CyberTracker

By René Nauta
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A roedeer and a badger. Who came first?

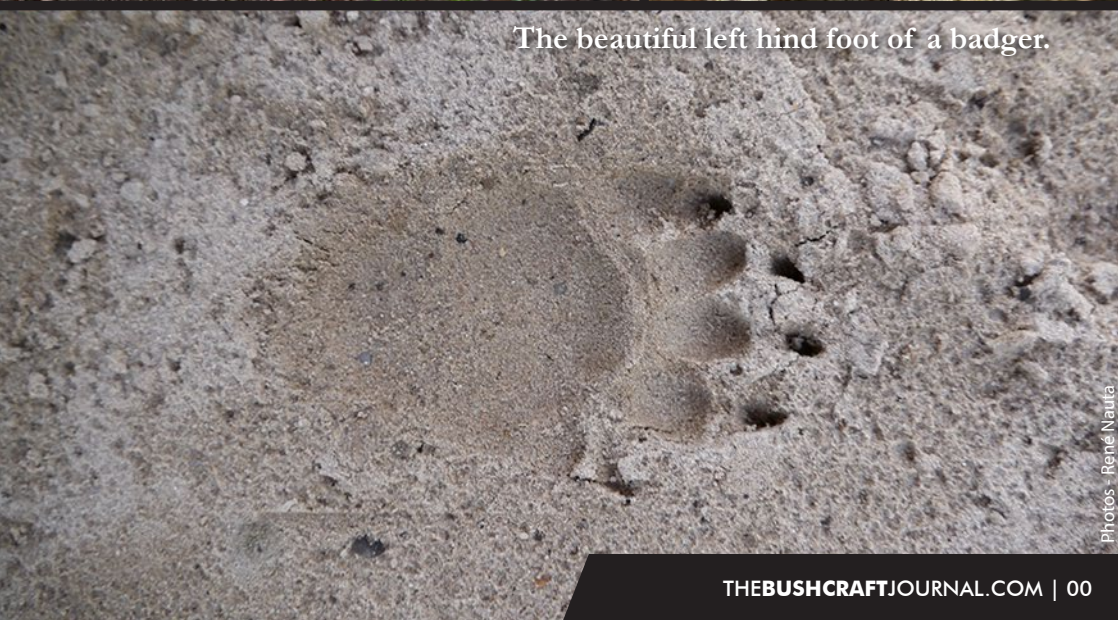
Tracking is addictive. To me at least it is. But most of all it enhances my life. While being in the outdoors I almost automatically receive all information animals leave behind. Soon after I have set up my tarp and collected some firewood I know who my neighbours are for the days to come. I hear a blackbirds' alarm and the chattering song of a wren, telling everyone there is a human in the woods. Thank you birds. I see the marking of a roe deer buck on a young rowan tree. A single beechnut squeezed in the bark of an old tree, hammered open by a nuthatch. A pile of yellow sand in front of his door tells me there is a busy woodmouse. I smell a fox which has been marking somewhere nearby and on the path, in wet sand is a tiny beartrack… the hindfoot of a badger.

Most of all these animals I won't see while I am around. But all their track and sign link me to their world and I can see them in my head. A fascinating thought!

Photo - René Nauta

The obvious marking of a roedeer buck.

A beechnut squeezed in the bark of a tree by a nuthatch.



The beautiful left hind foot of a badger.

Photos - René Nauta

But first, let's go a few years back in time.

August 2012, Lake District, UK.

We're walking through a densely covered and wet woodland. There are hardly any tracks here or roads with sand or mud. Everything is covered with leaves and rocks. But finally, on a small trail in a field with bracken, we stop to look at a single track. Comparable to the one on the picture. It is clearly a dog.

"Who made this track?" is Casey McFarland's question. Casey is one of the evaluators who will be running a 'CyberTracker evaluation' in the following days. We don't need much time and all agree it's a dog.

"Why?"

We all come up with our answers. 4 toes, blunt and stubby nails. The size of the print and the shape of the metacarpal pad. I am not sure, but I think we all looked quite satisfied!

But Casey adds some more. The toes are arranged in 2 front toes and 2 set further back. Both are different in shape. The front one have an ellipse shape. The other 2 are more like a bean shape with 'tips' pointing inwards. They almost seem to be folded against the front toes. All toes are spread. The negative space between toes and metacarpal resembles an 'H". That's handy in Dutch: the H for 'Hond' (= Dog). These are all new details to me.

"And is it a hind or a front?" Casey continues.

Front or hind? Is there any difference between those? He explains:

"It is a front. With many mammals, the front feet are larger than the hind. The toes are much more splayed than in a more compact hind foot. Fronts often have a round appearance and hinds are more oval. The metacarpal of the front looks like a triangle, while the same pad on a hind sometimes is no more than a firm dot.

Great! All new info. I never looked at a dog print like this before. We all get up on our feet again, ready to move on.


Dog

"And is it a right or a left?" he asks.

What? Can you see this by looking at one single print? I am pretty sure we didn't look that satisfied any longer. We get back on our knees again to look at that same track once more, to listen to more new information.

The shape of the metacarpal pad tells you whether a print is a left or a right. Just as with your own hand, the palm is drooping down. Larger at the pinky, smaller towards your indexfinger. It is the same with a lot of mammals. The palm pad is not symmetrical! Just as in this case. It is a right foot.

We are looking at one single print, of a dog. A right front of a dog.

I am convinced! So much new knowledge by just looking at one single track. And even a track of an animal I thought I already knew enough about.

Photo - René Nauta

All this new knowledge has to do with the CyberTracker (CT) system. I hope you've heard about it by now!

CyberTracker

The CT is developed by Louis Liebenberg in South Africa as a means to offer San Bushmen a better future (e.g. jobs as trackers). Besides tracking, the CT also is about trailing; following the fresh tracks of an animal.

Back in the days. Casey McFarland on the 2nd eval in Europe (Lake District august 2012)

Photo - René Nauta

Not long after, Louis set up an evaluation system to be able to measure everyone's tracking and trailing reliabilities. This is called the cybertracker evaluation. This system is spreading worldwide and is used in the field in Africa, US, Australia etc.

In 2012 I was involved with this 'eval' in the UK (Lake District). The next year I organised the first eval in Holland as I was, and still am, hooked on the in-depth knowledge that is attached to it. During an eval you will be asked 50-60 questions in the field in 2 days; about mammals, birds, insect, reptiles, amphibians, and humans.

The great thing about the evals is that it is a learning process, as every question will be explained afterwards.

Photo - René Nauta

Participants on an eval looking at one of the questions.

A fox and brown rat crossed each others trail.

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Evals are now being organised in Germany, Spain, Italy, UK and Holland. At the moment some of us, after receiving our specialist certificates, are being trained to run evals ourselves (John Rhyder in the UK, Joscha Grolms in Germany and me in Holland).

In the coming issues I'd like to take you along and talk about tracks from a series of mammals and birds which are quite easy to find in your own area. And a warning beforehand: ***tracking is (very) addictive!***

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CyberTracker Holland

Photo: René Nauta

Sign of a very active woodmouse

System overload! So many tracks in just half a metre!