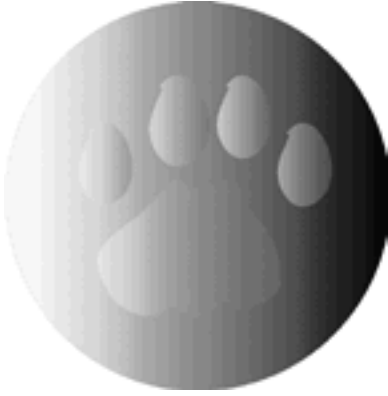
The tracker of the south has a great gift, and must honor it by using it often. But the detailed view becomes too narrow at times, necessitating a surrender to the other Directions.

For those who need to develop the South skills, here are a few suggestions. Detailed track reading is a great teacher of this; if it's hard for you to stay with fine detail, then make drawings, forcing yourself to notice and record as much as you possibly can. Second, with a string of tracks, try to imitate the animal. Crawl around feeling its body language (just “visualizing” the animal often allows you to keep your distance; you really want to be right there “with the animal”). Third, sit down on the ground, plot out one square foot of earth, and then study it for an hour. Yes, an hour. Set your watch alarm so you don't look at the watch every thirty seconds.

If you find that the south skills tax your patience, or if you think them silly or irrelevant, then you really need to work on them. Remember: The truth is in the detail!

Continued

Tracking in the West: Intuition & Humility



The West is the place of looking within and of the bear, and just as the bear in its natural cycle withdraws to its place of darkness and mystery, so do the people of intuition or “inner vision” sink into a calm space of knowing without needing to explain or justify. There is great humility expressed in the West, for allowing the intuition to come out means giving up control.

The tracker of the west often knows the way an animal went before the physical tracks confirm it, or has a sense of an animal’s mood with just a glance at a track, before the pressure releases reveal it. The west tracker is also easily drawn to powerful and essential lessons from nature, and seems to find those special discoveries which other people miss. He or she may walk directly to what is being looked for, while others take hours with a methodical search. Aboriginal trackers in Africa, Australia, North America and elsewhere have a very strong intuitive skill.

The West tracker has a great gift, and must honor it by using it often, even when others around are skeptical of it. But the intuitive view sometimes becomes ungrounded or is unconnected to larger wisdom, requiring a surrender to the other Directions.

If you need to develop the West skills, I can recommend a few methods. First, practice taking an intuitive reading of a track (by closing your eyes, putting your hand above it, and seeing what comes to you); then try to confirm it by analyzing the track’s detail. Second, blindfold yourself and let a friend lead you to a track you haven’t seen, and have him or her place your hand a few inches above it (not touching the ground). Try to feel the orientation of the track, and its size and shape. Then open your eyes to see what’s there. Try it a few times, until you feel relaxed and comfortable. Third, take an hour or two and wander aimlessly in a natural area, allowing yourself to be drawn to whatever interests you, appreciating each thing without analysis.

If the intuitive skills of the West are uncomfortable to you, or you don’t trust their validity, then you definitely need to work on them. Remember: The truth is within!

Tracking in the North: Purity & Perseverance



In the North, the bison faces directly into the purifying winds of winter with complete acceptance and calm endurance. Like the bison, people of the north easily leave their egos behind, along with expectation and control, and thus are able to go to the essence of things unhindered by their own needs.

The tracker of the north approaches a track with a fresh view each time, leaving aside any need to fit what is seen into a prior pattern or to judge it prematurely. There is no self-consciousness nor self-evaluation about “how I am doing,” just a simple openness to whatever is being taught. The commitment to stay with the a task is not driven by needing to prove something, but by surrender, and in this, strength is found. The north tracker rejoices in every new experience even though he or she may have seen something similar a thousand times. Often, this pure excitement and acceptance of every teacher is so compelling, that the north tracker can be found happily tracking or exploring in freezing cold or in a drizzle.

The north tracker has a great gift, and needs to honor it by practicing it often. But at times, he or she must be aware of the context, and must surrender to the other Directions.

If you need to develop your north skills, I have a few suggestions. First, you must let go of self-consciousness and also quiet the busy mind. Before you begin tracking or exploring, settle down with a quiet sit, calming your body and mind. Second, approach a track with an open mind, resisting the mind's efforts to immediately categorize or evaluate it. If cold or discomfort begin to bother you, just focus on tracking for a while; the choice to enjoy what you're doing will make discomfort fade away. Finally, now and then choose to track beyond your "comfort zone" of ability; don't listen to the voices that say you couldn't possibly accomplish this, and "just do it."

If the skills of the north, purity and perseverance, are hard to achieve for you, then it's a sign you really need to work on becoming comfortable with them. Remember: Truth is in purity!

Using the whole toolbox



I'll bet that one or two of the Directions seemed most natural for you as you read these descriptions (whether true in all their details or not). Why this is so, is not important to me. We may be born with certain tendencies, but school, work and cultural norms also certainly emphasize and give practice in certain ways of perceiving over others. I'll leave the explanations to the pop psychologists and focus on my purpose: to teach how to be a well-rounded tracker.

I truly believe that each of us is given all of the Directions, potentially at least, and that we can learn to use each of them. I can look in the mirror to see that, and point to countless students who have done so too. Now let's look at some examples of how using the whole toolbox can improve your tracking, indeed your entire relation with the natural world.

"Hitting the wall," that is losing an animal's trail as you are following it, is a fact of life in tracking. Relying on your personal strengths isn't working, so how do you extricate yourself from being stuck and how do you move forward?

One common scenario is losing the trail when the substrate changes and tracks do not register as well, they have aged differently from one microhabitat to the next, or the animal has changed gaits. If you have pushed ahead without having studied the original tracks intently enough, then you must return to the *South* and invest more effort in detail. This means noticing exactly how old the original tracks are, what their size and precise shape are as well as toe position and any subtle indicators. You may notice that pollen has blown over the forest floor, but has been lifted in places where the animal's foot has landed. Or you may notice claw impressions a certain distance from the toes. Investing in the detailed view will allow you to find confirmation up ahead with partial tracks or very subtle disturbances.

Perhaps, though, you've studied detail and you're stuck in a place where the animal had five route choices in a landscape broken by low shrubs. You role play, getting down at the animal's level to see which route makes most sense, then you check several alternate routes and find no confirmation on any of them, because passageways are littered with sticks and leaves. Here a turn to the *East* may be called for; you need to widen your view and take in the big picture. Does the animal's gait suggest it's on its way somewhere rather than hunting or foraging? Given the time the tracks were made, would your animal be going to a day bed, and if so given the temperature and wind, would it be going to a sunny slope out of the wind, or to a shady rock outcrop? Looking at the broader landscape with your knowledge of the animal's behavior and mood often produces an "obvious" answer, allowing you to jump ahead and confirm the animal's trail.

Sometimes the subtlety of tracks in very difficult substrate makes even the detailed view ineffective; perhaps the tracks cannot be seen but only felt with the fingertips where stones or leaves have been loosened, or else they are so illusory that your mind confirms their identity in one moment and completely doubts in the next. Furthermore, the large-scaled view helps little because every route the animal might take is equally logical or illogical. Rather than abandon the task, you must now enter the *West*, settling down and dropping to an intuitive place we call "the sacred stillness." This accomplishes two things: it dials up your sensitivity level as it were, allowing you to notice more subtlety than before, and it also opens the possibility of a commu-

nication with the animal. You may sense it went a certain direction, or you may even “see” where it went. Fortunately tracking allows the physical confirmation of your intuition!

In a final example of hitting the wall, you’re trailing a deer in pine needles, have started off well but now encounter an area with a myriad of deer trails merging and then splitting, including tracks of your same deer at a different time. You’ve gotten off on some other deer’s trail a couple of times, causing you to go back to the last confirmed track. You’re getting frustrated and distracted, in part because it’s also cold and starting to drizzle. This is a perfect time for a journey to the *North*. Being overwhelmed and frustrated without focus often means that you have not fully committed to the specific animal you are tracking; your attention is scattered and ungrounded. Take a deep breath, grit your teeth and mentally (and emotionally) commit to tracking your animal and no other. Accept the situation you’re in and “just do it.” You’ll likely find that distractions are blown away and you’ve created a space in which only you and the animal exist.

This example oversimplifies a bit how the tracker might use all of the Directions on the trail. In fact, he or she constantly moves back and forth among them – reading with instinct and then confirming it with detail, going out to a broad perspective and coming in, evaluating something and then dropping into purity, all within a few moments.

There are, of course, other applications of the four directions besides trailing an animal. Finding tracks to begin with might use the West’s intuition (actually our most-used and effective method), or the East’s view of habitats and animal behavior. Interpreting pressure releases involves analysis (the East), and role-playing (the South).

Focus on areas of underdevelopment

The recommended curriculum for learning how to use all the tools is simple. Find which ones scare you, intimidate you, bore you, frustrate you or anger you, and work on those! Hidden talents emerge, and reinforce the strong gifts you already have. Mastery is in the process, and your confidence as a tracker grows with completing the circle.

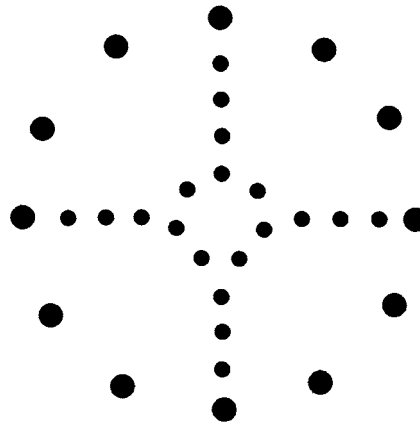
Oh, did I mention that this wholeness of the Four Directions also applies to the rest of your life?

Continued

Understanding the Four Directions

The fact that the “medicine wheel” of the Four Directions has different meanings for different peoples attests to the variability of perspective. Yet I would imagine that all Native Americans subscribing to the wheel would say there is an underlying truth despite these differences. In Thomas E. Mails’ *Fools Crow: Wisdom and Power* (Tulsa, Council Oak Books, 1991), *Fools Crow* lists the different meanings of the Four Directions for the Cherokees, Apaches, Western Sioux, Cheyenne and Hopi (p. 60). In each case, the colors and symbols differ though there is similarity in the meaning of each Direction. Hyemeyohsts Storm’s *Seven Arrows* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1972) devotes many stories and illustrations to illumination of the Four Directions and largely coincide with my own narrative in this article.

Ed McGaa’s *Mother Earth Spirituality* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1990) describes the Four directions in his treatment of the Sweat Lodge (Chapter 8) and of making a medicine shield (Chapter 17). He draws upon Black Elk’s vision of the Four Directions which you may find in John Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (New York, Pocket Square Books, 1932 and 1959).



Learning the Four Directions

Several Earth Skills classes allow you to develop well-rounded tracking skills, especially Advanced Tracking and the Earth Philosophy series that emphasize the West and North skills. Check the website at www.earthskills.com for class listings. Also look for more documents about tracking skills that I will be posting either in the Monographs section of the site or as articles in ES News, to which you may subscribe for free.

If you are in another area of the country, you may seek out classes in intuitive skills that are based on Tom Brown, Jr.’s Philosophy classes, either taught by Tom himself or by other schools.