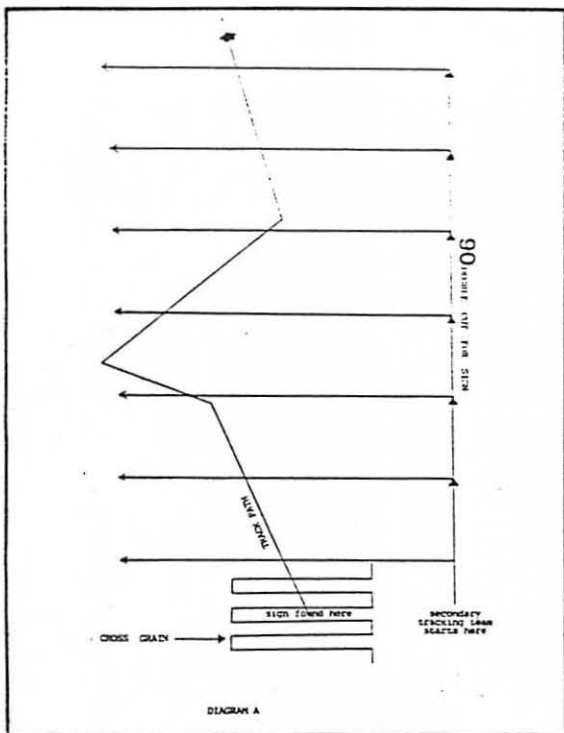


Outdoor Skills:

Man Tracking Techniques

A search and rescue skill that can be very valuable.



By Lenny Hoover

SEVERAL years back a member of our survival group had his young son disappear in the Coconino National Forest in the rugged country near Happy Jack, Arizona. When he got a call from his wife who had been visiting friends in the area, notifying him that his son had been lost, he immediately called me and as crisis leader of our group I activated all members with the only condition red emergency we have ever issued. The Coconino County Search and Rescue unit was called out and before long a massive search was under way to find the boy.

The emotions that a leader must face are very difficult during a crisis of this type. We all knew and loved the little boy. The dreadful heart rending of this situation actually put the boy's father out of commission by mid-day. My people were counting on me. I remember coming upon an old rock cistern and not being able to look in it. It took several minutes before I could do it. Then I had difficulty seeing the bottom of the thing through the patina of tears that covered my eyes. I could not let anyone else see, after all, they were depending on me.

Finally, after some agonizing hours of searching, the boy was found. I made an oath to myself that if it were ever possible I would learn more about tracking and search and rescue techniques. It took several years but I kept that oath!

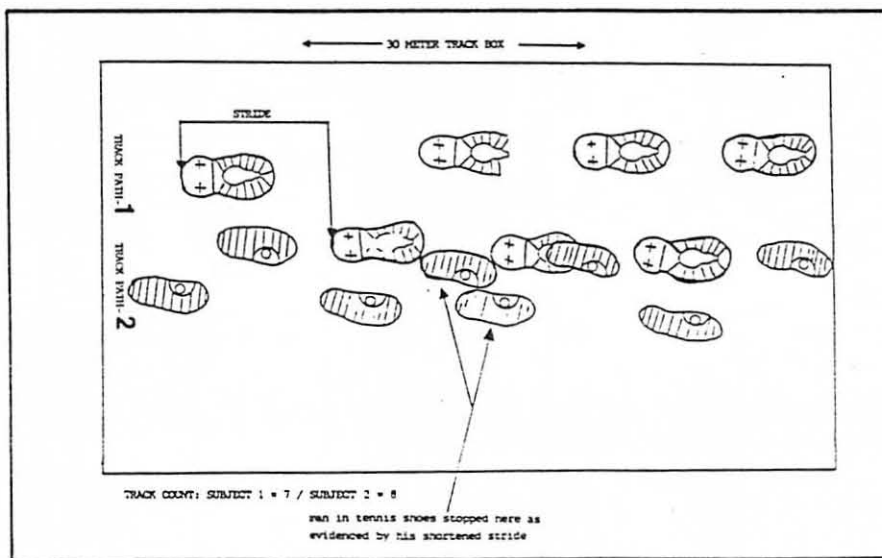
Search and rescue is really more of a science and to some degree an art. Many search and rescue units become drinking clubs and horseback roping leagues. It is unfortunate that this skill is many times not studied by those who claim to practice it. It was lucky for us that the Coconino Search and Rescue is one of the finest in the country. You would have to be when the Grand Canyon is part of your beat. One skill that impressed me and is the subject of this article is the *art* of man tracking.

Man tracking should not be confused with the tracking of game animals. While the two have similarities they also have wide differences. The basic type of search for the average search

teams is the line search. This simply means get a group of people in a line and cover a specific quadrant on a map. While not as effective as many other methods it does have the benefit of being simple so that untrained and out of shape people can utilize it. Trackers should start ahead of these groups so that tracks or *sign* are not compromised by those who are trying to help.

Trackers or a tracking unit should start by casting for sign in the last reported place the lost person was seen. Footprints, clothing, shoes, gun wrappers or anything the lost person was known to have on his person can be used to mark his passage across the earth.

What method is most effective to initially find tracks? I like two, the Cross Grain and the Circle Cut. The Cross Grain (lower part of diagram A) is one you may have learned in the Boy Scouts. The searcher simply studies the earth for sign while walking in a pattern. This pattern is that of interlocking L's. For close study a person may wish to use very short legs in his pattern. If larger distances are needed the



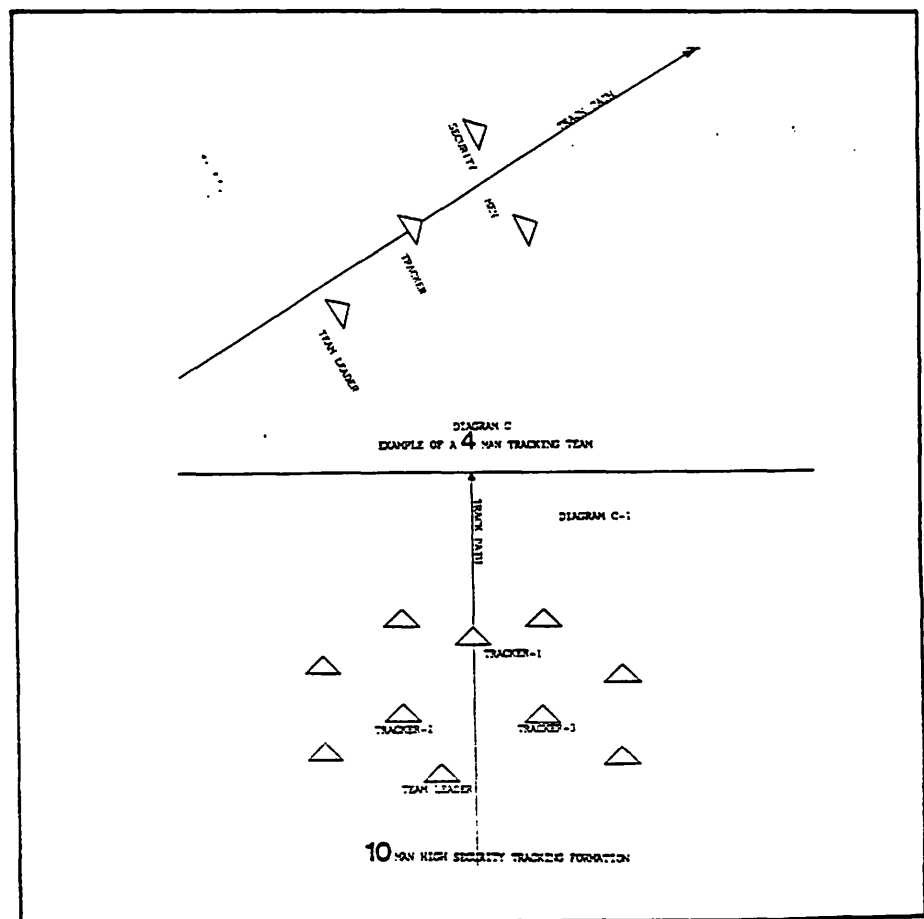
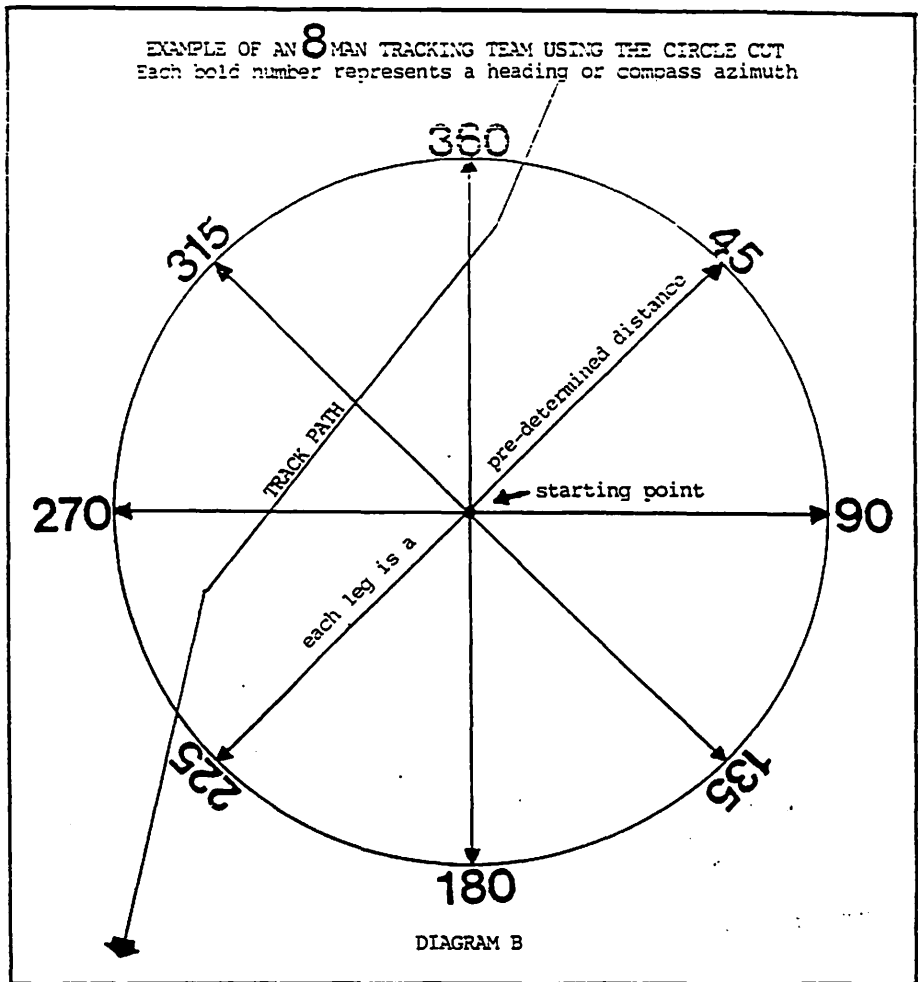
pattern can be enlarged. Two people can use the pattern working together as well.

The other good track acquisition method is the Circle Cut (see diagram B). This is simply searching for signs by radiating from some central point for a given distance. The ending point of each leg will eventually describe a circle. This method can be used with one person but really comes into its own when you have three or more searchers. Each searcher can then travel a given distance on a compass heading searching for sign. Remember that as distance from the starting point increases so does the distance between each search leg. This method is particularly effective because it searches in a 360 degree circle instead of just one direction.

After careful searching let us say that our tracking team has found several tracks that have been identified as being the right size and perhaps the mother remembered that the shoe print looks like those on the boy's tennis shoes. What do you do? Keep untrained people away from the area and track boxes (see track box diagram) which can tell you how long the lost person's stride is, if he was running etc. Most of all get your team familiar with the imprint the shoe has made in the earth. Casts can be made of prints as well. Is a second person involved? Is the victim limping?

After finding tracks move down the trail left by them. Be careful not to obliterate them. If you are tracking a dangerous person you will need several people to keep watch for the bad guy (See diagrams C and C-1 for team security tracking formations). Even if foul play is not suspected use security formations. A luminous marker should be left along your back trail from time to time. It is easy for a single searcher or a search team to get lost simply because they concentrate on the ground and not landmarks. A team should have a navigator to avoid this problem. Security people should not track. It is good to have a spare tracker as it is very taxing and a tracking team can move faster even if the trackers spell each other every 20 minutes or so.

Another method can be used to find sign if you have identified a clear consistent trail of tracks. It is called cutting for sign (see 90-degree cut for sign, diagram A) This method can speed up a rescue by expediting tracking. Radios should really be used for this method. A tracker or tracking team is left on a set of tracks and



Man Tracking Techniques

tries to continue following them. A larger team then travels down the suspected route off to one side of the path of tracks and then members of the second team cut off from the main body (which is traveling parallel to the suspected track paths) at pre-selected intervals perpendicular or at a 90 degree angle from the main body of the second team. If one of these people who have "cut" for sign comes across the lost persons tracks and can clearly identify them, he begins to follow the track path and eventually can radio the team leader of what he has found. The team leader may decide to move up everyone to this location and advance the search. He might just to be sure, keep the original team on their track path until they reach the man who cut for sign and discovered the track path. He might repeat the cutting for sign process again hoping to gain time on the lost person.

This method can also be used when a clear track path is lost at a river or in difficult country. Perhaps a search team can reacquire the tracks of a lost individual by avoiding the obstacle and picking up the tracks on the other side by cutting for sign. This method can be tremendously effective in advancing a search or picking up time on the "victim" especially in the face of bad



A map and compass are necessary for the best systematic search.

weather or nightfall if the victim is very young. It does take personnel who have been moderately trained however. This type of activity is extremely good for a survival group to practice.

Night Tracking — Many people feel that this is impossible or above their ability. It is not! It does take practice. Have a person during the day lay down a track in good tracking country where a clear print is left. Bring in your team of beginning trackers that evening and let them find the track using the above methods, just before nightfall. Your trackers with a flashlight (a GI angle head flash works great) can spot tracks by keeping their flashlight just off the ground shining at the earth at about a 20 degree angle. The prints are actually cast into relief by the light and darkness combination. Many old cougar hunters use this method just before sun up to find cat tracks in the snow or mud using their truck lights.

In the right country night tracking can be easier than day tracking as faint tracks may stand out better. Remember, it is easier to sneak up on someone or a team at night, especially when they have flashlights on. If you are forced to track a person who is dangerous or has been abducted keep the flashlight away from your body. Have security elements at some distance from the tracker and in front of them. Instruct them not to look at flashlights or carlights so they do not lose night vision. Have an extra tracker to rotate the tracking duty.

Night tracking is strenuous on the eyes and back. Remember to keep rear security who've been warned not to be backlit by the tracker's flashlight. *Only one* flashlight should be lit and that is the tracker's. The spare tracker while not working can be personal security for the working tracker, keeping him from running into thorn bushes etc. Keep the flashlight away from your body so that if shots are fired they hit air or the light, perhaps saving your body. Someone should keep track of where the night tracking team is going, for it's easy to get lost at night when occupied by other things than navigation. Night tracking is really a team effort though one man can do it. To get good at it, practice.

A few points to remember. A team

leader should be chosen who is not the best tracker but is able to make crucial and sometimes difficult decisions and live with them. A searcher once told me how on a search he had taken a right instead of a left on a deer trail. The child was never found. The next year on another search in the same place on the same trail he took a left instead of a right and found the victim of the previous year's search not 100 yards from the fork in the trail. The remains of the child were buried. Heartache and wrinkles come with responsibility. A little practice goes a long way!

Helping your local search and rescue team can be rewarding and an extremely valuable experience for you or your survival group — you do not have to reveal that you are survivalists. Learn the sole patterns of your survival group or family's boot wear. Even better, cut a distinctive notch in your group's boot heels and especially those of the young ones in your family. One of the toughest things as a tracker is trying to determine whether this track or that is the track of the missing person and not that of other searchers, hunters or children at play.

When you are vacationing or in remote country keep your children in a given area and watch them. Instruct your children that if they get lost to hug a tree. The sooner that child sets down the easier it will be to find him. Give your child a whistle (all kids love whistles) and make them keep it on their bodies while in the woods. If your child does get lost keep calm because that child's life is in your hands and rests on your level headed decisions. Make a sketch of the bottom of the lost person's shoe and pass it around to searchers.

Tracking is an art and a science. Some can be taught but most has to be learned through practice. It is worth you and your group's time to learn it. It may be the only means at your disposal to save a member of your family or a member of your survival group. Man tracking may also be the only way in a post holocaust world to track down something which has been stolen from you or to rid the world of a problem human. I know that if someone would harm one of my loved ones in such a scenario they had better watch their backtrail for a very long time! ●