

Wild Animal Tracking Down the Eightfold Path

Boaz Franklin

In retrospect, my search for the elusive roe deer began while participating in the European winter retreats. But sometimes you can connect the dots only after the fact.

BEGINNINGS: WINTER RETREAT AT WU BONG SA TEMPLE, 2015

After breakfast, walking out to the patch of grass outside the main building, the air is cold and crisp; the clouds are gray with the sun occasionally peeking through. Stretching a painful body after morning sitting, my feet take me toward the compost pile at the edge of the field. A silent whisper, I look up at the thicket, and a herd of deer eating from the ground appear before my eyes. Time stops. They notice me; we stare at each other for a brief moment, and then they jump and disappear into the thicket.

FIRST STEPS ON THE PATH: 2017

An auspicious turn of events brings a wild-animal tracking expert to call me about fixing his website. We end the call with me joining one of his courses, and a new door opens into an unbelievably exciting dimension.

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According to Wikipedia,

Tracking in ecology is the science and art of observing animal tracks and other signs, with the goal of gaining understanding of the landscape and the animal being tracked (the quarry). A further goal of tracking is the deeper understanding of the systems and patterns that make up the environment surrounding and incorporating the tracker.

In many ways I feel that this ancient art is not much different than studying the ecology of our minds, an investigation into our own nature and the nature of things.

Mornings are the ideal time for tracking. The angle of the sun creates sharp, thin-lined shadows on the ground, making it easier for the eye to detect shapes and patterns, inverted stones with colored, damp soil, and fresh paths of animals formed after their intense nocturnal activity.

The wind is strong and the sun is starting to rise. Thorny bushes scratch my legs. My eyes are focused on dry ground, moving from point to point, looking for a familiar recognizable pattern. They stop to gaze when a certain tracklike pattern appears. The senses open up and allow the flow of information to enter: sights, sounds, smells. Every little break of a branch, every trampling of grass indicates a movement in space, a presence that was there moments ago.

Silence is helpful for observation, for out of the silence emerge the signs of what has happened in the past, the base on which tracks stand out. Every sign tells a story, connecting the dots, and zooming out can provide a whole script.

“DON’T MAKE”

There is no path where we will see the exact same sign; there is nothing that repeats itself; the possibilities are endless. Even the passage of the same animal will give a different encounter with the surrounding terrain. Over time, accumulated knowledge, based on a pool of memory and experience, develops the ability to connect points, decipher traces, and connect with the animal that left the tracks. Just like in our Zen practice, knowledge can also be the obstacle to understanding the track and its origin. Memory and prior knowledge can force a reality on the terrain and do not necessarily explain it. If you hold or force your opinion on their conditions, the observation will get tainted; one must constantly adapt to a state of chaos and change.

“DON’T HOLD”

It is also impossible to return to the exact same point of occurrence. Expecting the past to repeat itself will blind you from what is in front of you, and you will surely miss the new and the potential of what may be revealed. Surrendering and connecting to this kind of loose and open observa-



Photo: Oriol Casanovas

tion opens up a potential for a feeling of freshness, renewal, connectedness to life and flow.

“THE SOUND OF THE WATERFALL AND THE BIRD’S SONG ARE THE GREAT SUTRAS.”

A bird in the distance chirps loudly and warns of impending danger. Old and decomposed manure of a wild boar, dry grass crushed in the form of an animal’s movement creates paths between the bushes. And here is where a gazelle rested at night; you can see the trampling of the fresh grass left behind in the shape of the animal’s body. A pile of *Boswellia* tree seeds are left behind where his head lay while he was chewing on his cud.

Tracking in nature provides a sense of elevation, an intimate connection with something that has not yet been touched, observed, or seen; a temporary story that will be swept away by the wind.

KEEPING A DON’T-KNOW MIND: TRACKING EXAMINATION, 2018

From time to time, it’s good to test your experience against reality. A group of enthusiasts meets in the southern Israeli desert for an international tracking examination with a master tracker from Spain. On an early and cool morning, we gather on a sandy dune under the only tree in the area. Without books or guides, no one to give you a hint or advice; under the constant pressure of time and fatigue, we are sent to find and identify dozens of tracks and signs. Each track identification is accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of being lost and confused, similar to the feeling in a kong-an interview when the teacher presents you with one of these peculiar cases from the kong-an collection. The only way to move forward is to surrender to this feeling, set aside any commentary, and begin a methodical investigation into what is in front of you. After that it’s about trusting your gut, setting aside all commentaries—“don’t check”—and making a call with the very good chance of getting it totally wrong.

MY KONG-AN: “WHERE HAVE ALL THE ROE DEER GONE?”

Sometimes we go out tracking with a predefined question. During one of my conversations with the tracking master, I was made aware of the declining numbers of roe deer in Israel and the efforts to revive their population. Apparently, the most southern population of roe deer on earth, once prospering in the Carmel mountain range, have been extirpated due to extensive hunting. The last roe deer

was seen in Israel in 1912. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, attempts have been made to try and reintroduce these deer to Israeli nature. Groups of roe deer were brought from the prospering European population, acclimatized, and returned to the wild so that a sustainable population could form. But the last sighting of a roe deer was in 2017, so everyone is wondering if they are still out there.

The roe deer is an exceptionally sensitive animal. Their sense of smell is five times more developed than a dog’s. They can smell predators from a mile away and can hide in the thicket without being seen, much like the elusive animal of the Zen ox-herding pictures. Because they’re so hard to find, it’s difficult to measure the success of the reintroduction project.

Conservationists have been using tracking for a while now as a method for gathering data on wildlife. It became apparent to me at that moment that I would use my tracking skills to join the efforts in evaluating the success of the roe deer reintroduction.

ISRAEL, 2018: BEGINNING THE SEARCH

Just like hiking through the landscape of our minds, not always knowing what we will meet on the path, having faith that it will lead me to an answer, I embark on a search for the roe deer. Climbing a tangled hill in a thick forest. Ivy thorns scratch my legs and arms while moving through the undergrowth. Looking for a sign, any signs. The path becomes narrower and steeper. *Only go straight.* Now I have to crawl on my hands and knees so I can enter a system of paths leading through the lower bush. Maybe here it is possible to find the remains of dung where a deer was resting. Evidence from a few years back indicates that a couple of deer were marking their territory at this spot. I notice more and more fresh wild boar manure, so fresh they seem to have passed here in the past hour. Maybe it’s not such a good idea to get so close. During the day the wild boar hide in a thicket of just this kind. I’m now alert, looking in all directions. I’m listening in strenuous concentration. My heart is beating fast, sensing the danger.

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Photo: Oriol Casanovas

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inquiry, his big doubt for which he hadn't found an answer. But even though I knew some background now, I was still sitting with the question of how to respond to my friend.

The Zen master continued, "Well, you have to know that the quote is not complete." Somehow I really needed to hold my horses back while listening to his answer, waiting about how it would resolve. "The complete quote is: We all already have Buddha nature—but nobody believes in it!" This was the perfect match to my friend's statement, which I thankfully accepted.

Acceptance obviously cannot enter through the front door—as wide and open as it might be. Neither can having trust in or believing in something enter through this door—and not only trust in something but trust in *oneself*. If it cannot enter through the front door, then how else can it enter? I think each of us has our own approach.

One of the jobs of a Zen teacher is to test our approach to acceptance. But we're tested not only by Zen teachers, but also by our daily meetings with friends, random persons, and life partners (or ex-partners). Especially with ex-partners, the ability to stay in contact with oneself is tested in the hardest way. Try to get an answer by asking them "What kind of improvements

should I make to be of benefit for others?"

To return to my initial question with an understanding of acceptance: If you find a way of trusting yourself, then entering the stream of reality wouldn't be that hard. Finding a way of entering would answer the question of "How do you enter the stream?"

One way to enter is to be thankful for the cup of tea you've received. Mine is to thank you for reading to the end of my article.

And all of these words—did they clarify the question "Why don't you enter the stream, Shariputra?" One question was raised, many doubts are following. If holding the question with acceptance is possible, then finding an answer is also possible. Not only finding an answer—it's also possible to bring it into everyday life for the sake of all beings and for the whole world. ♦

Leo Liebenauer-Welsch got in contact with Kwan Um School of Zen 1993 after already practicing Zen for three years. The breakup of his personal relationship in 2014 led him to do a three-week solo retreat. He found love again not only with his new wife (within a challenging patchwork family), but he also found it with his newly intensified practice. He now holds sixteen precepts and lives in Vienna.

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Advancing on my knees in the bushes, I suddenly hear a loud sound of branches breaking a few feet away from me. A moment after that something very heavy starts to run and trample the ground. Without thinking, a strong *one mind* takes over, and I just start running. I had reached his lair. Luckily, I and the wild boar run in opposite directions.

GREAT FAITH

Every week I travel to the forest, stroll along trails, climb hills, and get into a thicket. Each time before setting out on a tour, the hope of finding the deer's footprints resurfaces. Maybe they're in an area I have not yet searched. Maybe they will show up in the winter when they come out of the thicket to eat pine leaves, mushrooms, and grass. Or rather in the summer when they go down the slopes to the peach groves to eat the young leaves. In the summer, the paths turn to powder, and it is much easier to notice the shape of the footprints.

"WHERE ARE YOU GOING? WATCH YOUR STEP."

Many tracks are discovered during the months of search: the badger tracks with the rounded pads and long claws, the heavy wild boar leaving deep hoofprints, the heart-shaped gazelle footprints, its pile of dung midden, niches of the nightingale and of a band of partridges, the foot of the porcupine which is shaped like a human baby, leaving behind signs of its dragging spines. Researching the deer's behavior in an attempt to figure out their habitat. Random conversations with the farmers who own

the plantations, and with park rangers. A particularly moving encounter with the caretaker responsible for raising the deer before releasing them into the wild, tears in his eyes as he recounts raising the herd.

Two years of searching without a trace. The park ranger who was in charge of the deer's reintroduction lost hope long ago, estimating that they were probably preyed upon by jackals.

BORISA TEMPLE, SPAIN, 2019: WINTER RETREAT

Afternoon walk in the damp forest, the path winding between the tall pines. Walking in a column. The ground is wet with melted snow. My eyes carefully follow signs on the ground. Suddenly a beautiful pair of distinct roe deer footprints appear before my eyes. A brief moment of joy. A smile. The walk continues.

ISRAEL, 2021

A random conversation with a close friend and park ranger. He mentions rumors of a planned roe deer reintroduction attempt planned for the near future. Fingers crossed. "How can I help?" ♦

Boaz Franklin has been studying animal tracking since 2017 and is certified as a tracker by the Cybertracker organization. He has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen in Israel since 2006. He is a dharma teacher and the abbot of the Pardes-Hanna Zen Group.