

A VETERAN-BUILT FIELD GUIDE

READING GROUND

VISUAL TRACKING AND THE FOLLOW-UP

2026

PREMIUM
EDITION



READ
SIGN



AGE
TRACKS



RECOVER
TRAILS



VETERAN'S STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS
LLC

**VETERAN'S STRATEGIC
SOLUTIONS LLC**

DISCIPLINE • CERTAINTY • FOLLOW-UP

A practical field guide for reading ground and staying on sign

You will never feel ready. Ready isn't a feeling — it's a decision.

Anyone can be taught to recognise a boot print. That is knowledge, and it is the easy half. The hard half is the follow-up: staying on a trail while it degrades, reading what the ground says about the people who made it, and closing distance on them before the sign is gone. This guide covers the second half.

Nothing here requires equipment beyond a notebook, a compass and light. What it requires is discipline — a fixed sequence, run the same way every time, so that speed comes from certainty rather than from hurry.

1. Six questions before the first step

Answer these before moving. Not perfectly — sufficiently.

Who are you following, and how many. **What** happened at this spot, and what are they carrying. **Where** did they come from and where do they appear to be headed. **When** did they pass, and how old is the sign. **How** are they moving — fast, loaded, already tiring. **Why** does any of it matter; what is the purpose of the follow-up.

The trap is completeness. Every minute spent building a perfect picture is a minute the gap widens, and the trail itself will answer half these questions better than the briefing ever could. Get the essentials, start, and let the ground teach you the rest. A fast start beats a complete brief.

2. The first four

Four things get nailed down before you take a step, because getting any of them wrong costs the whole effort.

Confirm the right sign. Which track is actually theirs? Ground rarely holds one set of prints. Confirm by witness, by search, or by elimination — and be honest about which. Following the wrong trail well is worse than following the right one badly, because it feels like progress.

Count the group. An estimate is enough. Method is in section 3.

Record the footwear. Note each sole pattern separately — heel and forefoot are often different, and that distinction is what lets you tell one person's prints from another's later. Build a small card: divide it into squares and sketch each pattern with a code. Then you can report "two of pattern X, three of pattern Y" over a radio in seconds instead of describing tread over the air while everyone waits.

Spoor card

sketch each sole pattern once — then report the code, not a description
Heel and forefoot are often different patterns. Record both.

 X1	 X2	 X3	 X4
 Y1	 Y2	 Y3	 Y4
 Z1	 Z2	 Z3	 Z4

Over the radio: "two of type X1, three of type Y3." Seconds, not a paragraph.

Print this page, cut the card out, and carry it. Codes only work if everyone uses the same card.

Fix the initial direction. Cardinal is enough — north-east, not a three-digit azimuth. Report it so whoever is behind you can start building the picture of where this is going.

3. Counting a group without guessing

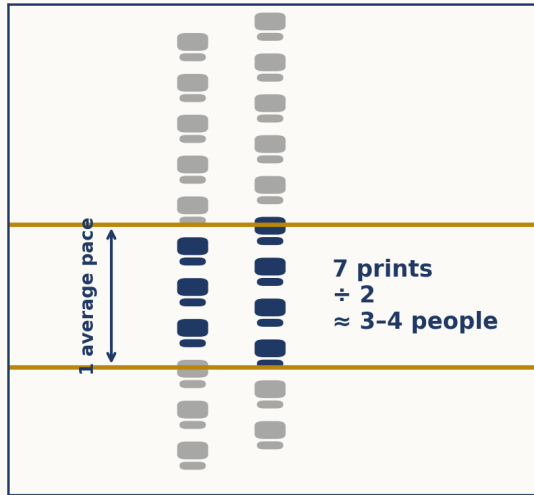
Small groups in single file can simply be counted, pair by pair. Five or six people, straightforward. Above that, counting individual prints fails, because they overlap and you start inventing numbers.

Use a box. Mark two lines across the trail, one average pace-length apart. Count every print inside the box and divide by two. Seven prints is about three people.

For a better figure, widen the box. Two pace-lengths apart, count everything inside, divide by four. Twelve prints is three people. The wider box averages out the irregularities and is the more reliable of the two.

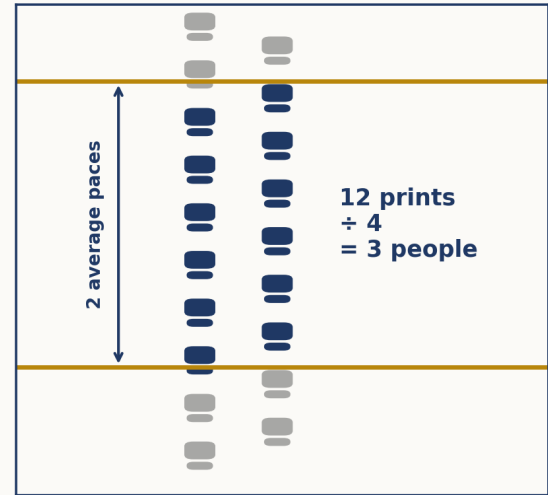
One-pace box

quick — count and halve



Two-pace box

more reliable — count and quarter



In one pace-length each person plants about one foot. Box a known distance, count what fell inside, divide.

The narrow box gives you a range. The wide box resolves it. A range you trust beats an exact number you invented.

Why it works: in the space of one pace, each person in the group plants roughly one foot. Box off a known distance, count what fell inside it, divide. It is fast, repeatable, and close enough to act on.

Do not overwork it. A range you trust beats an exact number you invented. The count should take a minute, not ten, and the trail will correct you as you go.

4. Moving as a team

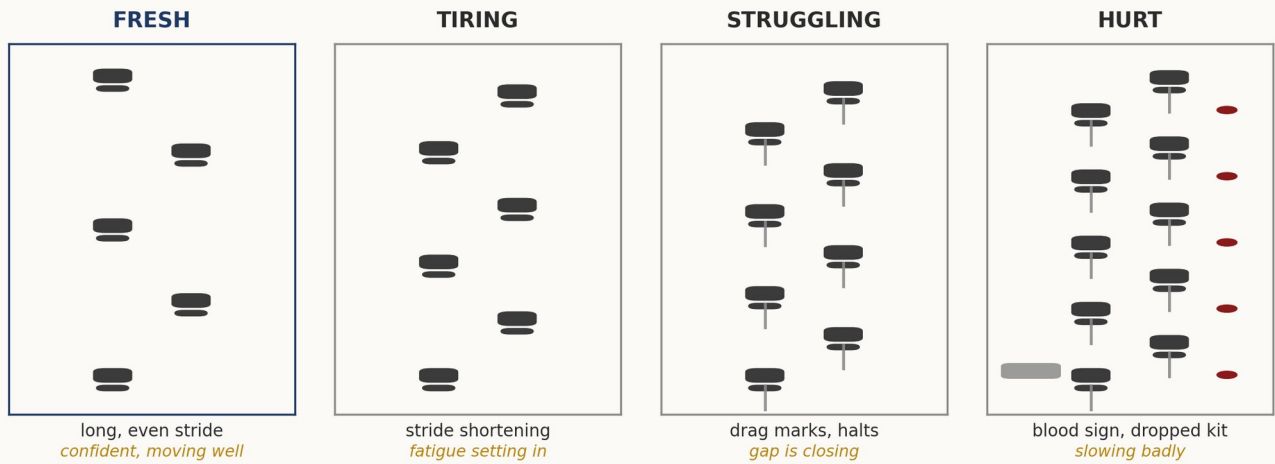
Pace and discipline. Move at the speed of certainty, not the speed of haste. Lose the sign and you have lost the race — recovering a lost trail costs far more time than moving carefully cost in the first place. Keep silence and keep spacing the whole way.

Report every turn. Relay major direction changes back, in cardinal terms. Whoever is behind you is building a map of where this is going, and that map is only as good as your last report.

Read the group's condition as you go. This is the part most people skip, and it is where the real information is. A long, even stride means fresh and confident. A shortening stride means fatigue setting in. Drag marks, frequent halts and dropped kit all say the same thing louder. Blood sign means someone is hurt and slowing.

Reading the group as you go

Every stride tells you whether the gap is opening or closing.



Every stride tells you whether the gap is opening or closing. You are not just following the trail. You are reading what is happening at the end of it.

5. Expect the unexpected

The gap can collapse in an instant. A trail that has been running for hours can end in contact with no warning, and a trail can be laid deliberately to bring you somewhere.

Read the end of the trail, not just the trail. Sign that suddenly becomes easier to follow deserves suspicion, not gratitude. **Never assume you are alone out there.**

6. The follow-up mindset

Five habits, and they are the whole craft.

Start fast. The gap only grows while you stand still.

Stay certain. Speed of certainty, never speed of haste. The two look similar from outside and produce opposite results.

Keep everyone informed. Report every major change of direction. A follow-up nobody can find is a patrol, not a pursuit.

Never lose the sign. Everything else is recoverable. This is not — or not cheaply.

Never assume you are alone. Read the end of the trail.

7. Ageing the sign

The “when” question deserves its own answer, because everything else depends on it. A perfect trail four days old is a history lesson; a poor trail twenty minutes old is a pursuit.

Read the edges. A fresh print has sharp, crumbling edges and a clean floor. As hours pass the edges soften and round, and wind fills the impression with dust and grit.

Read what has landed in it. Debris on top of a print — leaves, grass, insect trails, rain pocks — went there afterwards. Debris pressed into it went there at the same time. That single distinction settles most arguments about age.

Read moisture. Soil turned up by a boot is darker and damper than the surface around it and dries at a known rate for that ground. Learn your local ground by making your own prints and checking them at intervals through a day.

PHOTOGRAPHS GO HERE. Ageing cannot be drawn — it has to be seen. Press a print into the ground behind your own house in the morning and photograph it at two hours, six hours, and again the next day. Four photographs of Flint Hills soil will teach a reader more than any illustration, and no other guide will have them.



Use the weather as a clock. If rain stopped at 0400 and the print is crisp, it was made after 0400. Sprinkler cycles, dew, and the first frost all work the same way. The most reliable ageing tool is not the print — it is knowing what the weather did and when.

8. When you lose the trail

You will lose it. The measure of a tracker is not never losing sign; it is how quickly and calmly it gets recovered.

Stop at the last confirmed print and mark it. The commonest error is walking forward hunting for the next one and destroying the ground you needed. The last known sign is the anchor for everything that follows.

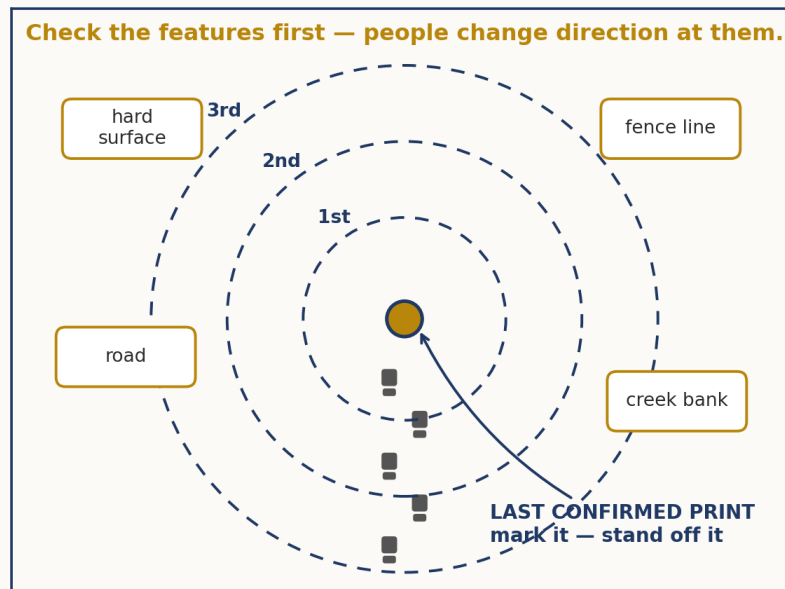
Work outward from the anchor, not forward. Sweep in a widening arc or a box around it, keeping the marked point in view. People change direction at features — a fence, a hard surface, a stream bank, a road. Check those first.

Assume they did something deliberate. Walking backwards, moving onto hard ground, entering water, splitting the group. Sign that simply stops usually means a decision was made there, not that the person evaporated.

When you lose the trail

work outward from the anchor — never forward

Check the features first — people change direction at them.



Stop at the last print you are sure of. Sweep a full circle around it, widening each time.

Set a time limit on each sweep. Drifting forward is how a lost trail becomes an abandoned one.

Give it a time limit. If the arc has not produced in a set number of minutes, go back to the anchor and start again wider rather than drifting. Drifting is how a lost trail becomes an abandoned one.



9. Practice — how you actually learn this

Reading about tracking produces nothing. The skill is built by making sign yourself and then studying it, which costs nothing but daylight.

Make your own prints and age them. Walk a short line across bare ground in the morning. Photograph the prints at two hours, six hours, and the following day. Do it again after rain, and again in dust. Within a week you will read local ground faster than someone who has read ten books.

Walk a trail you already know the answer to. Have someone cross a field while you look away, then track them. You can check every conclusion immediately, which is the only way to find out which of your assumptions are wrong.

Count a group whose size you know. Have three people walk a line, then box it and count. Do it with five. Do it with one person walking twice. The method becomes trustworthy only after you have proved it on ground where you know the answer.

Practise losing it on purpose. Have your group step onto a road or a creek bed. Run the anchor-and-sweep drill for real, with a stopwatch. The discipline of not drifting forward is the hardest habit here and the only one that matters when it is dark and everyone is tired.

10. Kansas ground

Most tracking material is written for desert or heavy forest. The Flint Hills are neither, and the differences matter.

Tallgrass holds sign differently than soil. Bent and broken stems, and the shine where a stem has been crushed and turned to the light, often outlast a footprint. In deep grass you may be reading stem damage and flattening rather than prints at all.

Limestone and gravel give you almost nothing. Rock scuffs, displaced pebbles and the darker underside of a turned stone are the whole vocabulary. Expect to lose the trail on hard ground and to pick it up again where it re-enters soil — which is why the anchor-and-sweep drill matters more here than in soft country.

Creek banks and draws are the features that catch people. Water in this country runs in cut banks, so a route across a draw funnels into a small number of places. Check them first.

Wind is the clock. Open prairie fills a print with dust faster than sheltered ground does. The same print ages at two different rates a hundred metres apart, so judge age against ground of the same exposure.

Winter is the honest season. Frost, mud and snow hold detail that dry August ground will not. If you are learning, start in the cold.

Quick reference

Step	What you do	Standard
Before moving	Six questions — who, what, where, when, how, why	Sufficient, not perfect
First four	Right sign · count · footwear · direction	All four before the first step
Counting	One-pace box ÷ 2, or two-pace box ÷ 4	A range you trust
Footwear	Sketch and code each sole pattern	Report the code, not a description
On the move	Speed of certainty, silence, spacing	Never lose the sign
Reading condition	Stride length, drag marks, halts, dropped kit, blood	Is the gap opening or closing
Reporting	Cardinal direction at every major turn	Keep the picture current behind you

Why this is worth knowing outside a tactical setting

The discipline transfers, and it is worth naming because most people who learn tracking never make the connection.

Know enough, then go. Waiting for a complete picture is the most common way a pursuit is lost before it starts — and the most common way a decision is lost anywhere else.

A range beats a false exact number. Precision you invented is worse than an estimate you can act on, because you will trust it.

Read what is happening at the end of the trail. The sign in front of you is data about a situation you cannot see. That is true of a stride length and it is true of a customer who has stopped returning calls.

Every minute lost widens the gap. The trail does not wait, and neither does anything else with a clock on it.

Pocket card

Cut along the outside of the two tables. Fold between them, laminate, carry.

SIDE ONE — BEFORE YOU MOVE

WHO	how many are you following
WHAT	what happened here, what are they carrying
WHERE	come from, headed to
WHEN	how old is the sign
HOW	fast, loaded, tiring
WHY	what is the purpose of the follow-up
THE FIRST FOUR	right sign · count · footwear · direction
RULE	know enough, then go — a fast start beats a complete brief

SIDE TWO — ON THE MOVE

COUNT	one-pace box ÷ 2 · two-pace box ÷ 4
REPORT	cardinal direction at every major turn
READ	stride length · drag marks · halts · dropped kit · blood
AGE	edges · what landed in it · moisture · last weather
LOST	stop · mark the last print · sweep outward · time limit
PACE	speed of certainty, never speed of haste
WATCH	read the end of the trail — never assume you are alone
RULE	every minute lost widens the gap

A worked example

The sequence is easier to hold once you have seen it run end to end. This one is invented, but nothing in it is unusual.

0910. A landowner reports two people crossing his fence line an hour ago, heading away from the road. That is your brief: two people, one hour, general direction. It is not complete and you do not wait for more.

0912 — the first four. At the fence there are three sets of prints. One belongs to the landowner, who walked up to look — he is standing in his own sign and can tell you so. That leaves two. You sketch both soles: a chevron forefoot with a plain heel, and a waffle pattern, and you code them X1 and Y1. You count: a two-pace box holds nine prints, so call it two, maybe three. Direction out of the gate is north-east. You report the codes, the number and the cardinal, and you start walking.

0925. The prints are crisp-edged with grass stems bent and still bright where they broke. Rain stopped around 0500 and there is no rain damage in the impressions. Consistent with the hour you were told, so the brief holds.

0948. Stride length has come in noticeably on X1. Y1 is unchanged. Somebody is tiring or carrying something and the other one is not. You report the change, because it means the gap is closing faster than the clock suggests.

1004. The trail reaches a limestone shelf and stops. You do not walk onto the rock hunting for the next print. You stop at the last clear impression, mark it with a stick, and stand off it. First sweep at fifteen metres finds

nothing. Second sweep picks up a displaced pebble and a scuff on the far edge of the shelf, thirty metres north — not north-east. They turned at the feature, which is what people do.

1011. Sign resumes in soil beyond the rock, and there are now three sets. A third person joined at the shelf, or was waiting there. Your count was a range and the range just changed, which is exactly why a range was the honest answer at 0912.

1015. You report the new count, the new direction and the fact that the group grew at a fixed point — because that last detail tells whoever is behind you something the prints alone do not.

What the example is actually teaching. You started on a partial brief and the trail filled in the gaps. Your count was a range and the range saved you from being wrong out loud. You lost the trail, which is normal, and the discipline of not drifting forward is what got it back in seven minutes instead of an hour. And the most useful single observation of the morning was not a print at all — it was a stride getting shorter.

What this guide leaves out

Named deliberately, so nobody mistakes this for the whole subject.

Counter-tracking — what people do to defeat a follow-up, and how to read it when they do. Walking backwards, brushing out, hard-ground routes, splitting and rejoining, false trails. It is the natural second volume and it changes how you read everything in section 5.

Dog teams. A handler and a dog work a completely different problem from a visual tracker, and the two are often used together. Nothing here applies to scent.

Night and low light. Side-lighting a print with a torch held low is a skill of its own, and it makes sign visible that is invisible at midday.

Urban and hard surface. Concrete, tile and carpet hold sign, but the vocabulary is transfer and disturbance rather than impression.

Before you use any of this

Two honest notes, and they matter more for a civilian than for a soldier.

Following people is not a neutral act. Tracking a person on private ground, or following someone who has not asked to be found, can be trespass or worse regardless of your intentions. Know whose land you are on and what your standing is before you take the first step.

The lawful uses are the ordinary ones — searching for a lost hiker or a child with the people who own that responsibility, following game, understanding your own property, or teaching the skill. If a follow-up turns into anything else, it belongs to law enforcement and the correct move is to stop, mark what you have, and call it in. Preserving the sign for someone with authority is worth more than closing the gap yourself.

© 2026 Veteran's Strategic Solutions LLC. All rights reserved.