

Tracking Column

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THE WAY OF TRACKING © KYT WALKEN

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The ground is the oldest newspaper in print, always being updated with the most recent news, if you can't read it, you're operating in the dark!

Mike Hull: "I have been an outdoors man my entire life. I have also been in some form of law enforcement since 1974, 27 of those years as a Virginia State Game Warden. I noticed a huge lack of knowledge in the law enforcement communities of the value of foot impression evidence, tracking and woodland operations. I took my personal experiences along with training from multiple resources and developed training to enhance ones operational abilities in rural environments."

1. What is the most memorable tracking experience stuck in your mind?

The tracking experience that stands out most to me occurred in the Shenandoah National Park back around 1998. I had just trained a bunch of Park Rangers about two weeks prior. I received a call around two AM from Ranger Ken Johnson asking for assistance. They had an individual who had been camping along the Appalachian Trail report that two armed men had threatened and shot at him. The Rangers immediately placed Rangers north and south of the area to seal it off from the public and confront anyone leaving the area. The complainant was put in a motel and interviewed in detail. He drew a map and provided his shoes so we could identify his outer sole pattern from others we hoped to find. We met in the parking area at daylight. I measured and documented the shoe outer soles of the complainant.

I and three Rangers initiated a tactical approach to the camp site of the complainant. I was the tracker who followed the AT and looked for any footprints on the way in while the three Rangers provided security. About halfway there we approached a track trap, an area that retained detailed information of outer soles from people's tracks. I had everyone go around this area without disturbing it so I could analyze it later. Our immediate objective was to clear the area of any threats.

We moved further up the AT until we reached a fork going off the west side of the trail. Here we found a large rock and a large tree that was drawn on the complainant's map and just beyond about 50 yards was his tent off the east side of the trail about 30 yards. In order to reduce any unnecessary disturbances, I had the Supervisor remain by the big tree. I had another Ranger remain at the AT where the trail to the tent intersected. I and the remaining Ranger cleared the tent.

With no evidence of any suspects in the area the remaining Ranger stayed at the tent while I went to work looking for track evidence. I went back to the AT and worked north paying strict attention to the west side of the trail looking for ingress or egress as this was where the suspects supposedly came from. I continued north until I reached the Rangers securing the north end of the area then I returned south and paid strict attention to the east side down to the supervisor. I then went out the westward trail that intersected with the AT and checked both sides of that trail. Upon returning I told the Supervisor I had found nothing of interest. I am now going to walk out the west trail and cross through the woods north easterly and come out on the AT and look for sign because this was where the complainant said they came from. This area had thick vegetation and I had to maneuver through it. No sign was found of anyone passing through that area.

I returned to the Supervisor and suggested He and I go back to the track trap and analyze the information there. Upon Analyzing the track trap, I was able to determine there was three separate sets of tracks going through it. Two sets were of the Complainant's ingress and egress. The third set was of a totally different person who had passed through before the complainant's arrival due to their age. (this was later confirmed by the trail registers hikers use.) There was a very interesting finding with the tracks of the complainant. The stride going in was obviously longer than his stride coming out. That is consistent with him moving faster going in, while carrying his camping equipment, and moving slower coming out, empty handed and after being shot at.

With the totality of all the tracking information gathered at this point it was determined that this complainant had fabricated the whole story but in order to complete a thorough investigation and to



further support the track evidence we all returned to the scene, including the perimeter security to thoroughly investigate.

Metal detectors were used to search for shell casings where shots were allegedly fired from. No casings were found.

Vegetation was searched in the area of the alleged bullet trajectory. None was found.

A search for tracks where he said he ran from his tent and entered the AT between the big tree and the big rock. No tracks were found to support that, although tracks were found to and from a tree where a food bag was hung with a rope.

Again there was no evidence this incident had occurred.

My job was done so I left the rest of the investigation up to the Rangers.

The Rangers turned the investigation around to the complainant. Why did he fabricate such a story?

Approximately a week later I was asked to return to the incident site. We reconstructed the entire tracking process using a high-tech GPS system. It was interesting to note that when I went from the westward trail through the woods to the AT I could actually see my week old tracks through the vegetation.

Complainant's cell phone showed he first checked his voicemail after the incident, then he called the wrong police agency – the recording said he could hear shots in the distance.

He reported to the rangers the shots were fired at him.

His ex-wife said he was famous for making up elaborate stories

His girl friend said he told her he was an undercover DEA agent and people were after him

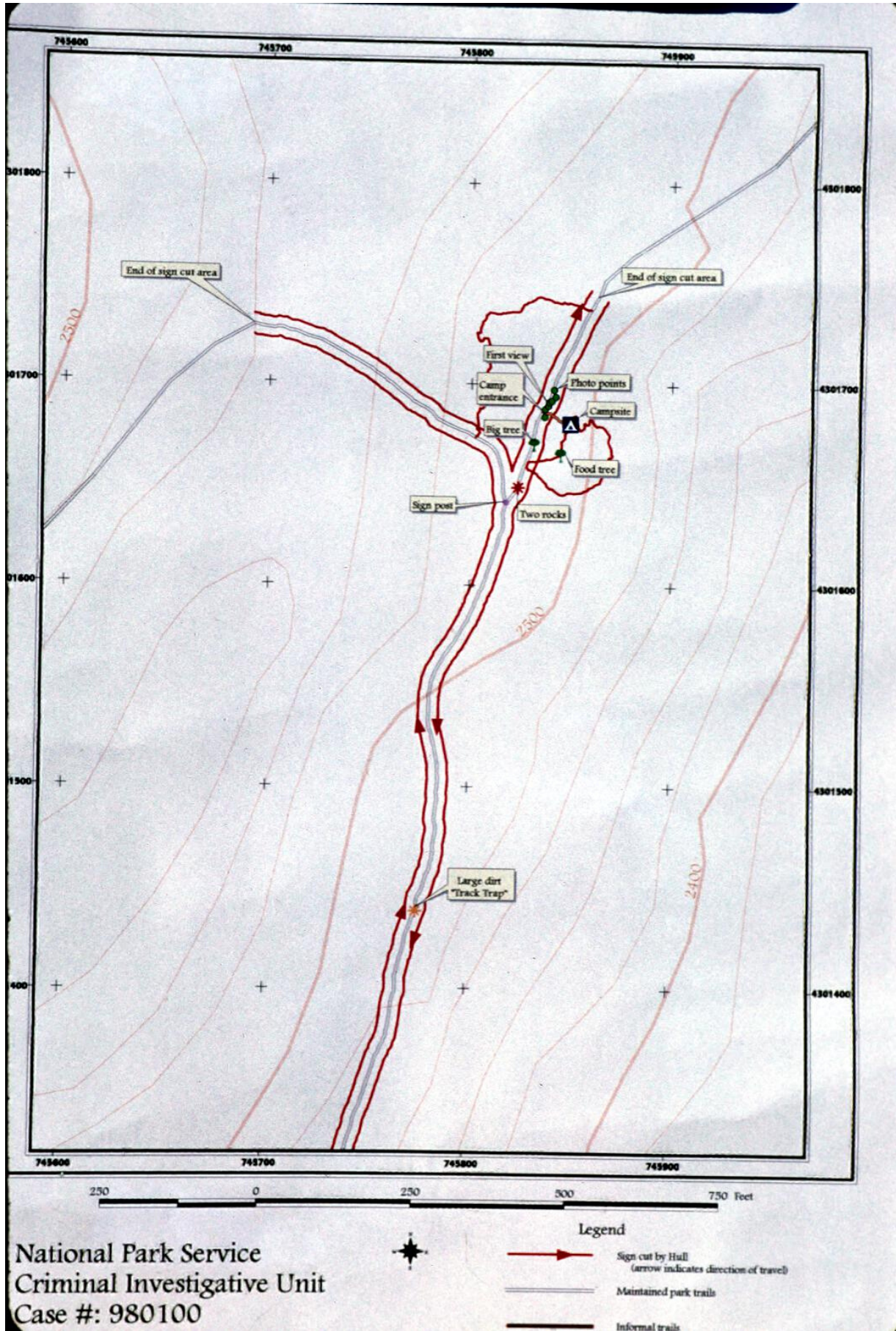
Conclusion was: he was trying to impress his girl friend of the daring exciting lifestyle he lived.

According to the Investigator the tracking training they received and implementing it in this case has changed the way they will investigate cases in the future. Had they not had the training they would have called out all available officers, canines and helicopters to search for someone who didn't exist.

I ended up Training Park Rangers from DC all the way to the Smokey Mountains and finding a few Rangers and great friends who were already performing well in the tracking arena that eventually took over the tracking training for the US Park Service.

This case was just so educational to me at the beginning of my tracking training career and confirmed my belief of the value of tracking. It is almost unbelievable how many times I and other trackers have proved something did not happen due to the lack of tracks. The lack of tracks is evidence in itself. The success in this case propelled me into further training opportunities and educated me in several ways of documenting tracking evidence.





2. Have you ever had the feeling this art is way too difficult?

Tracking has various degrees of difficulty depending on a variety of things that effect Lockard's exchange principal. Some of the things that effect the ease of tracking are; the weather, the medium, time of year and the time of day. I believe the magnitude of challenges from the various environments and conditions are a drawing point to a tracker because it is never the same you never get bored, its always a challenge and every step you find is a reward. The tracking tools and process is the same all over the world, but the environments produce an ever changing focus on the key sign for each situation. To identify the passage of something or someone through an area you must first be able to understand what is normal or natural for the area such as rhythm and balance of the plant life and color and texture of the ground.

Then you must find a disturbance within or going through and analyze what made it. I've never even considered it too difficult to track but I will acknowledge it can be a lot of work. There were times when it was too difficult to track someone in certain conditions, but I normally would go outside those conditions to areas I could track in and determine if they had gone in that direction or not. If it was easy everyone would be doing it but Once you become aware of the value and many uses of tracking it can be very motivational and there is no limit to the challenges, it can offer.

3. Dirt time requires dedication and patience. How did you gain that?

I was fortunate to have a job that allowed me to practice tracking skills almost daily. I was a Virginia State Game Warden for 27 years. It was my job to seek out persons using the outdoors and ensure they were doing it legally and safely. Practically ever day was a search for vehicles in remote areas and determining how many and what they were doing. Searching for lost persons and investigating hunting incidents and fatalities. Looking for illegal baiting and ingress and egress of tress passers. Investigating crop damage complaints and determining what type of animal is involved. Processing crime scenes in the woods. Off seasons I would hike through the mountains and find sign of where tree stands had been, camp sites, ATV trails and marijuana grows. I thought I knew how to track due to my background, but it wasn't until I took structured training that my eyes were really opened. I attended many different tracking schools. Learning different perspectives, methods and techniques. Animal Tracking, Search and Rescue, Tactical and Forensic Tracking and they all had dirt time included. Teaching tracking also includes lots of dirt time and I think teaching really makes you dig into the finer details. Now I look at the ground as a bulletin board. Time and weather effects the sign each day and fresh sign is added on almost a daily basis. It is a welcoming feeling to walk across the earth and feel like your apart of it by being able to read what has been going on around you.

4. Which, in your personal experience, is the toughest terrain you have ever tracked in?

My most frustrating tracking experience is trying to follow someone through an area that has recently been bush hogged. The whole area is torn up. Shredded leaves, broken limbs, flattened ground, its an information overload. The whole area is disturbed so anyone walking through, their disturbance blends in. Another tough situation is in the hardwood forests I live in right after a heavy wind and rainstorm. Here again green leaves are twisted around and torn off, broken limbs everywhere and everything is wet and similar in color. I have found that tracking in the same location at different times of the year can change dramatically as far as ease goes also.