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Northwest People

The Art Of Pursuit -- A Broken Twig, A Twisted Tuft Of Grass Are All That Master Tracker Joel Hardin Needs

By [Susan Gilmore](#)

LIVES CAN BE READ IN THE footprints left behind. The circling shuffle of nervousness. The deliberate, steady steps of someone lost in thought. Anger mirrored in the depth of a footfall. Fatigue, fear, frenzy. Footprints tell the story.

For the professional trackers, these are maps they follow with a skill as old as time: the power of observation.

JOEL HARDIN CROUCHED BY THE side of the trail and drew a line with his finger. In the September sun, weathered pine needles showed a slight indentation invisible to most eyes. Inches away, a crease was pressed into the ground, equally inconspicuous.

In the dry country above Kamloops, B.C., a place of scattered pines, rolling hills and sagebrush, tracking is easy. It is a place, Hardin said with the confidence of three decades of practice, where sign shows well.

"This one's from a jogger who ran here yesterday. A Nike," he said, tracing a faint outline in the soft ground. "This one's from the criminal."

Positioning himself above the print, he lectured softly. "See these pieces of grass? They're chewed. You can see the geometric pattern that mirrors the impact of the shoe." The escaping criminal wore a waffled, Vibram sole, no question. It was as clear as if Hardin were looking at boots on the rack at REI.

A night watchman had been abducted by three men who stole a cash box, then abandoned their getaway van and headed west into the brush on foot. There were no witnesses, and a group of trackers, led by Hardin, knew only that the watchman was wearing hiking boots.

By nightfall the trackers would find the watchman's body, shot and stabbed. The criminals had long fled the scene.

Hardin, on the trail of one, quickly dismissed the jogger's tread and pointed to dry grass around the Vibram imprint. "I can tell it's fresh," he said. "It was made since noon."

He pulled out his tracking stick, a 3-foot-long metal rod marked in inches, one of few essential tools of a tracker, and placed it along the boot print.

He sketched the image of the print on a small blue card - a tedious task that forced him to memorize the clue in a way a photograph would not.

Measuring the distance to the next print - another faint crease in the landscape - he calculated the criminal's stride. Up the trail, over a hill, down a ravine he followed the track, much like someone on a daunting scavenger hunt.

Broken twigs, displaced branches, flattened grass all told him the trackers were on the right trail. Reading the sign as if it were Braille, with daylight fading, he bent on one knee and ran his hand over the ground.

An imprint in the dirt showed a pine needle moved a fraction of an inch. This sliver of a clue, dried and curled by the sun, was a false lead, he explained, pointing to another pine needle that clearly had been stomped on

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by the fugitive.

"Do (ITALICS:) not lose the prime sign."

It is his mantra.

HARDIN, MASTER TRACKER from Whatcom County, with a strong jaw and grizzled faced that give him a striking resemblance to Charles Bronson, measures his words much the way he measures his sign: with confidence and precision. He is taciturn, but not modest. He knows he is very good.

In 25 years with the federal Border Patrol, he saw it all. He has found murderers and missing children, desperate people trying to sneak into the United States and criminals trying to sneak out.

"Joel's a bulldog, he has bulldog tenacity," says Ab Taylor, Hardin's Border Patrol mentor and one of the nation's foremost trackers. "He's a hunting dog."

He uses no infrared photography, DNA analysis, sophisticated fingerprint comparisons.

Hardin simply relies on his senses, his instinct and the knowledge that few criminals are smart enough to hide the footprints they leave behind.

A criminal careful to wear gloves or wipe away a fingerprint may have no idea his footprints can be just as revealing to a trained tracker.

"With today's mobile movement of people and the overwhelming increase in abductions and homicides that involve depositing bodies, trackers are a great gift," says Hardin. "They can identify footprints that help patch cases together."

In the past 30 years Hardin figures he's tracked more than 5,000 people, from a man wanted for beating and stabbing a 77-year-old woman near the Canadian border, to a Boy Scout lost during a California jamboree. Even Bigfoot seekers have called for his help.

To be sure, Hardin's job is made much easier by careless criminals.

"Most crooks don't know what they leave behind," said Stan Robson, sheriff of Oregon's Benton County and one of Hardin's trainers.

To Hardin's eye, a sign is anything indicating a person or thing has passed along the way. These are clues invisible to all but the best of trackers.

And often what a tracker doesn't see is as important as what he does.

When 7-year-old Roxanne Doll was kidnapped and murdered last year in Everett, Hardin joined Snohomish County search-and-rescue volunteers looking for her. They had thought they might find the tiny, blond child, or her body, in woods off the Mountain Loop Highway where her father and another man, later accused of killing her, had been camping. But when searchers found no footprints of the child or of someone who might have carried her into the woods, Hardin said with certainty she wasn't there. Her body eventually was found in North Everett a week after she disappeared.

"A lack of footprints is a fact of evidence," Hardin says. "That's what sets trackers apart. Not finding something is as valuable as finding something."

HARDIN GREW UP IN A small Idaho town where he loved to fish and hunt and explore the outdoors. He became a policeman in 1960. Five years later he joined the Border Patrol and was assigned to the Southern California border.

"Coming from the Northwest I've always hunted and fished and been out of doors. I thought I knew as much about tracking as any other hunter," he said.

But in the government's fledgling tracking program, Hardin found out he didn't.

"There was a very small, elite group of sign-cutters, of which Ab (Taylor) was one," said Hardin. "Periodically they would take new people into the group."

The Border Patrol's emphasis on tracking coincided in the mid-1960s with the end of the Bracero program, an agreement between the U.S. and Mexico that allowed Mexican farm workers into this country to offset World War II labor shortages. The program brought in 100,000 or more workers each year before the door to the

that in labor shortages. The program brought in 100,000 or more workers each year before the door to the border was latched.

"In 1965 we tried to grab everyone and account for everyone who crossed the border," said Hardin. "If I had one who got away, I'd better have an excuse. We counted every track that crossed the border illegally."

The week he joined the Border Patrol in 1965, said Hardin, there were 35 agents assigned to the Southern California station and they caught two people trying to sneak into the country. Today, he said, at the same crossing, the number might be 5,000 people a day. One result, he said, is that tracking skills are dying out.

"When you have hordes of 200 people walking across the border en masse, with only two or three agents to stop them, you don't get the privilege of tracking. It's a numbers game; tracking is a quality game."

Tracking, or "sign-cutting" as it is officially called in the Border Patrol, is also, by any standard, a slow, tedious process.

"To cut means finding the evidence of the passage of a person," said Hardin. "You look for marks, scuffs, scrapes that a person is in the area."

In 1972, after seven years on the California border, Hardin moved back to the Northwest to patrol the U.S.-Canadian border. He settled with his wife, Janet, an artist, and their four daughters in the tiny farming community of Everson, a Whatcom County border town of 1,800 along the Nooksack River.

He worked for the government's anti-smuggling unit until he retired in 1990.

Now, at 56, he spends much of his time teaching his skills through his company, Universal Tracking Services Inc., and working on a book about his pursuits.

He has trained trackers throughout the Northwest, including the Pacific Northwest Trackers used by King County Police. Hardin also trains the U.S. military and last summer taught tracking to Army snipers.

From time to time, although not as often as he'd like, he is called in on searches and criminal investigations.

The tracking job this fall in Kamloops ended with the capture of three murderers.

But in reality, there was no murder. It was an exercise, part of a three-day training session Hardin conducted for search-and-rescue volunteers from British Columbia.

THE BORDER PATROL'S TRADITION OF TRACKING traces to the Old West. Many early Border Patrol trackers were remnants of even earlier Texas Rangers, who learned the skill from Indian scouts.

Some, called River Riders, were still patrolling the Rio Grande border when Ab Taylor began his long career with the Border Patrol. "I just catered to those old dudes and got them interested in teaching me," Taylor said. "The best trackers did almost magic things."

Like Taylor before him, Hardin also marveled at the ability of trackers to unravel lives through scuff marks and twisted pieces of grass.

He learned that tall people leave longer strides and someone who's angry leaves a deeper footprint, stomping as he walks. Fearful people will run through things, leaving frenzied footprints. Someone who's lost will ramble and shuffle, often twisting in circles.

A person's mental state is mirrored by his feet. A good tracker, Hardin said, can find the evidence to map the exact point a person got lost.

"It bordered on clairvoyance or a miracle gift," Hardin said.

He was tapped for the elite tracking unit because of another skill he'd mastered - typing. But he learned to track.

The long, dusty border with Mexico tested even the best. Hardin would spend 12-hour days tracking those who illegally crossed the border, and he still marvels at their skill trying to elude the Border Patrol.

They would brush out their tracks, walk on stilts. One man even tied cows hooves to the insteps of his shoes trying to disguise his footsteps. He was eventually caught 70 miles into Arizona.

"You ever see a two-legged cow?" asked Taylor.

The reputation of the Border Patrol trackers gradually grew beyond the California border stations.

In the mid-1960s Border Patrol trackers were working in remote areas of San Diego County when children became lost. Offering their assistance in a handful of searches, they picked up the signs and helped find the children.

Taylor, realizing their expertise could be put to wider use, offered the Border Patrol trackers to local law-enforcement and search-and-rescue organizations.

Hardin remembers a case in the early 1970s. Searchers had been looking for a 4-year-old boy for four days when Hardin was called to the Southern California campground from which the child had disappeared. Only two things were known - the last place the child was seen and the fact he was barefoot - and the situation seemed hopeless. Hundreds of searchers scouring acres of terrain had found nothing.

Hardin met a teenager on the search who had taken one of his tracking classes and had flagged a suspicious sign: something that looked like a skid mark on a steep bank above a pond. Overlooked by the other searchers, the sign was as clear to Hardin as if the child had left a map.

Hardin followed tracks down a creek to a gully where he quickly found the tired and hungry boy.

"There's an overwhelming feeling of gratification to be able to find that missing child and return him to the family," said Hardin. "It's just an overwhelming emotion when you are able to crawl the last 10 feet through the brush or last 10 feet around a stump and find the small child."

MORE OFTEN, THE PEOPLE Hardin tracks don't want to be found.

When state investigator Bob Keppel reopened a suspicious Yakima death case in 1981 he needed to find a footprint expert. Associates told him the best guy was right under his nose - Hardin.

A woman had been found dead in a horse shed and medical experts concluded at the time that she had been kicked by a horse. But the victim's sister refused to believe it was an accident and convinced investigators to reopen the case.

Using grainy, black-and-white photographs and researching weather reports for the day she died, Hardin listed 11 reasons why the victim could not have walked out to the stable.

There was a fine white powder on the bottom of her boots that most certainly would have disappeared had she walked in the snow. Studying hoofprints, Hardin deduced that the animals were not shod - another blow to the kicking theory.

A dozen years after her death, the husband was convicted of cracking his wife's skull with a hammer. Hardin's analysis proved critical in winning a conviction, Keppel said.

Keppel also called Hardin in on several of the unsolved Green River murder scenes. Hardin found footprints, but since many of the women had been dumped months or years earlier - and the crime scenes had been damaged by weather and armies of other prints - it wasn't possible to track the killer.

Hardin's most famous case is the capture of Artie Ray Baker, a California fugitive who killed a customs officer at the Canadian border in 1979. Baker, who had been a member of a militant, radical commune in California and was skilled in guerrilla warfare, shot the agent and escaped on foot into woods near Lynden. He passed within a few hundred yards of Hardin's home.

It was clear to Hardin that Baker knew how to hide his trail, walking barefoot and across logs, brushing out his tracks and trying to trick his pursuers into thinking he had swum across a river.

All night Hardin followed Baker's sign. He found places where the killer had sat and watched the searchers. He found, beneath leaves, a shallow grave where Baker had entombed his socks.

It was a huge case. Police from throughout the region mobilized to scour the rough Whatcom County terrain.

But as daylight broke the following day it was Hardin who spotted Baker hiding in the brush. Hardin simply walked up to him, taking "three or four giant mother-may-I steps," and made the arrest. "He was mystified I'd been able to do it," said Hardin, who did not hesitate even though Baker had a gun. Hardin has never been shot at while tracking.

It may be that the only beings to escape Joel Hardin are supernatural ones.

One day in 1982 when he was vacationing in Idaho, Hardin got a call from the U.S. Forest Service. An employee had found what looked like Bigfoot tracks in the Walla Walla watershed. Would he investigate? "I said I'd never seen one, but I'd be willing to look," said Hardin, who hopped on a chartered airplane.

He found about a half-dozen footprints and, after carefully examining them, determined it was a clever hoax. He remains a Bigfoot skeptic. "As much wandering around as I've done I've yet to see evidence that convinces me Bigfoot exists," said Hardin.

Still, Hardin is under contract with the Oregon-based Bigfoot Research Project, which hopes to prove that Bigfoot is no phantom. The project has summoned Hardin to three sightings, most recently to a footprint found last spring near The Dalles, Ore.

Hardin dismissed the print after he saw the faint outline of a heel around the end of the Bigfoot impression. That, and the fact the footprints simply ended, left little question in Hardin's mind. "It has to start somewhere and end somewhere," he said. "We've never found a hoaxer who wanted to stay out in the woods the rest of his life."

Does it bother the Bigfoot project to trust the footprints to an avowed skeptic?

"It's perfect," said Tod Deery, project field director. "Our research project is based in the scientific method and we want to remove all biases."

As confident as he is in his skills, Hardin is haunted by the cases that remain unsolved.

"Mandy Stavik is one of the cases that bothers me the most," he said. The college student was murdered in 1989 after she vanished while jogging near her rural Whatcom County home. Her body was found in a river.

Hardin followed her track through a hay field and then it simply disappeared. Scouring the river bank, he found no evidence she'd been pushed into the river. He speculated that her body was dropped off a bridge upstream. It's a case, he said, that probably will never be solved.

HARDIN REACHED DOWN AND grabbed a twig, snapping it in half. He twirled a blade of grass between his fingers. He was keeping himself occupied, making sure he let his Canadian students do the work in their abduction exercise.

The Canadian searchers were closing in on the night-watchman killers. Hardin flicked a stick into the brush, silently signaling that they were on the right track.

The classes are tough and Hardin is a perfectionist.

"Tracking isn't for everyone," he said. "It takes diligence, attention to detail and perseverance."

That focus has been Hardin's life. Accomplished as he is, he is a man of khaki, not cashmere, clearly more at home in the woods than on the streets of a city. "I wouldn't send him to the opera or enter him in politics," says Taylor. "He has some rough, raw edges. Thanks to his wife and civilization, he's more acceptable, not quite as raspy."

To his students, though, he is a mystic and magician.

"It took me a long time to be convinced he was really seeing something," said Matt Condon, one of Hardin's students and a Snohomish County search-and-rescue volunteer. "It's like a 3-D puzzle. You stare at it and then it comes clear. Of course, you say. Of course."

Sally Sterner, a nurse from Everett and another Snohomish County search-and-rescue volunteer, remembers the first class she took from Hardin.

"We all went out onto a hillside and glanced up to look for the first track. It was just a jumble of sticks and brush. One of the instructors directed me to look at a spot and I saw the track. Man, I'll never forget my excitement. I used my stick, looked for the next one, and there it was. It was amazing it showed up in the jumble and rubble of everything. I could see them."

That sense of revelation is what Hardin hears often from his students, and it makes him proud. Perhaps tracking won't, after all, become a lost, neglected art. Perhaps lives will be saved by the skills that he shares. He has no doubt they are worth sharing and preserving.

"Most often what you do with your feet is the result of decisions that have already taken place in your mind," he says. "Until people quit walking around on two feet, our expertise will always be needed."

Susan Gilmore is a writer for Pacific Magazine. Gary Settle is Pacific's staff photographer.

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