Outside February 2002

[THE TRACKER]

Every Step You Take

Mystic, taxonomist, master of dirt, JOEL HARDIN knows where you are – even if you don't

BY BILL DONAHUE

ALONG ABOUT THE 12th hour of class—after our instructor, Joel Hardin, has whittled six or eight sticks of pine down to toothpicks and after the elderly student lounging beside me in the sparse shade of the ponderosas has fallen asleep (and starts snoring, his handlebar mustache twitching in somnolent spasms)—I suddenly apprehend the commonsense magic of wilderness man-tracking.

"Humans are a unique creature," says Hardin, 62, a paunchy retired cop and the reigning maestro of the tracking universe. "They're the only creature in the world that acts on education and knowledge, but generally they don't do wild and funny things like leap from rock to rock to hide their footprints. And if they do—well, you can look and tell where they went on and where they went off. All the evidence is there on the ground."

Shazam! My seven classmates suddenly cant forward in suspense. These people are the tracking-world equivalent of Ph.D. candidates: SAR volunteers who have spent at least 400 hours each in classes run by Hardin, the chief instructor for Universal Tracking Service, a mobile school based in Everson, Washington. My classmates have all earned their Track Aware, Tracker I, and Tracker II pins; they can follow footprints for miles in the dark in a dust storm. But they're here now, on this hot September weekend, amid a cluster of Forest Service cabins at Camp Cody in the Central Oregon woods, in hopes of attaining the pièce de résistance of Hardinometrics: the Sign Cutter pin. A Sign Cutter, according to UTS's arcane guidelines, can prevail over "conflicting, confusing, disorganized, and misleading information" to decipher vague scratchings on the ground. My classmates want wisdom, and Hardin, who has tracked more than 5,000 individuals in the last three decades, feeds them another morsel.

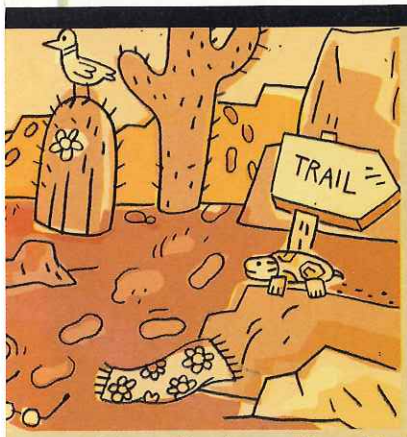
"People don't levitate," he says. "People got two legs and two feet, and that's how they get around on this earth."

A murmur of wonder ripples under the pines, for Hardin is correct. Our species has been leaving tracks in the dirt ever since we departed from the Garden of Eden, presumably on foot. Indeed, in his new book, *The Art of Tracking*, South African writer Louis Liebenberg argues that the earth's first trackers, the Kalahari of prehistoric southern Africa, were also the planet's first scientists: In analyzing footprints, they anticipated the physicists who today "track" subatomic particles.

Whether or not that's true, tracking has become the most esoteric discipline in the SAR tool kit. Fewer than 1,000 Americans are currently active man-trackers, and while most volunteer for county rescue squads, many belong to either the woo-woo fringe or the paranoid right. Among the former are the disciples of Tom Brown, the New Jersey naturalist who comes close to claiming that one can, by communing with a footprint, divine what its maker ate for breakfast; among the latter are the protégés of David Scott-Donelan, a former Rhodesian counterinsurgency specialist whose Nevada tracking school begins with the premise that the "quarry" is "ARMED and DANGEROUS."

Between these two extremes, in more or less the same slot as meat and potatoes, sits Joel Hardin, whom Linda Hunter, a director of the International Society of Professional Trackers, calls "the nation's best search-and-rescue tracker, the elite of the elite." Hardin began honing his craft in 1965, when he was hired to chauffeur the U.S. Border Patrol's tracking squad through the California desert. The Patrol trackers were a tightly knit, ultramacho fraternity; they aimed to keep their skills secret. Hardin learned anyway, and then he spent a decade chasing Mexican émigrés as they fled their homeland on foot, on stilts, and in shoes tied to cow hooves. He has since tracked a murderer trained in erasing his footprints, a Boy Scout who got lost at the Idlewild Jamboree, and a former Bulgarian freedom fighter who moved to America and holed up in the hills of Washington state, subsisting on huckleberries and slugs in between robbing people's homes.

When you query Hardin about such successes, he mostly just shrugs and spits at the ground. Such behavior reminds you that tracking is not romantic; it's just a matter of staring at dirt. And that very endeavor—staring at dirt—is the featured activity of my weekend in the Oregon woods. Day and night, my classmates follow "lines of sign," elaborate footprint-stories, through the cheatgrass and pine needles. One group of students dreams up fictional scenarios—a fugitive takes to the woods, say—and then tramps the tale into the dirt for the others to puzzle over. Sometimes students pause to sketch a shoe sole



LOST & FOUND: Reports from the Field

4. GRANNY ON THE LAM

"I once tracked a woman in Joshua Tree. She'd started hiking with her grown grandchildren, gotten tired, and turned around. But when her family returned to the campground, she wasn't there. From her point last seen, I cut for signs and eventually found the place where she veered off the trail. By examining her footprints, I could see where she stopped and adjusted her stance, where she looked at a barrel cactus that'd been busted by bighorn sheep, and where she watched a phainopepla bird eat mistletoe berries. I began calling her Grandma. It's good for a tracker to establish a cognitive closeness to the subject. I could tell within a few paces where she was lost: Her prints became frantic. I saw where she sat down and drummed her fingers on the ground. I could clearly see her confidence level eroding. She'd forgotten she'd crossed into another canyon instead of turning back. Several hours later, I got a radio call that she'd found the road and had hitched to the visitor center. She was fine, despite doing the very worst thing for a lost person to do: keep moving. We'd intimately shared a path for a few hours, yet never met."

–HANNAH NYALA, FORMER NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TRACKER

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY ANDERSON

ALK DIRT TO ME: HARDIN IN HIS ELEMENT, EVERSON, WASHINGTON

LIGHT BRIGADE: A HARDIN-LED NIGHTTIME-TRACKING EXERCISE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

on an index card; sometimes they use a "tracking stick" (a ski pole with lines on it) to measure the distance between strides.

The work does not make for rousing spectator sport, but Hardin nonetheless spends hour after hour leaning against a cedar fence rail, watching. When one of his acolytes goes off-course, he says nothing. He merely strolls up behind the person and flicks a pine needle high in the air, so it flutters in the sunlight and lands right where the student is supposed to be looking—a deft gesture, and also a warm one, in a languorous, country sort of way.

Hardin grew up in Emmett, Idaho, hunting and fishing. He worked as a cop after high school and sharpened the interrogational techniques that are, he says, still the most crucial of his SAR skills. "You have to ask the right questions at the beginning so you don't go down the wrong path," he says. "One time, a woman reported her husband missing; he'd hiked up a mountain to take photos at dawn. I could've just rushed out, but I asked, 'What kind of camera did he have?' It comes back that it was a cheap point-and-shoot. I got myself another cup of coffee, then I said, 'What'd he do Friday night?' It turned out that he'd walked through wet grass; he knew it was rainy—bad photo weather." His verdict? "Tell the lady to look in the closet," he said. The guy's clothes were gone. He hadn't gone hiking; he'd split.

Sometimes, of course, "lost" people truly are lost. And when it gets that serious, Hardin's abilities border on the supernatural. In 1999 he tracked an Alaskan home-builder named Robert Bogucki through the Australian outback. Bogucki had stepped into the bush with little more than a Bible and a hope to "sit down and let my mind go free." His parents first caught wind of this dubious vacation scheme from the Australian police, who spent two weeks looking for Bogucki. When the Aussies didn't find him, his parents called in Hardin, who followed month-old tracks across 160,000 square miles of wilderness. Gradually he came to respect Bogucki's conviction.

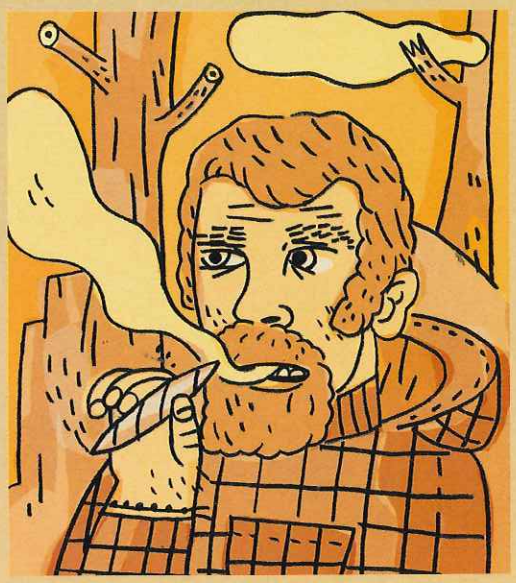
"He was levelheaded," Hardin says. "He had a route, a straight line, and he'd deviate from it, sometimes for 15 miles, but always he'd retrace his steps. I got so I could tell where he stopped to rest and where he sat with his maps and began to doubt his navigation skills." Hardin's crew followed the line in helicopters—through canyons and over vast thickets of knee-high grass—and on the fifth day they found Bogucki, in good health. "Joel wasn't just looking for me," Bogucki marveled afterwards. "It was like he was out there taking the trip with me."

At Camp Cody all my classmates and I can do, really, is huddle together in plebeian awe. Finally, on Sunday morning, Hardin announces (apologetically) that once again no one in camp will be receiving the elusive Sign Cutter pin. He offers no exact explanation, but a week later I call and press him to define what he really wants in students.

"Well," Hardin says, "I guess you could almost call it clairvoyance."

"That's impossible," I say.

Hardin laughs. "Well," he says, "it's *almost* impossible."



LOST & FOUND: Reports from the Field

5. JOINT TASK FORCE

"Back in the early 1970s, hikers in Yosemite found a skull of a guy who'd disappeared in '66. He'd worked at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and there was a theory that he'd been killed because he had top nuclear secrets. After the skull was discovered, his wife said, 'If you find anything more, please bury it there.' Several months later, a hiker found a knuckle. He was a hippie, and this was when drugs were rampant in Yosemite. He took me to the knuckle, and we soon uncovered about half the bones. We buried what we could, made a small stone cross, and then went down to the river to clean up. The hippie pulled out a bag of weed and asked, 'Do you mind if I toke up?' I was a ranger and a former highway patrolman, but this guy had just helped me bury bones. So I said, 'Today's a freebie. But if I see you smoking tomorrow, I'm gonna take you to jail.' He said OK, and lit up."

–BUTCH FARABEE, RETIRED YOSEMITE CLIMBING RANGER