

# TRACKING

## Signs of Man, Signs of Hope

A Systematic Approach  
to the Art and Science  
of Tracking Humans



**David Diaz**  
with V.L. McCann

**new light on an ancient art!**

**T**racker. The very word evokes images of buckskin-clad braves crouching over the ground, carefully studying the signs before them—a part of history. But the modern world has not put behind it the need for the earthy business of tracking—far from it. Such skills are still routinely used by the military, rescue personnel, and law enforcement, as well as by hunters and people living at subsistence level throughout the world.

**TRACKING—SIGNS OF MAN, SIGNS OF HOPE** is the ultimate authoritative guide to this most complex pursuit. A great resource for military, law enforcement, and rescue professionals, **TRACKING—SIGNS OF MAN, SIGNS OF HOPE** is also useful for outdoor enthusiasts. Users will find it invaluable as an on-site manual in the course of any search.

*Chapters cover topics such as:*

- **discovering how the experts gather and take advantage of information about their “Chase”**
- **turning your five senses into scientific evidence gathering machines**
- **telling the difference between natural and unnatural movement, foliage, and sounds**
- **differentiating between unrelated or incidental signs and those left specifically by your Chase**
- **accurately interpreting the age of a sign**
- **determining the physical, mental, and emotional condition of your Chase**
- **transforming hindrances into advantages**
- **picking up the trail again once it has been lost**
- **protecting yourself against a dangerous and/or desperate foe**
- **working together as a team**
- **documenting the evidence so that others can pick up where you left off**
- **and more.**

*Continued on back flap*

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DEDICATED TO THE MISSING AND EXPLOITED  
CHILDREN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD AND  
TO THOSE MEMBERS OF THE AMERICAN  
ARMED FORCES WHO WERE, ARE, OR EVER  
WILL BE HELD AS PRISONERS OF WAR OR  
DECLARED MISSING IN ACTION.





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*The instinct of man is to pursue everything that flies  
from him, and to fly from all that pursue him.*

—VOLTAIRE



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## foreword

In this period, when modern armies are uncompromisingly reshaping their respective forces to face the challenges and threats of the twenty-first century in a high-tech mindset, the primordial principles of tracking still prove their responsiveness, in the same way as when human beings still hunted for their food. *Tracking: Signs of Man, Signs of Hope* rekindles the light and illuminates the path towards the need to relearn the skills of tracking. Above and beyond, this book will certainly trigger the conceptualization of new sensors and surveillance equipment for improved combat effectiveness.

During my stint as commander, 18th Infantry Battalion, Philippine Army, I had the chance to train with SFC David Diaz on Basilan Island, Philippines, during bilateral military exercises in 2002. David was called upon to share his expertise on tracking with the members of the battalion because we both believe that, indeed, *tracking matters*. His same training program was reintroduced into the Philippine Army and has been successfully and aggressively implemented ever since.

Lt. Col. Daniel Lucero  
18th Infantry Battalion  
Philippine Army

Dave Diaz is an acknowledged expert on tracking and field craft, recognized throughout the U.S. Army's Special Operations community. His methods have proven themselves through success by empowering soldiers to effectively track armed combatants during the Global War on Terror. Dave's book is an excellent digest of his validated methods of instruction and techniques. I'd recommend it

as a “must read” for all field soldiers and trainers. It provides invaluable tools to execute stand-alone tracking courses or enhance sniper or reconnaissance programs.

CSM John G. Macejunas  
U.S. Army (Retired)

*Tracking* by David Diaz is probably the most succinct tactical/tracking writing that I have ever had the pleasure of reading. It offers something for everyone, from outdoorsman, policeman, and rescue personnel to SPECOPS operator. It allows the reader to gain valuable insight into techniques and methods that when practiced will significantly increase survivability and effectiveness, depending on the use. As a 26-year Army veteran, 17-plus of which was as a SOF operator, I highly recommend this book for those serious about operating in the field, whether you are a soldier, law enforcement officer, or rescue professional.

CW3 Michael Haugen  
1st Special Forces Group (Airborne)  
Fort Lewis, Washington, U.S. Army

Tactical tracking has become a critical skill for the Global War on Terror, and only a handful of people have the expertise and experience of Dave Diaz. I had the good fortune of working with Dave on Basilan Island, Philippines, in the spring and summer of 2001. Dave had worked on me for months with his ideas of how tracking could be applied to our efforts there. He changed the way we looked at everything and made our detachment realize the importance of understanding “everything.” What Dave really taught us was Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) to the square inch. Dave teaches his trackers to collect data in all types of terrain, weather, and culture in the area of operation. This data is then analyzed to the point where it becomes instinctual to the tracker.

Dave became a surrogate member of our team in the Philippines and planned, coordinated, and executed a six-week tracker course for the Filipino soldiers we were advising. The results of his course were nothing short of astounding. In six weeks, he took these soldiers from barely being able to pass an army physical fitness test to completing an extremely demanding field training exercise. The soldiers were taught techniques for collecting tracking data and how to apply that data to actual tracking. Some of the soldiers became so proficient in their tracking that they could track on their hands and knees during hours of limited visibility. The most visible change was the soldier's situational awareness (culture, terrain, and weather) and attention to detail in every task (especially tracking reports that would help commanders make informed decisions). The skills and techniques Dave teaches can be applied from the jungles of the Philippines to the deserts of the Middle East and will keep soldiers alive as well as bring terrorists to justice.

Captain Michael Perry  
1st Special Forces Group (Airborne)  
Fort Lewis, Washington, U.S. Army





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## introduction

*Tracker.* The very word forms images of buckskin-clad braves crouching over the ground, carefully studying the signs before them. It brings back memories of old cavalry movies where the dust-worn officers watch and wait while the scout reaches out his hand, touches the hoof print near his foot, stands up, and points to the horizon declaring, “South. Three days’ ride.” It is an image that fills the average person with awe and wonder. How does the scout know which way they’re heading? How does he know the print is three days old?

In the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Butch and Sundance try every trick they know to shake the slow, steady advance of their pursuers. They double up on one horse, watching with surprise when the posse divides in two and then quickly comes back together again—dead on their trail. “Who are these guys?” they keep asking. After setting off on foot, they watch in disbelief as a famed Indian scout tracks them over solid rock. “How does he do that?” they ask again.<sup>1</sup>

But is there really a shroud of mystery behind the skills of a Native-born tracker? Are only a select few endowed with the sacred ability to track animals or human beings through miles of rock, brush, or jungle? I am here to tell you that there is no mystery to tracking, and I will prove to you that these skills can be learned by almost anyone.

But why write a book on tracking? Our technologically advanced society has eliminated the need for such rudimentary search methods, right? Little known to many in America, people all over the world still use these techniques, and specialized training in the field

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<sup>1</sup>George Roy Hill, dir., *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1969.

of tracking is essential for many agencies in our own country to accomplish their missions. The military uses some of these skills in areas of direct combat, guerrilla warfare, strategic reconnaissance, VIP rescue, and downed pilot recovery. The success of a search-and-rescue team most assuredly depends on the team's ability to track down a lost child or injured climber. U.S. law enforcement agencies have been and still use these skills to track fugitives and drug traffickers. And the U.S. Border Patrol has highly distinguished itself through its effective use of these techniques in locating and preventing smugglers, illegal immigrants, and all manner of criminals from crossing our borders.

Many third-world countries—where modern technology hasn't reached into every corner of society—still depend upon their knowledge of tracking for everyday survival. In fact, many of the skills I will be sharing in this book I learned firsthand from headhunters, bushmen, and native trackers located throughout the world.

My intention is to bring back an art that has been all but lost from American society, to preserve the hard-earned and much-coveted knowledge learned through years of study, experience, and dedication. My hope is that this knowledge will bring about a safer world; that it will provide skills enabling the average person to better find a lost loved one; and that it will be passed on to succeeding generations before it is lost forever.

With some adaptation, this book can be used anywhere in the world. Unlike other books on tracking, this book focuses on tracking human beings, whether they are enemy soldiers behind our lines, criminals on the run, or children lost in the woods. It is, therefore, intended for use by military personnel, law enforcement officers, and search and rescue teams, although its use is not restricted to public servants. Scouting and adventure groups may find this information useful for outdoor and survival training; those who have lost their ancient arts may find a connection with their ancestors through the teachings in this book; and any individual who has an interest in this subject can learn a great deal by studying these pages.

What this book will not do is make the reader an expert tracker. No book alone can do that. It is intended only to cover the fundamentals of ground tracking. To become merely proficient takes time, dedication, and hands-on training under the watchful eye of a skilled and proven tracker. It takes years of experience and practice—sometimes an entire lifetime—to gain respect as a well-known, accomplished tracker. But what this book will do is open your eyes to the world around you and move you beyond the level of the beginner and into the ranks of the craftsman.

Welcome and embrace it; tracking is as essential today as it was yesterday, and as it will be tomorrow. Come join the twenty-first-century tracker as we explore the fundamentals of the past in *Tracking: Signs of Man, Signs of Hope*, and join the ranks of those who have earned the title of “Tracker.”



## HISTORY AND BRIEF OVERVIEW

*We and our ancestors are the same . . .*

—CARLETON COON

The art of tracking has been around since the creation of mankind and has come full circle with a renewed interest in this nearly extinct science. As important as the advent of farming and the discovery of fire, tracking—and its close cousin, hunting—has been critical to human survival, not only in securing food and clothing, but also in finding shelter from harsh and unforgiving weather, animals, and terrain.

Unfortunately, man was not equipped with many of the natural abilities of his lower-classed counterparts: he could not run as fast as a cheetah, soar the heavens like an eagle, master the ocean depths like a shark, or crawl up the sides of a cliff like an insect, lizard, or spider; he was not supplied with the keen hearing of a bat, the sharp eyesight of a hawk, the precise homing instinct of a pigeon, nor the discriminating olfactory senses of a dog. Even when it came to catching his prey, man was left with few natural abilities. Without claws or webs to catch his prey, man had to rely on traps and nets; without sharp teeth or brute strength, man had to develop the means to kill with club, spear, or arrow; without natural camouflage, man had to develop techniques to blend in with his surroundings. Man had to use his superior intelligence to enhance those senses and abilities naturally endowed to his animal counterparts, and he had to

develop the means to do this as a group, a duo, or—most critical to his survival—single-handedly.

## A short history

The science of tracking, I'm sure, began when early man discovered he was hungry and had to find an animal in order to kill and eat it. Since most animals didn't just stand around waiting for the spear or club, man had to learn how to find his prey. Through trial and error—and the loss of many lives—tracking was developed and fine-tuned over the centuries. Families, tribes, and even entire colonies came to depend on the tracker's skill for their very survival and control over their domain.<sup>2</sup> Prehistoric art tells countless stories of hunters and their bravery, recounting entire hunts from departure to final victory.

As mankind grew into societies and civilizations, tracking was expanded to include uses outside the basic necessities of life. The ancient Chinese and Japanese used it to wage war against their enemies. Sun Tsu described the importance of using local natives who knew the lay of the land in order to secure victory in a strange territory.<sup>3</sup> This is similar to what the United States recently did in Afghanistan, working closely with the indigenous Northern Alliance to secure victory in that country. Ninja and samurai warriors also had to know these techniques to infiltrate into the heart of their enemies' lands.<sup>4</sup> Biblical stories tell of ancient leaders, spies, and undeserving fugitives whose knowledge of the wilderness, its dangers, and its food and water sources ensured the survival of the Israelites. And surely, great warring nations like Rome, Babylon, Chaldea, and Persia, as well as renowned warriors under Alexander the Great, had superior tracking knowledge to so thoroughly and completely defeat their enemies.

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Ardrey, *Territorial Imperative* (New York: Atheneum, 1966).

<sup>3</sup>Sun Tsu, translated by Samuel B. Griffith, *Sun Tsu, the Art of War, Manoeuvre and Employment of Secret Agents*, ed. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963): 105, 144–149.

<sup>4</sup>Oscar Ratti, Adele Westbrook, *Secrets of the Samurai, Outer Factors of Bijutsu, Ninjitsu* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co.): 324–331.

During the birth of the American Colonies, Native Americans were instrumental in teaching the colonists ancient arts, which helped their survival. The War of Independence was the first recorded instance of “Europeans” utilizing guerrilla tactics—which the Colonial Army learned from the native tribes. Survival and tracking skills helped give rise to American legends like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Lewis and Clark, who used their talents to discover new lands and rescue kidnapped women and children.

The nineteenth century saw even greater use of these capabilities. Although slave traders and owners used these skills to track down escaped slaves, it was the famed Native American scouts who captured the wonder and imagination of generations to come. They used their knowledge and expertise to infiltrate enemy territories, trail renegade Native American bands, and track down famous outlaws to bring them to justice.<sup>5</sup>

Many writings of frontiersmen and soldiers attested to the capabilities of these scouts. One memoir, written by U.S. Army officer Homer Wheeler, captured the skill of one such scout named Poor Elk, trailing renegade Cheyennes near Yellowstone in 1874.

Poor Elk followed about a mile to where the pursued party had camped. He brushed away the ashes from the dead fires and felt of the earth underneath, examined the droppings of the animals, counted the number of fires and noticed, by marks made by the pins, the size of the lodges; carefully scrutinized some moccasins, bits of cloth, etc. that had been thrown away; noticed that the moccasins were sewn with thread instead of sinew and were made as the Sioux made them. . . . A sweat-lodge had been built, indicating that they had remained in camp at least one day, and the droppings of the animals determined that the stay had been but one.

The position of the camp, the tying of the animals near the tepees and the wickiups, the number of lodges, the care taken by the Indians in leaving, all these things furnished evidence as to the number of Indians and animals and the number of days since they had

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<sup>5</sup>Gordon C. Baldwin, *The Apache Indian Raiders of the Southwest* (New York: Four Winds, 1978).

camped there. Though moving steadily, yet they were in no special hurry; were Sioux and not Cheyennes; had recently left an agency; had not crossed the Yellowstone at the time reported, but two days earlier; were evidently a party of Sioux who were on the way to join the Indians north of the British line. In fact, the record left by these Indians was as complete as though it had been carefully written out.<sup>6</sup>

These warriors were trained from their earliest childhoods in the craft of trailing and sign reading, incorporating these skills into every facet of their lives. “Amazing deductions from such sign reading are recorded, and would have seemed impossible if they were not so routinely faced and solved,” observes historian Thomas E. Mails.<sup>7</sup>

In the twentieth century, too, as part of law enforcement, military operations, and search and rescue missions, tracking proved its usefulness time and again.

In the early 1950s, Kenyan Mau Maus advocated open revolt against Great Britain. When this took the form of a terrorist campaign aimed at English settlers, the British government hired native Kikuyu trackers to locate and root out the isolated bands of rebels.<sup>8</sup>

During and after the 1967 Six-Day War, elite Israeli forces, known as Sayeret Scouts, tracked and captured those who sought to destroy the nation of Israel. Today, they are still tracking Palestinian terrorists, smugglers, thieves, and Egyptian spies.<sup>9</sup>

The Vietnam War was the first military conflict that saw extensive use of Special Operations Forces. Between 1964 and 1971, the Studies and Observations Group (SOG), the Vietnam War’s covert special warfare unit, fought with distinction and valor, excelling in rescue attempts behind enemy lines, cross-border operations, and reconnaissance missions. Highly skilled in tracking and counter-tracking techniques, the SOG owed the success of its Laotian campaign to modern

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<sup>6</sup>*The Soldiers*, The Old West Series (New York: Time-Life Books, 1974): 117.

<sup>7</sup>*The Mystic Warriors of the Plains* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1995): 523.

<sup>8</sup>Robert B. Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).

<sup>9</sup>Moshe Betser and Robert Rosenberg, *Secret Soldier* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996).



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