

The Citizen's Forum

TRACKING NOTES

Sign tracking in Bear Valley

By Richard Vacha, Point Reyes Station, Co-founder Marin County Tracking Club

How do you track where there are no tracks? A challenging question. Though clear tracks are deeply fascinating, the activities of all animals leave marks of various sorts that can be read and interpreted just like tracks, and are an equally important part of "reanimating" the world.

So I began to wonder what can be found in areas such as the Bear Valley Headquarters where, much like most of West Marin, there is very little ground that actually shows tracks, even though a great deal of animal activity is going on in within the mix of forests, hills, meadows and creeks. Once again, what can seem like a beautiful but rather empty landscape, quickly comes to life with a little closer observation.

So lets start by parking the car and scanning the picnic grounds. Quickly, we see the Acorn Woodpeckers working in the tops of the oaks and firs, and grey squirrels jumping from limb to limb, and making occasional forays across the ground. Then we notice the Flickers and Steller's Jays landing below the oaks, pecking at the ground.

Getting out, we stroll over to the tall Firs and are amazed to see that they are riddled with what must be tens of thou-

sands of holes, filled with tightly wedged acorns. This is one of several "granaries" in the area, the work of woodpecker colonies that must be hundreds of generations old. Their raucous calls (that actually inspired the Woody Woodpecker song) fill the air. They work continuously, resetting the acorns so they stay tightly wedged and unavailable to other birds and rodents.

Careful observation under the oak trees reveals ant nests, wiped clean by the long, sticky, probing tongue of the Flickers. And there are numerous small digs from the activities of the Jays hunting for insects. With a sideways flick of the head, they throw small mounds of soil to the side, but these digs are not as deep or conical as the numerous holes we find a little further on under the bays and along the grassy slopes, the signs of skunks hunting for Jerusalem Crickets. Occasionally, we find small skunk scats along these foraging routes, crumbly, and full of the tan-colored remnants of their favorite prey.

Looking up into certain Bay trees closer the creek, we are amazed to see millions of small round holes drilled in parallel rows around the trunks and branches. These are ancient feeding trees for Sapsuckers. What would make one Bay Tree more desirable to a Sapsucker than another? Better taste or consistency? Better location for entrapping insects in the oozing sap?

As always, more questions than answers...

Further on, we find Woodrat and Deer Mouse nests in piles of branches and the hollowed out trunks of the old trees. In addition to the various methods of nest building and the different shapes and sizes of scat which clearly identify rodent families and even species, there is a lot of feeding sign too. The bay nuts are a prized food for the local rodents, as well as the jays and quail. What is of interest to a tracker is the way the nuts and acorns have been penetrated, since each mammal or bird has its own particular method of opening them to reach the food. Acorns on the ground in a meadow can be quite revealing since so many different animals are feeding on them, from squirrels, mice, rats, and deer, to woodpeckers, crows, jays, and turkeys, and each one leaves characteristic marks and patterns in the remnant shells and the patterns of disruption on the forest floor.

This landscape is quickly coming to life. There is a lot going on here! We move on, encountering bobcat and coyote scat along the trails, full of telltale fur and bones, and equally telling locations. In the streamside willows and alders it is not uncommon to



The Bay Area Puma Project – coming to Marin

Photo by Trish Carney; trishcarney.com

Citizen contributing photographer Trish Carney remembers clearly the January email inviting her to join researchers in the field with the Felidae Conservation Fund/Bay Area Puma Project. "I almost fell out of my chair," she recalled. "I was beyond excited. I think I stood up and did a gleeful little happy dance in place and then ran over and gave my dog a big fat hug and then sat back down and replied to the email with an enthusiastic yes!"

The Bay Area Puma Project (BAPP) is the first major study of mountain lions in the Bay Area. Launched in mid-2008, the 10-year project aims to reveal critical information about the region's top predator to preserve this essential member of the Bay Area's ecological web.

Several mountain lions have already been fitted with innovated GPS-accelerometer collars to provide insight into puma biology and behavior. BAPP is a partnership between ecology researchers at UC Santa Cruz and wildcat conservationists from Felidae Conservation Fund, with coordination and logistical support by California Department of Fish and Game.

The study is coming to Marin County, but Carney's first introduction to the field researches was literally as their houndsmen's dogs treed a lion in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

"There was no time to get out tripod and flash because everything was happening very fast," Carney recalled. "I was trying to maneuver through the thickets and I was not about to ask them to wait for me to set up, so I just went for it. I was very relieved that I got a couple of images in focus since I was shooting without a flash and was hand-held at a pretty low shutter speed, sitting-kneeling-bracing myself on a slippery slope of loose shale."

"Locking eyes with a wild puma is a transformative experience," Carney said. "The beauty, power, strength and presence of this animal is breathtaking. At the same time, it was hard seeing the animal so stressed by the dogs and people. But the darting, fitting the GPS collar, and measuring vitals was fast, and soon the lion was released."

Carney reported that the lion was a healthy, 93-pound female estimated to be 4-5 years old. "She had an interesting individual characteristic in that her tail was shorter than most pumas' tails," she said. "It was a healthy tail but just shorter, so her field study nickname became Half-Tail. She was also recorded as '13F' because she is the 13th collared lion in the study and is female." — Citizen staff

find bobcat scratching posts and deer antler rubs, which can be clearly differentiated by picturing the animals in action.

We are then drawn toward the open meadow where the grasses are riddled with vole runs and rabbit runs. Again, scat and feeding sign abound, and there are frequent grassy balls where coyotes have dug up gopher and vole nests. Farther back in the corners of the meadows intense badger digging is taking place where they hunt gophers. Sometimes the actual marks of their huge digging claws can be seen in the walls of the burrows.

The deer, both native and exotic, are out in the meadows too, browsing and grazing, and their differing methods of feeding can be seen in the way the grasses are cut. Their fresh trails through the grass can lead to pressed down lie-spots. Feeling the temperature of the ground can reveal how recently they were lying there. They

browse the coyote brush too, but the extensively nipped buds all over the tops of the thickets turn out to be the work of flocks of sparrows sweeping through the area.

Well, by now you can see where this story is going—it's endless! Time after time, I've set aside two or three hours to track around the meadows, only to find that I barely make it a hundred yards down the trail, and I'm eager for more.

Marin County Tracking Club free outings are on the last Sunday of every month, and all are invited. The group meets next at 8:30 am, Sunday, Feb. 28, at Toby's Feed Barn in Point Reyes Station or at 9:30 am at Abbott's Lagoon bridge. Richard Vacha leads private classes and walks by appointment. For info: rrvacha@horizoncable.com, or 663-1704.

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Herd Out West

By Larken Bradley

Couldn't help but hear.

"It rained the entire time I was in Palm Springs – a First-World problem, I know."

Comment made by a woman at a gathering over the hill, heard by a citizen of West Marin.

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