

# TRACKING TECHNIQUES

## FOR TOUGH RIFLE-SHOT GAME

### EXPERIENCE, PATIENCE AND ATTENTION TO THE SMALLEST DETAILS ENSURE RECOVERY.

**T**he shot was good—you're pretty sure!—but the deer isn't down. Instead, he went away, perhaps showing symptoms of disability, perhaps not.

Sooner or later, this moment comes for every hunter: Somewhere out there in the hushed woods is a wounded deer, and it's up to him to follow and find it. He owes it to himself, to the deer and to all the rest of us. He's obligated to make every possible effort to recover the animal, dead or alive.

Please note that I didn't say every "reasonable" or "convenient" effort. Until you find him, that deer *owns* you! Even if you never find him, he'll always own a tiny piece of your soul. Both of those I've hit and lost in my 55 years of deer hunting still possess me, even decades later.

Maybe you aren't too sure of your own trailing ability. Then go get help, even though you have to ask somebody to give up his own precious hunting time. If he's a sportsman, he'll gladly help. I've probably lost weeks of prime hunting time in trailing other hunters' deer over the years, and begrudge not a minute of it. A lost deer is everybody's buck and everybody's tragedy. You help because, some day, you'll need help, or because somebody helped you in the past.

If you have no companions able or willing to help on the trail, find somebody who is, even if you have to pay him. If it's legal in your state, get an experienced blood-trailing dog. The dog offers the best possible odds for recovering any wounded deer.

Two points in that last paragraph: Companions who don't know what they're doing can hurt more than they help and can cost you your chance to recover your kill. *Ditto* untrained dogs (and handlers). Either can unintentionally destroy or confuse even a pretty plain trail. No help is better than that kind of help.

Considering all, the most satisfactory resort, obviously, is to your own skills. The most useful skill would eliminate trailing altogether, by putting an animal down in or near his tracks every time. Being as how we are all prone to human fallibility, that's hardly realistic, but we can greatly curtail the need to "trail wounded" in several ways, none of which can be detailed here. They include use of a weapon of suitable power, frequent, diligent practice with same, and careful study of the internal anatomy of the game.

The first step is to be sure that your bullet did

**By JOHN WOOTTERS**

indeed strike the animal; sometimes it's not so easy to tell. Although my hearing is none too good after all these years of shooting big rifles, I almost always hear my own bullet strike, even at short ranges. Perhaps I've unconsciously trained myself to listen for it. Others tell me they cannot hear their bullets, but for me it's the surest indication of a hit. It also tells me something about *where* the bullet struck.

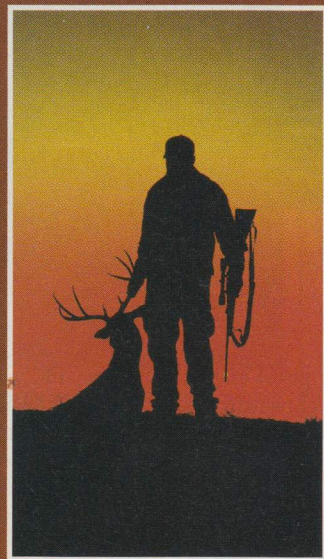
If the animal doesn't fall within the hunter's view, he must do two things simultaneously, which, under the stress of such a moment, is difficult. The first is to locate with certainty the animal's exact position at the moment of impact, and the second is to observe its behavior as keenly as possible. All this, while reloading for a possible follow-up shot; no wonder this is the moment when most losses occur. In any case, the hunter must *never* assume that, because a deer flees without showing signs of being wounded, he was missed. On the contrary, if a shot is fired, we're obligated to assume that it hit until we satisfy ourselves otherwise.

A casual look-around won't do. Many animals are quickly dead but not found because the hunter simply never looks in the right place. I once had a buck drop in high grass at about 60 yards but failed to get a good mark and missed the line slightly, walked right by him and spent two hours in fruitless searching. Finally, I started back to get help and almost fell over the deer where he'd been lying all along. A positive mark is the most important step of all toward recovery.

If the deer made it out of sight, you still have to mark where he was when hit, because there will be the most telling evidence found. The pattern and color of any blood sign there, the color and distribution of hair cut by the bullet, and, of course, any other body bits—bone, muscle, paunch contents, etc.—can all help in finding your trophy.

The response of the animal upon receiving the bullet is sometimes hard to note amid the recoil (and the excitement), but it's important to your task. Did he flinch at the shot, rear, leap into the air, kick at a point on his body, hump up or perhaps go to his knees or even down flat and get back up? If he ran away, was he bounding or running flat-out, running normally and fast or moving sluggishly? Was he using all four legs? Tail up or down? There's a lot to look for in just a few seconds, but clues noticed during these few seconds may save your deer.

Bullet impact sounds: a sharp crack signals heavy bone, maybe scapula, pelvis, or spine; a



GEORGE BARNETT PHOTOS

*Even when mortally struck with a premium big-game bullet, a mature, heavyweight whitetail may not initially show any sign of a hit. According to Wootters, the first law of recovery is carefully following up every shot taken with a thorough tracking effort.*



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hollow thump suggests a chest hit, a solid *whop* means heavy muscle—or paunch. Reactions: If he rears, leaps or kicks at himself but doesn't go down within a few yards, it's probably a body hit somewhere; if he humps up and moves sluggishly, it's paunch for sure. If he goes down flat for any length of time up to 30 seconds but can rise again, shoot again quickly: Your bullet has passed close to the spinal cord but didn't injure it. If he drops to his knees but recovers quickly, it could be a non-fatal neck wound or even a hit on an



**Experienced trackers stay out of the trail, following off to one side so as to avoid confusing the sign in case retracing is required.**

antler. If he runs with his flag up, he may be only scratched.

Point-of-impact sign: Pink, frothy blood is from the lungs; bright red, from a muscle or artery; greenish or brownish, from the abdomen. A lung hit that exits often leaves a fan-shaped spray of blood behind where the buck was standing (conspicuous on snow) and promises a short trail. Bone fragments are bad news, almost always indicating a broken leg and a long stern chase. Hair is diagnostic, and is always present (although not always easily found) if there was any sort of hit. The color is an obvious indication of the location of the wound on the deer's body. A tight tuft of brown hair may mean a hard body hit, whereas scattered individual hairs suggest a grazing, perhaps superficial, wound. With any

wind, remember the hairs will drift to earth downwind of where the deer was hit.

Absence of blood at this spot does *not* denote a miss. The blood trail may not begin for 50 yards or more, especially when the gun was a muzzleloader, revolver or small-caliber rifle (.25 or smaller).

Marks in the earth tell part of the story. Deep-dug, splayed, spinning tracks show where he took his first wild bound. Knee-marks in soft ground say he went down momentarily. You must make absolutely certain of the line the animal took when leaving the scene. Now is the time, while you have before you fresh tracks that you *know* were made by your buck, to note identifying characters. Deer tracks are almost as distinctive as fingerprints, and you may have to fill in the trail between blood spots by recognizing your buck's hoof prints from all others. Note size and depth of tracks as well as shape. Look for asymmetry in the hooves, especially differences in toe length, as well as cut, broken or deformed hooves, and note which of the four feet shows the distinctive mark. Remember, the larger tracks are from the fore hooves.

Now you're standing exactly where the animal was struck, you know in which direction he ran and you have some idea of where and how seriously he may be wounded. You should be able to recognize his track if you see it again, even without blood corroboration...all this before you've taken a single step in pursuit. Your chances are multiplied by a start like this, if you take your time and overlook nothing. Be thorough and systematic, use your intelligence to piece clues together into a coherent picture. This is detective work; reason logically from the known to the unknown, the biggest unknown being the deer's whereabouts.

Some trackers of primitive societies can perform seeming miracles in trailing, from long experience and knowing what to look for and what a wounded animal of a given



**Tracks are at least as important to trailing a cripple as blood, although fewer hunters today take the trouble to learn to read them.**

species is likely to do. You can defeat yourself by assuming that, because you aren't a Seri Indian or a Kalihari Bushman, you cannot follow a trail. The important thing is to try, using your eyes and brain. Most trails are, in fact, not all that obscure, if you go slowly. If you lose the trail, try not to obliterate sign, go back to the last sure mark and try again. I've started over a dozen times on many trails, until finally I spotted that tiny blood speck or turned leaf that I'd overlooked before. Patience and persistence make up for lots of inexperience.

Blood not only drips to the ground but may also be brushed off on weeds and

### NIGHT-TRAILING... WHEN THERE'S NO CHOICE

I hate to trail wounded deer at night. Sign is hard enough to see in broad daylight, and that much harder at night. And, with no shooting light, the only hope is to find the quarry down and unable to get up.

There are, however, times when night-trailing is unavoidable, when rain or snow threatens to wipe out the trail, for example, or where scavengers are so plentiful that nothing will be left to find tomorrow.

An old-fashioned gasoline pressure lantern is superior to any other kind of portable light source. Fresh blood almost seems to fluoresce in lantern light, standing out much more boldly than in any electric light. A lantern reflector helps too.

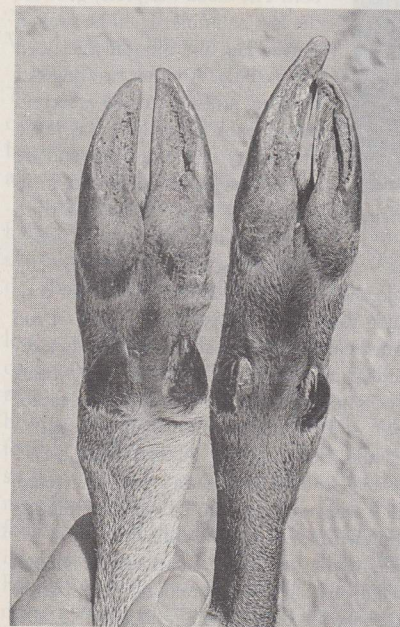
Since the deer, if located, will surely not be seen very far in the dark, I carry a shotgun loaded with the heaviest buckshot loads. And I prefer to go alone; night-trailing in a party is dangerous. Companions' movements in the brush are confusing, and people can get excited!



**A pool of blood like this shows where a wounded deer stood, or lay down, to listen or watch for pursuit.**

shrubbery as the animal passes. Wherever the fugitive stops to listen or watch his back trail, the blood may pool, especially if he lies down. The blood trail may grow steadily heavier, telling you that the animal is either slowing down or losing more blood, either of which is promising, or it may diminish or even stop altogether. Common with broken legs, this always bodes ill. At this point a dog may be the last best hope.

The toughest trick is to concentrate on



**Deer hooves are as distinctive as fingerprints, and anomalies such as the asymmetrical toes on the right are not only fairly common, but make unmistakable tracks.**

the trail and at the same time keep a sharp eye out ahead for a glimpse of the quarry. If possible, try to trail with a trusted buddy; the tracker devotes himself solely to the trail, while the buddy moves parallel, off to one side of the line with rifle ready, constantly scanning the woods ahead. All hands should move as stealthily as possible, keeping the talking down. Many lightly wounded white-tails will lie down fairly quickly but will remain supernaturally alert. Your best chance is to spot him in this first bed and get in another shot; if you jump him here without inflicting a second and, hopefully, disabling wound, he'll run 'til next Tuesday, and you may not get him.

If there's a woman in the hunting party, enlist her help with a difficult blood trail; for mysterious reasons, female eyes can pick up blood most men overlook, and this natural ability is enough to offset a lack of experience. My wife has made the difference in finding several wounded deer that I doubt could have been recovered without her, and I've heard of other, similarly-gifted female blood-trailers.

The verdict is still out, in my mind, on the battery-powered, infrared-sensing device called Game Finder (Game Finder, Inc., Dept. HM, 1311 N. Memorial Parkway, Suite 100, Huntsville, AL 35801-5903). It has dramatically detected a couple of carcasses for me, but failed to locate some that seemed to me about equally detectable. The principle seems sound, but the operator needs a lot of experience and practice for consistent results. Still, when a trail runs out, a Game Finder is *way* better than a forked stick!

Sometimes, sadly, they do run out. I seldom hunt where there's snow to help in trailing (although I've seen hard-hit bucks lost in snow, too), but if a deer can make it much more than a quarter-mile, he's unlikely to be recovered. My longest successful trailing job took me only a little more than 1,000 yards. The odds decline sickeningly with every step past 300 or 400 yards you take on the trail. At that point, I begin watching the vultures and ravens and searching around water holes. Wounds produce fevers, and badly wounded deer usually go to water within a few hours.

As a last resort, walking in widening circles around the last recognizable sign has gotten me two or three bucks over the years that I simply couldn't trail. It's grasping at straws, and likeliest on somewhat open ground, but I'll take a buck any way I can find him. I'm a hard man to pull off a crippled deer.

So should we all be. ■