# TRACKING SASQUATCH

By
Stephen F. Stringham, PhD © 2011

You've heard of winds strong enough to blow the hinges off of Hell. I don't know much about Hell, at least not firsthand. But wind gusting over 125 mph had blown the hinges off my barn, along with the doors. The sheets of wood had flipped and tumbled through the air like Olympic gymnasts, across an open field into a grove of aspen, where they shattered into scrap. That barn, near the western border of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation had withstood storm winds for more than 50 years. But within minutes after the doors and hinges tore loose, the barn was flattened.

I had rented the barn and adjoining cabin five months earlier, at the start of my second year on the Res. The first year had been spent teaching biology and wildlife courses at Blackfeet Community College. Then the Tribe contracted with me to create and direct the Blackfeet Environmental Office. That was when I rented this place on the shore of Dog Gun Lake. During the ensuing five months, the wind had never stopped blowing. Day and night, night and day, it whistled, whined, and slammed against my walls and my body without cease.

Sometimes the wind was near hurricane force, like the day when my barn blew down. Fifty-five below zero that day, wind-chill somewhere near 200 below. Such extreme conditions are more often associated with the peak of Mt. Denali in my home state of Alaska. But they also occur in Montana, where the Rocky Mountains rise from the Great Plains that are already a mile above sea level.

Yet, on the Res, hiking through Arctic maelstroms was not a sport like climbing Denali or Everest. It was not a challenge faced "because it's there." No, something else impelled me to leave my snug little cabin and snowshoe a mile-plus out to the road, where my pickup waited. Something else called a "job." Earning a living. Trying to protect the Tribe from contamination of their water, air and land by the waste products of industrial civilization. Both the job itself and the commute back and forth were sometimes life and death struggles. And not just for me, which is why the land bred such tough, resolute people.

The Res is mostly short-grass prairie, devoted to grazing horses and cattle, or to farming. The deep post-glacial soils are rich enough to support good crops, if watered well. But once the wheat and other grains are harvested each fall and the stubble plowed under, the exposed soil erodes quickly. Several inches of topsoil can blow away during winter, exposing cobble-size rocks in such overwhelming abundance that you'd think they were crops of potatoes that hadn't just frozen, but petrified.

Those farms, a few industries like the Pencil Factory, and the normal effluents of human communities, produced enough pollution to transform crystal clear mountain waters into unpalatable brown streams. Those mountain waters flowed onto the Res from Glacier

National Park and the Lewis  & Clark National Forest to the west of the Reservation. The Park lies north of Hwy 2; the Forest south of it.

Once Natives began using mainstream technologies and living mainstream lifestyles, they began facing the same kinds of environmental problems as anyone else.  They were also subject to Federal (but not state) environmental laws, and thus eligible for Federal grants such as the Environmental Protection Agency funds that supported our Office.

Nevertheless there were major differences between environmental conservation within state vs. tribal jurisdictions.  Most of these differences were cultural.  Contrary to the "Myth of the Nobel Green Savage," Natives are not inherently environmentalists in the mainstream sense.  They have their own versions. In particular, some Traditionalists try to maintain the purity of lands they consider sacred, along with their soils, waters, and vegetation, as well as any animals or stranger creatures dwelling therein.

Sacred lands of the Blackfeet include the so-called "Badger/Two-Medicine watersheds. Badger River flows out of the Lewis & Clark National Forest that began a few miles west of my cabin.  Traditionalists and mainstream environmentalists had banded together to prevent "desecration" of this pristine area by exploitation of oil and gas reserves.  Among the sacred creatures allegedly dwelling therein were Sasquatch and something like Nessie – as one Tribal member claimed months later.

By profession, I am a wildlife biologist, specializing in bears.  Unlike most of my peers in a graduate school, I wasn't cut out for life in a government agency or university.

Wildlife/wildland agency policies are too often determined by political power plays rather than by science.  Instead of politicians and bureaucrats adapting policies to the realities of Nature, they demand that everyone and everything adapt to them, as if their decrees could turn back the tides of environmental degradation any more readily than they could turn back the tides of oceans.

Nor was I cut out for life in academia, which uses rigorous science to generate a wealth of creative ideas about environmental stewardship, but lacks the clout to put most into practice.

For anyone seeking opportunities for applying innovative ideas to solving real-world environmental problems, there seemed no better profession than consulting.  In 1972, therefore, my one-man business WildWatch expanded beyond guiding wildlife viewers. I hung out my consulting shingle and began advising clients – beginning with Alaska Natives fighting for the right to manage their own wildlife and lands under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act..

I was still consulting 20 years later, now on a 2-year contract for the Blackfeet Tribe.  I joined Stewart Miller in organizing the Environmental Office, securing grants, training Tribal members, doing environmental monitoring, minimizing pollution where possible, and prosecuting offenders.

I usually made it into work, no matter how fierce the winter weather. If my pickup would start, I would drive the 20-30 miles into Browning, praying every yard of the way that I'd make the trip safely and on time. There were moments when that seemed easy, moments when I could speed along at 55mph through clear air, as snow blew across the road just above the ground. But all too often, the wind would suddenly strengthen enough to lift billowing clouds of snow another 5 to 10 feet. This ground blizzard instantly reduced visibility to a few feet. All I could do was slam brakes and hope I did not slide off the road or crash into another vehicle. More than once, my pickup came to rest buried in a roadside snowdrift from which it had to be dragged by a luckier motorist. And more than once I avoided head-on collisions with 18-wheelers only because their drivers sat higher off the road and had enough visibility to avoid me.

Powerful winds had been the norm for the past 5 months. Even gentle breezes had been rare. Never, until this January morning had the wind entirely ceased.

Utterly calm. Absolutely Zero wind, as though it had reached the temperature of Absolute Zero where all movement ceases. Except that here it was only the air that quit moving, as though frozen in its tracks. Frozen into minute crystals that hung suspended in space as they drifted earthwards – individual flakes that glistened in the sun, sparkling a million fold in all directions.

Calm. A calm so deep that it seemed abnormal. Like the calm before a storm, or the calm at the center of a cyclone. A pregnant calm. A tense, expectant calm. A calm that made me feel as if something wonderful and magnificent were about to happen. But what? The beginning of a mystery that would haunt me for nearly two decades.

Abnormally calm. Abnormally quiet. The first day in over 150 days, that I had awoken to find animal tracks scattered across the land. Fresh undisturbed snow is like a blank sheet of paper upon which animals record moments of their lives through the tracks they leave behind. Reading their stories had long been one of my favorite pastimes in the Alaska wilds, where fresh powder was often marked with the tracks of lynx, wolf, otter, beaver, snowshoe hares, voles, lemmings, and owl wing tips. On the Res, by contrast, tracks were usually blown away or filled with snow almost as quickly as they were formed. So although a day never went by without me scanning the snow for news of my wildlife neighbors, this was the first time that I saw anything written legibly.

Quietly ecstatic, I bundled up against the intense cold, then shoved pencils and a notebook into my Arctic parka. Donning snowshoes, I set off westward to the nearby border of Lewis & Clark National Forest. Once off the Res and into the heavily forested Badger watershed, animals and their tracks would be far more abundant.

Luck was with me. I found a maze of otter tracks and spent nearly an hour deciphering their activities. Farther on, I found tracks of a pair of coyotes moving from the rolling hills of the Reservation, through aspen groves and beyond into the forested mountains on the Federal lands.

Along that border, maybe two miles west of my cabin, were thousands of dead aspen, remnants of a fire years earlier that had left only the bare twisted skeletons of these wind-stunted trees. Most could be seen as deformed creatures cringing in terror or reaching out in insufferable agony, begging for salvation from the fire that ravaged them. Yet, others looked like dancers petrified as they began leaping toward the heavens, exploding with joy and love of life.

It was with these yin/yang thoughts in mind that I first noticed tracks much bigger than the coyotes had left, weaving among the dancers. From afar, I thought they were human footprints, although I had never before seen sign of another person in this area during even the best weather. Anyway, who would be crazy enough to wade through knee-deep snow and waist-deep drifts without snowshoes or skis?

Only when I reached the tracks and walked beside them did I realize that the stride length was far too long for any human under eight feet tall. At that point, the snow was so loose that the tracks had little shape; just foot-long holes punched into powdery snow that had caved in when the maker's foot was withdrawn. If not human, then what? Moose? They have a stride length at least this long. And if a hind foot came down just ahead of or behind a forefoot, two hooves in tandem could make a track this long.

That was my thinking until I reached wind-packed snow that held clearer tracks. Astounded, I beheld two sharply defined toe prints and a heel print, as though from a giant human foot. My first thought, of course, was bear, probably grizzly bear because only an adult male, weighing at least 800 pounds, made tracks that big.

But what would a bear be doing out and about in this weather? Why wasn't it deep in hibernation? Hadn't it accumulated enough fat during autumn to sustain itself all winter? If not, was it hunting food? Hunting prey? Possibly me?

Instant paranoia. Anti-predator instincts kicked in. My senses sharpened. Everything around me seemed to stand out in greater visual detail. Sounds also became clearer and louder. For the first time, I noticed the sound of something walking.

People who seldom experience snow may imagine that walking through it is quiet. But icy snow crunches underfoot; powder squeaks. I heard both, faintly. Something was in the forest, at least 50 yards away, hidden among Doug fir and spruce. Something large, at least as large as a human. I could never have heard anything smaller. Unconsciously, I quit breathing. I held my breath so that I could hear better. Held it from fear that the creature could hear me. Held it until my lungs felt they would burst and I had to breathe. Then holding again and listening, and listening.

Silence. Had it heard my gasps? Was it standing still to listen for more sounds? Was it sniffing the air to catch my scent? Was it fleeing or perhaps stalking me.

Paranoia mounting. My mind searching for options. Wishing like hell I'd brought bear pepper spray – as though I could have kept it from congealing into a solid block at 45$^{o}$

below zero.  Wishing I had a rifle or shotgun.  Wishing that I hadn't left home that morning..

At least fifteen minutes passed without any other hint of the creature.  Too afraid to continue pursuing it, I turned around and followed its tracks back toward their starting point.  More than a mile later, they crossed a barbed wire fence, onto a road where someone had driven recently, destroying any further sign.  (Before I could return to the "Dancers" and follow the tracks forward, the wind picked up again and buried them in drifting snow).

While backtracking, I had noticed something very strange.  All the tracks I found were from hind feet.  No "hand" prints like a bear would leave.

When a bear walks, its left hand and foot move forward together, then its right hand and foot.  They occur in alternating pairs, LH-LF, RH-RF, LH-LF, RH-RF.    The left hand hits the ground, making a track, then lifts up, just as its left foot comes forward, then lands just *ahead* of the hand print.  Then the right hand moves forward, hits the ground, making its track, whereupon the right foot comes forward and lands ahead of the right hand print.  Whenever you see normal bear prints, you see them in pairs, with the footprint on each side of the body a few inches ahead of the hand print.

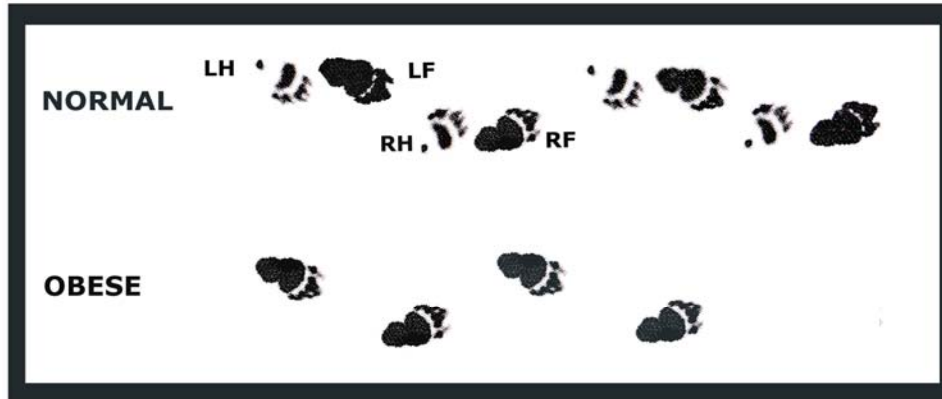
Unless this bear had been walking on its hind feet, without its hands touching the ground, these could not be bear tracks. I had seen bears walk short distances upright like a person does.  But not for over a mile and not through deep snow.

If not bear, then what?  I had asked the same question a few years earlier in the Green Mountains of Vermont while looking at similar tracks.  In both cases, my mind flashed to Sasquatch stories, until a sense of embarrassed gullibility made me dismiss the notion.

Searching the barbed wire fence where the creature had crossed, I found strands of hair snagged on several barbs.  Some was grizzly hair; some was horse hair, and some was unknown to me.  I eventually sent the unidentified hair into a federal lab for analysis, but never got a response.  To this day, I don't know what creature produced it.

This is where matters stood until 2010.  I had memories of curious tracks in Vermont and Montana, but nothing more.  Were they evidence of Sasquatch?  Or not?

I got the answer this past summer while studying tracks laid down as grizzly bears walked or ran while traveling, hunting, courting, mating, playing, and other activities. Among my "discoveries" is that the relative distance between a bear's hand and foot prints on each side of its body depend on its stride length.  A lean bear walking swiftly, brings its foot down well ahead of its hand.  But an obese bear lumbering along can't bring its foot as far forward. It's belly gets in the way of its knee.  So its footprint may fall on top of its handprint, erasing it. To the unknowing, the tracks suggest an animal walking on just its hind legs.




**How bear tracks can be mistaken for Sasquatch tracks:** Direction of the bear's movement is from left to right.  LH = left hand, LF = left foot.

Had the tracks in Vermont and Montana been clearer, I would presumably have immediately recognized them as bear tracks, not primate-like tracks as Sasquatch reputedly has.  I was lucky just to find an occasional toe or heel mark.  Yet some toe prints had what looked like claw marks. Claws are typical of bears but supposedly not of Sasquatch.

Does this mean that all tracks attributed to Sasquatch were actually made by bears walking with short strides?  No idea.  Plaster casts attributed to Sasquatch usually look more like human tracks than bear tracks.  But were you to find questionable tracks, the first thing you might ask is whether bears live in the area.  If not, ….

Not every question is so easily – if slowly – answered, of course.  Certainly not my sighting of something like "Nessie" while I collected water quality samples the following September.  But that is a story for another chapter.

Excerpted from the book manuscript for

**MYTH OF THE NOBEL GREEN SAVAGE**