

# Constructing a Footprint

*by Hatch and Judy Graham*

**H**ow do you isolate the track of one small, missing four-year-old boy in a scout camp full of kids?

"Search" is a classic mystery, and searchers often need the patience, deductive reasoning, and ingenuity of a sleuth to find the clues and follow where they lead — to the missing person.

When four-year-old Eli Fordham disappeared from Marin-Sierra Boy Scout Camp on an afternoon in August 1984 (see *Response!* Fall 1984), Nevada County Sheriff's Department geared up immediately for the search. It initiated a hasty search and called out its mounted posse, California Rescue Dog (CARDA) teams, the California Youth Authority (CYA), and the California Highway Patrol helicopter.

By early the next morning, dozens of campers, camp staff, and other searchers had crossed and recrossed the campground, looking for Eli. The camp was a jumble of footprints, but no one could tell which might be Eli's. CARDA dog handler Steve Stillwell was assigned to find Eli's small print among (or underneath) that jumble of tracks.

Steve was a skilled mantracker with Tehama County Search and Rescue when, in 1982, he first saw search and rescue (SAR) dogs in action. Recognizing a good research tool, Steve promptly got a German shepherd and went into training with CARDA. Now a qualified dog handler, he's seen the two skills — dog handling and mantracking — complement each other on many occasions. But sometimes he finds that his first assignment on a search is with his tracking stick. When he was assigned to find out what Eli Fordham's track looked

like, he had his work cut out.

He asked Eli's father, Mike Fordham, to show him all the places the family had been the day prior to the little boy's disappearance. "I checked the PLS (point last seen) and found nothing. I checked the washroom where they had cleaned the first fish Eli had ever caught. I found nothing."

A good interrogator, Steve interviewed the parents separately. "Sometimes their stories would be different." He tried to reconstruct the circumstances at the time Eli disappeared — who was where, walking in what direction.

Eli was last seen at a point where five trails converge, not far from a group campground where the little boy and his family were camped. Two parallel trails come from the campground. Two trails come from the opposite direction, and the fifth trail comes from the lake.

Steve learned that Eli and his mother, Pat Fordham, had been walking along trail one. Two girls came down trail five, from the lake, shortly after Eli disappeared. Mike Fordham said he was coming down trail four. This left trails two and three open; since they ran in opposite directions, the possible search area radiated out 360 degrees from the PLS.

By questioning Pat Fordham separately, and then the two parents together, Steve was able to establish that Mike had actually come down trail two, not trail four. This cut the search area in half for a hasty search.

Steve then gathered a number of children and lined them up according to the size of their shoes. He asked Pat to estimate which child had a shoe slightly smaller than her son's, and which had a slightly larger shoe. Taking the difference between the sizes, he judged that Eli's shoe must be a child's size eight-and-a-half. He used the same method to

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determine the width at two-and-a-half inches.

Steve then asked Pat if she knew what kind of tread Eli's shoe had. All too often, searchers find that a missing child's parents have no idea what the bottom of his shoes look like. But when asked the right questions, Pat Fordham came up with some good answers. "Very worn old tennis shoes" she remembered, "with small wavy lines on the bottom."

"What size lines — as wide as a pencil, or a toothpick? Large ocean-type waves; small gentle waves or sharp mountain-top waves?" Pat thought they were small, gentle waves the width of toothpicks.

Any worn spots? A worn spot on the heel, and the toe was worn smooth.

Steve again started looking for tracks — first around the PLS, then the trail to and around the lake. He found three different prints that somewhat resembled Eli's, as described by his mother: one with pointed waves, one with large waves, and one (too small for Eli's) with small gentle waves. He circled the tracks and asked Pat Fordham to look at them. She confirmed the picture that Steve was forming of Eli's footprint.

When he was relatively sure of the size and tread of Eli's shoe, he drew a print on a piece of paper, labeling it

"Tentative Track — Not Confirmed."

"Never say it's the victim's track unless you can positively identify it as the victim's," Steve warns. "A wrong track can cost the victim's life. A probable track can get a search started in the right direction — but with caution."

He sent his drawing to the command post and then continued checking around the PLS, trying to locate Eli's track and establish a direction of travel.

With his drawing posted at search base, crews coming back in from their first shift checked to see if they'd seen that print in their assigned areas. The track description was also radioed to searchers still in the field.

A CYA ground crew reported a track resembling Eli's on a knoll to the west. Soon after, mounted searchers found another print in a drainage farther to the west, and reported that it looked just like the drawing at search base.

By this time a CARDA bloodhound team had trailed west, past the CYA crew and into the drainage, confirming that Eli was in the area. While the bloodhound worked with the little boy's scent, posse members continued down the drainage, looking for signs. One of them heard a small voice — and found Eli.

"This was a search where many skills came together to find the victim," Steve

notes. Constructing Eli's footprint by investigation and deduction was just one of those skills.

Nevada County's immediate response in calling out professionally trained volunteer searchers also contributed to a happy ending. Mounted posses covered long distances and helped confine the search area. The primary search area was broken down into smaller segments for methodical coverage by foot crews and search dogs.

The search for Eli Fordham wasn't the first time — or the last — that Steve has been called on to construct a missing person's footprint.

"There was a search for a forester in Humboldt County. He was wearing cork boots, and there were five or six other foresters running around with cork boots on. I started writing down the sizes and the number of spikes on their boots. Even cork logging boots are individual — not only different in size, but also the spikes may be missing on some of the boots, or one may be worn down more than others."

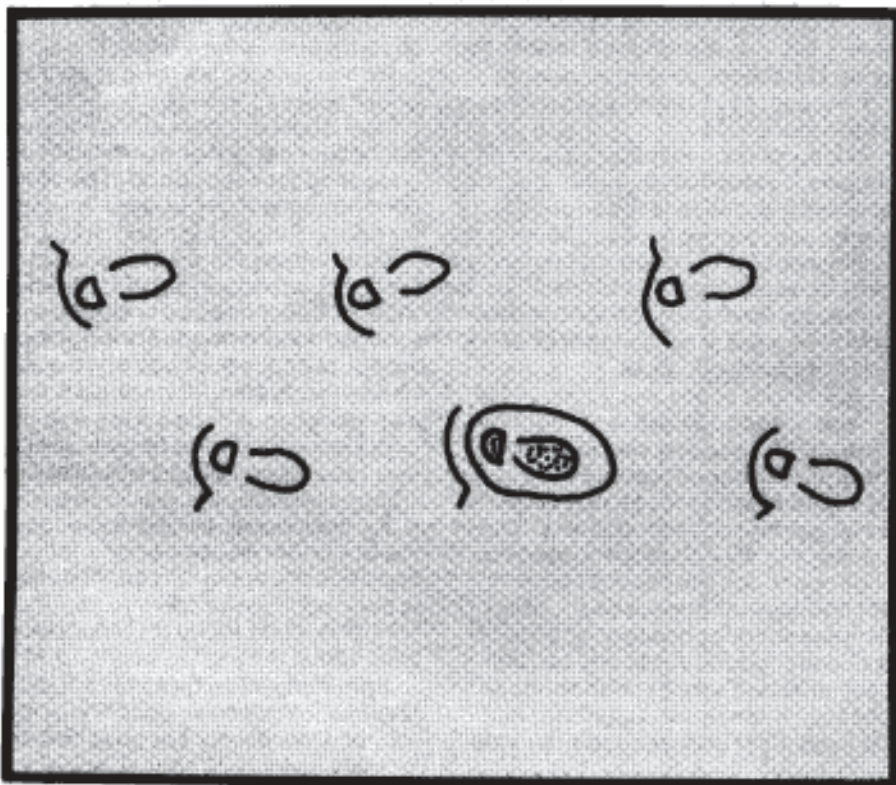
Steve summarizes the elements in constructing a track:

- Check the PLS.
- Find out where the missing person was before he was missing, and what he was doing there.
- Question parents or others who may know what the subject's footprint looks like, or have other information that could help in constructing a print.
- Use deductive reasoning based on all the tracks in the area, as well as shoes the missing person may have left at home, in camp or in his car.

Constructing a footprint out of this kind of evidence can take time. Steve urges searchers — and deputies who may be first on the scene of a missing person search — to take mantracking classes such as Ab Taylor's "Step by Step Mantracking," to make them more track-aware.

"The fewer people who've walked over the PLS since the victim disappeared, the better our chances of being able to identify the victim's footprint," he reminds. "But if the first-on-scene deputy can identify and preserve the print, that's a tremendous help. If you can establish a direction of travel from the track, you can cut the initial search in half. When we get there, we know what we're looking for, and we can head right out in the field and start searching."

When Eli was found, he was missing one tennis shoe; the other was given to Steve as a memento. He keeps it on his mantle to remind him of a search that started out as a real mystery. Good strategy and skilled searchers solved it — in time to find Eli, alive. □



This illustration shows tracks marked to indicate right or left prints. Tracks are circled when they reveal enough identifying marks to constitute a "positive make." Reprinted with permission from the book *Tracking: A Blueprint for Learning How* by Jack Kearney, Pathways Press, 525 Jeffree Street, El Cajon, CA 92020.