Tracker Training

Having the ability to interpret facets of the environment and determine the presence or behaviour of certain animals via the use of tracks and signs is a skill that will greatly enhance your ability to guide safely and effectively. Guides cannot rely solely upon their trackers to read these signs and are required to develop skills that pertain to these areas.
During the process of tracking one is exposed to details that are often overlooked, and being able to decipher this information will develop a far greater understanding and knowledge of the animals that surround us.

One week CyberTracker Tracker Training courses held in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (or on site at your own venue if available and suitable). The course will focus primarily on the recognition, differentiation and identification of Tracks & Signs. There will be a formal CyberTracker Track & Sign evaluation at the end of the course for certification purposes.

Tracks & Signs

There are many different elements to the observation and interpretation of Tracks and Signs left by animals. They may be any of the following, or a combination thereof:

- **Ground spoor:** These basically consist of visible tracks or trail left on the ground by an ***animal***. These may show in the form of footprints (or impressions left by parts of the body coming into contact with the substrate), scuff marks, turned stones or leaves, etc. Clear spoor of this nature can tell us a great deal of information about the animal that left it. In addition to being able to identify the species responsible for leaving the track, one may be able to establish its approximate size, sex, condition, group composition, etc; as well as giving you hints as to the approximate age of the trail.
  These comprise the basic signs that trails consist of, and as a tracker you will need to recognize the signs as they may appear in varying types of substrate, as this may cause significant variation as is explained later. They may be clear and well defined, or partially obscured, or even be illustrated by a fraction of a track that is visible. The key is to learn not only what the track looks like, but the SPECIFIC FEATURES of the track (including factors such as ***gait*** and ***stride length***) so that when you are presented with partial or obscured tracks that you are able to use these specifics to assist in the positive identification.
- **Urine & Faeces:** Faeces signs may often indicate species via the size, composition (diet) and other specifics that one might learn from it; some animals will utilize middens or "latrine sites" as a mechanism of territorial demarcation; these also give one of the best ways to assess how recently a trail was left – in terms of temperature and moisture enabling you to establish freshness of trail; urine deposits may often only be evident as a crust on the ground, or sometimes a white discoloration left after the fluid has evaporated and leaves only the white uric acid stain. One may establish sex from urine deposits in certain cases due to the position of the orifice from which the urine originated, or type of deposit left.
- **Territorial signs:** Many species are territorial in habit, and this requires that they leave signs that indicate "ownership" or occupation. These are primarily in the form of faeces and urine deposits left at latrine sites or along pathways; other equally significant, but less obvious signs are glandular pastings, scratching, or rubbing signs.
- **Aerial or Vegetation spoor:** These tend to be trails left through grass or bush where the animal has moved but no actual ***tracks*** are visible. This may be indicated by the detection of trodden grasses, pushed branches, broken spider webs, mud on leaves left after an animal has been wallowing, dew-trails in the early morning where individual dew droplets are "smudged" across grass plants leaving a recognizable trail, etc. These may become confusing, especially where numerous trails converge or diverge. Look for "track traps" to reconfirm that you are on the correct trail.
- **Feeding signs:** This would be evidence indicating a particular species by the particular feeding signs left; this may even include saliva left where animals have been feeding or resting, good indicator by moisture levels. For this you need to have a good working knowledge of the various

feeding behavior specifics where they may apply in order to recognize these. This would apply to both carnivores and herbivores in many cases.

- **Skeletal signs:** Identifying or recognizing **species** or its **predator** via the interpretation of bones or skulls ranges from being fairly basic to extremely advanced. From a predation perspective it may be closely linked to the previous point. The best possible means of identifying a species from its skeletal remains would be from the skull (especially when horns are present), and specifically the ***dental formula*** as this may be unique to a species. The condition of the teeth is also a method of establishing the approximate age of the animal prior to its death. This may also be used in establishing "violent" vs "passive" mortality in assessing the position and distribution of the remains.
- **Shelters:** These are more often associated with smaller creatures, and often clues are left pointing towards a particular species, this may be the ***type of shelter*** or combined with other ***Incidental or Ground Spoor/Faecal Signs***
- **Scent:** Olfactory signs that an animal has been in an area – usually scent-marks or dung and some of these may be interpreted even by the relatively rudimentary olfactory capabilities of the human tracker.
- **Regurgitation (pellets):** This is typically indigestible material that is regurgitated; again moisture may be a good indicator of time-frames. These signs are often linked to certain species – Mammals: Lion and hyaena; Birds: owls, kingfishers, herons (any species whose diet consists of high quantities of indigestible material such as hair, bones and arthropod exoskeletons), many frugivorous birds will also regurgitate large seeds that they are unable to process
- **Paths:** Regularly utilized passages and game trails give an indication of peripheral information such as waterpoints, etc; "runs" for rodents will stem from shelters. In well established safari destinations the ***road network*** will substitute to a large extent the "natural" game paths, as these become the chosen passage-ways.
- **Vocal and auditory signs:** These are obviously immediate – alarm, distress or contact calls, but you need to recognize species, the significance or nature of the sound and be able to pinpoint the position. Auditory signs may also be ***Circumstantial Signs*** where these sounds arise from an ***indirect*** but ***linked*** source – birds and other animals giving alarm calls in response to the presence of a predator.
- **Visual signs:** Other than actually being able to see the animal, you need to recognize visual signs of its presence – i.e. moving vegetation or ripples in water, etc
- **Incidental signs:** Other indicators that an animal has been there, such as hair or feathers, rubbing points, etc
- **Circumstantial (indirect or associated) signs:** these are usually related to the signs given off by **other species** that may indicate the presence of your quarry – i.e. antelope staring fixedly at a position, birds calling or flying off (oxpeckers, francolins, etc); flies or scavenging species indicating the presence of a carcass, etc

Trailing

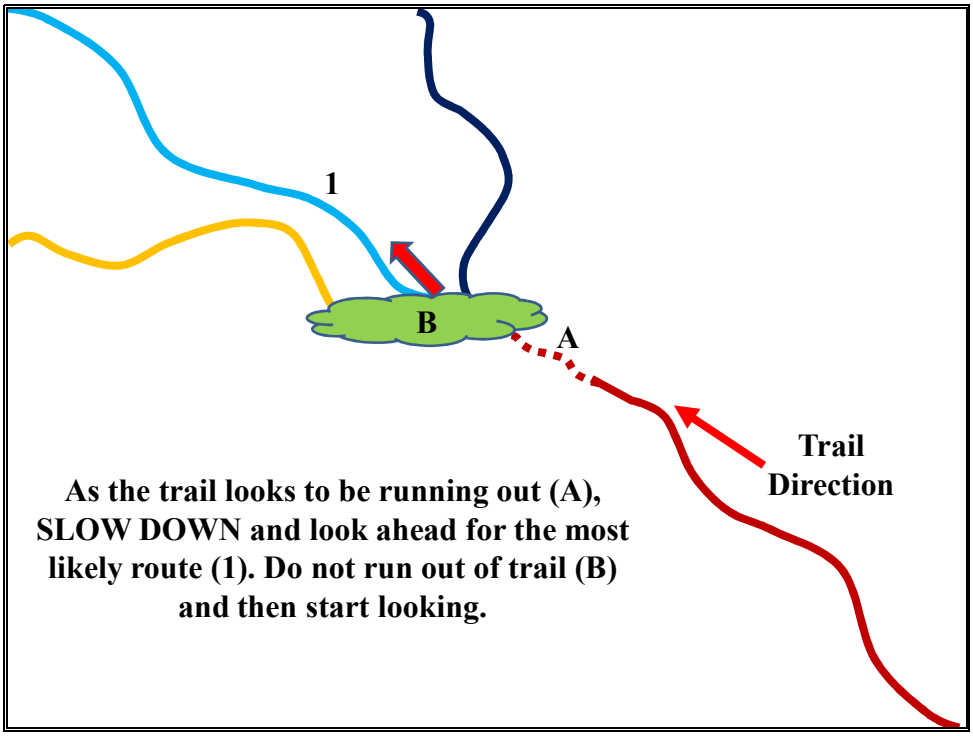
In the context of the Tracking course, learning how to follow a trail left by an animal with the intention of finding the animal is not something that can be very easily taught from a set of notes or a short session of practical training. The variables are so great that it would not be possible to cover even a fraction of them. There are however a few useful **guidelines** that will be covered, that may help your progress, or at least to get you started.

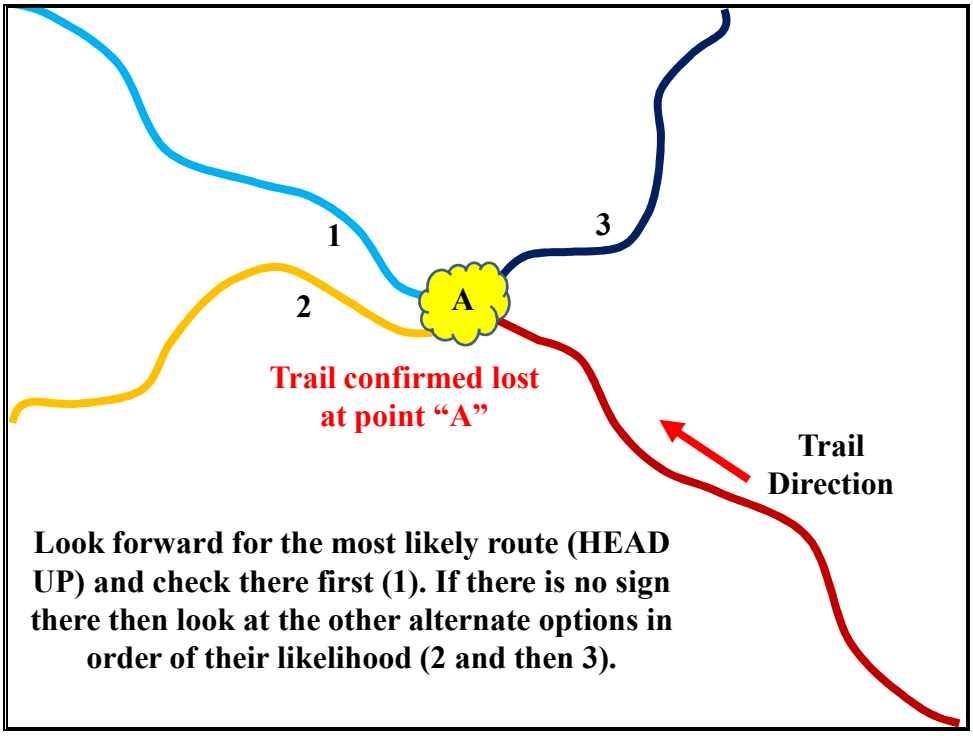
You will be trained in the following:

- **Keep the trail between yourself and the sun**
- Build up a **rhythm ("rhythm" should be that you pick up pace where the trail is easy and the terrain allows, but as it becomes more difficult or the bush gets denser, that you slow down as required)**.
- **Look around** you at the **terrain** and **path options, cover, "track-traps", areas which you would like to avoid, etc**. Try and **plot the path.**
- Choose the **MOST LIKELY ROUTE.**

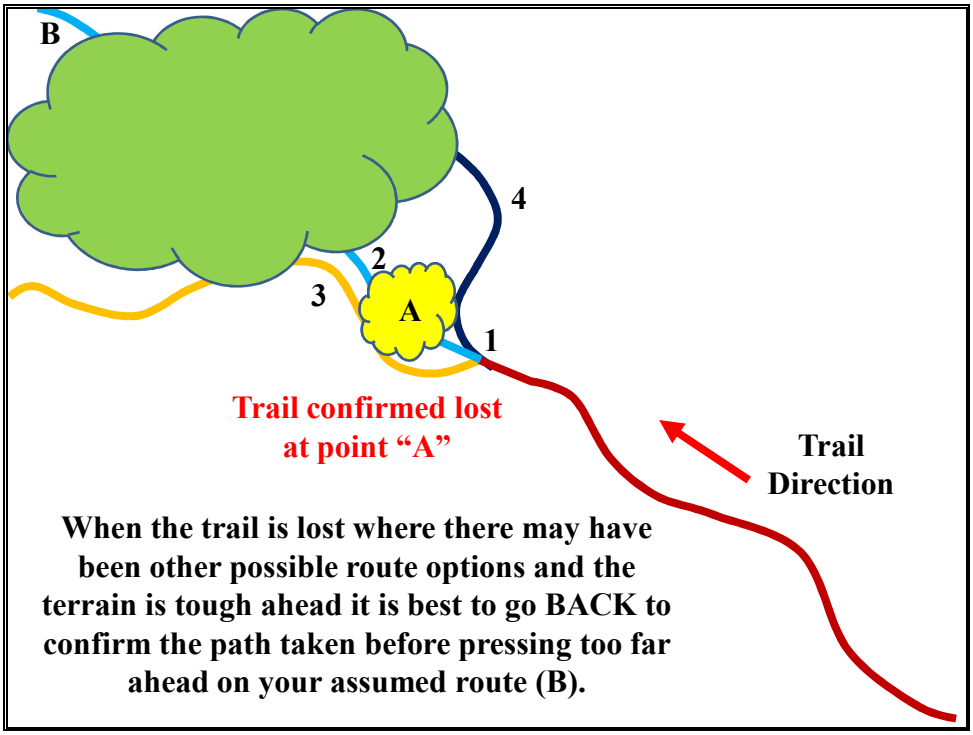
- Remember that you might **expect a change in direction once an animal reaches a specific destination** (midden, water, etc), and you will then need to reevaluate the trail and establish the motivation for the next leg!!
- Your aim should be to **become PART of the bush.** Try and **remain undetected** (not only by the specific animal/s that is your quarry or focus).
- Do not remain glued to the trail, irrespective of the terrain.
- **KEEP YOUR HEAD UP!!** Try and **see the trail well ahead of you (signs of other animals, new path options, escape routes, dangerous areas, and MOST LIKELY ROUTE!!)**
- Place the animal in its environment and apply its **typical habits** then allow this to guide you when you have a difficult area of the trail.
- Allow the **gait** or **stride-length** to provide you with relevant information

Below are some slide scenarios that may help to depict common scenes that you may encounter whilst on a trail, and how you might respond to them. There are obviously enormous variables that may determine your next step, but these would be considered useful guidelines from my experience in evaluating trailists and common mistakes that are made.

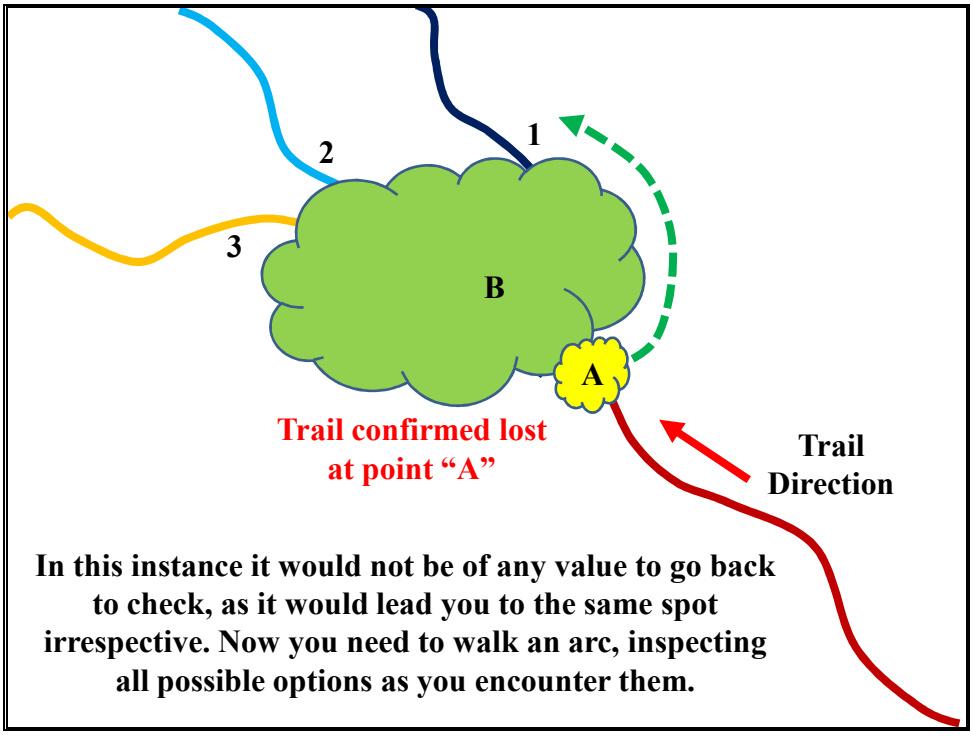




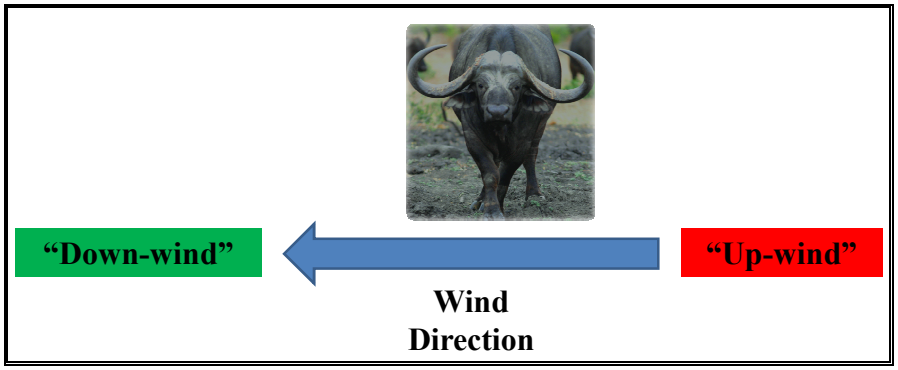
Look forward for the most likely route (HEAD UP) and check there first (1). If there is no sign there then look at the other alternate options in order of their likelihood (2 and then 3).

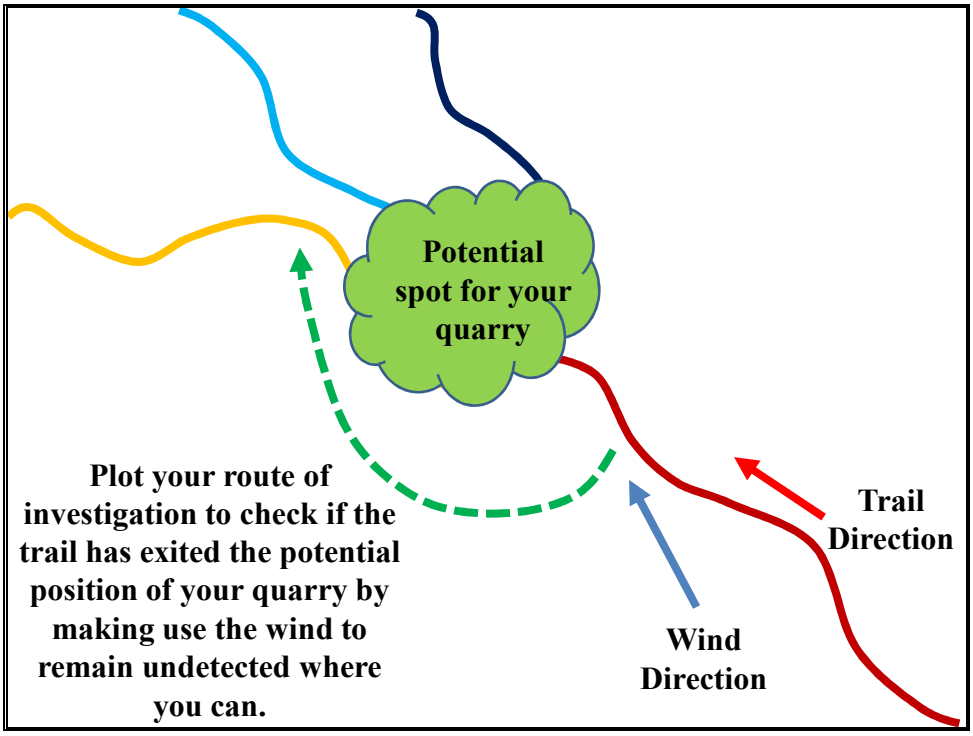


When the trail is lost where there may have been other possible route options and the terrain is tough ahead it is best to go BACK to confirm the path taken before pressing too far ahead on your assumed route (B).



- **Wind**
  - Make use of the wind wherever you can – sometimes the nature and direction of the trail will not allow you to maintain a **"down-wind"** direction, but if you sense that you are getting **close** or you see a **potential resting position** ahead of you and the trail heads straight there you should **depart from the trail** and attempt to use the wind to your favour when making your confirmation.





- **Test the wind regularly** if it is **swirling** or **drifting** slightly (it is not necessary to keep testing a stiff breeze that has not been shifting). There are many different methods to check the direction of the wind – some use **ash-bags** (avoid using scented talcum powder)**, moist hands, grass panicles, dirt** (although you should **avoid KICKING** the ground audibly). I use dry **scrub-hare droppings** – these are readily available, easy to keep a stock of in a film canister or similar, scent-less and when crushed produce tiny flakes that are easily visible and very light, so will indicate even the slightest breeze. **Stand still when you test a light breeze so that your vortex or movement does not influence the drift of your particles.**

****Trail Basics – A Summary:**

1. Walk **SQUARE** to the trail (unless the sun is prohibitive to this)
2. LOOK **AHEAD/UP**
3. Stay **FOCUSSED** (do not allow your mind to wander and be diverted by **UNLRELATED** things)
4. Look ahead for **MOST LIKELY ROUTE**
5. When trail is lost **STOP** and **GO BACK** (make sure you are still on track before pressing too far ahead)

Trail-specific training courses may be arranged upon demand