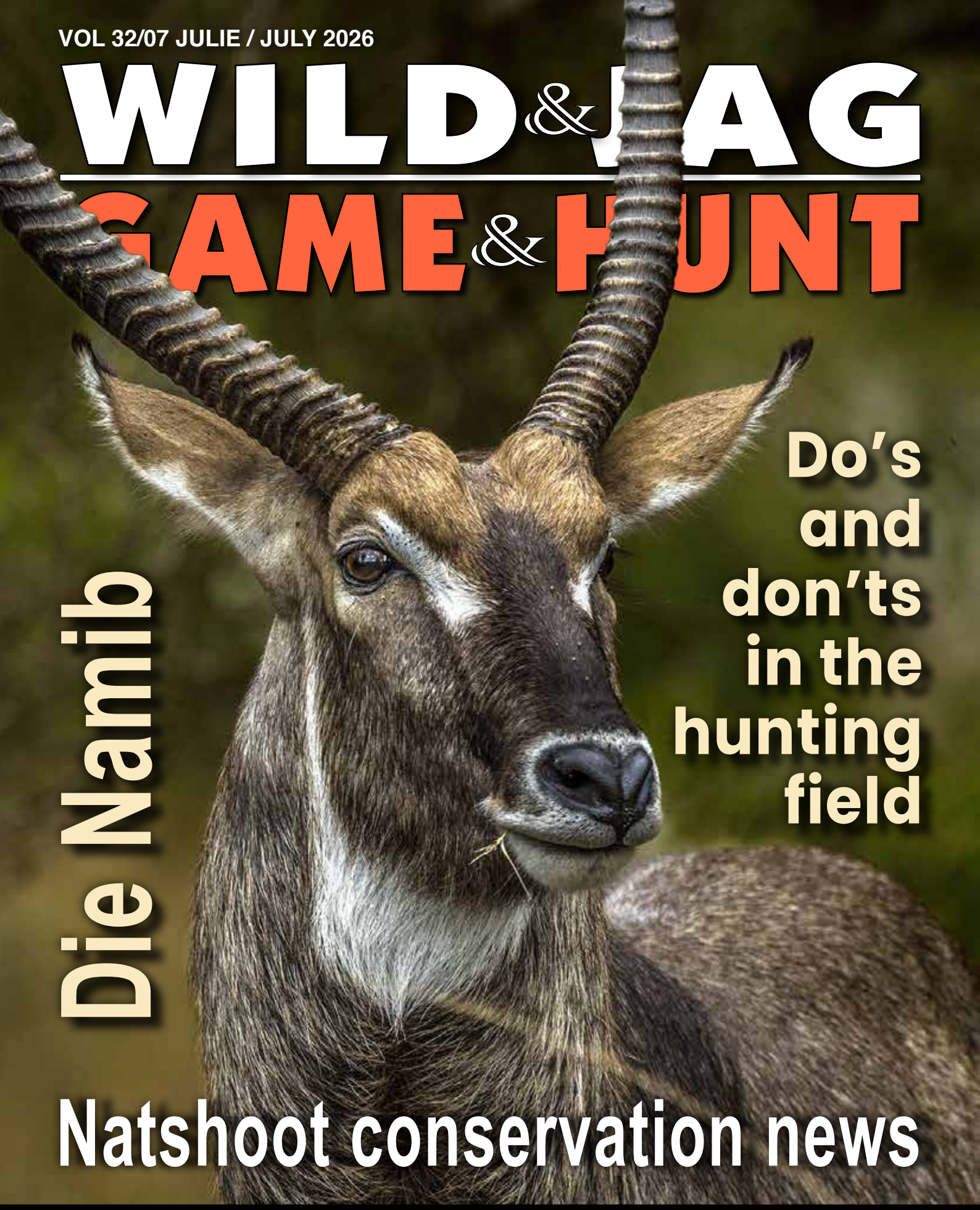
VOL 32/07 JULIE / JULY 2026

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TRACKING

Part 7: Track interpretation



By Cleve Cheney

Books are amazing – I love them. Between the covers, one finds a plot, actors, and an unfolding story. The covers hide what is to be found between them. But a book is far more than just the front and back cover, and so it is with tracks. At first glance, one sees and identifies a track, which is like the covers of a book. It will tell you what animal made it, but once you open the covers, there is a story in each track that needs to be deciphered. Trackers are avid readers. Their library is the bush, and their books are the many signs written in the sand or carried on the wind, betraying the presence (past, present, and future) of the inhabitants of wild places. The tracker's senses are constantly bombarded with evidence called "sign" in tracking language. This sign informs him of the whereabouts, "whenabouts" and "whyabouts" of the wild creatures, both great and small, that roam the places they share and call home.



Figure 1:→ Deciphering the unspoken language of tracks can provide the tracker with useful information

Besides identifying a particular species, tracks can supply us with a lot of information **(Figure 1)**. Tracks tell us what type of animal left its signature registered on a receptive substrate, when it was there, the age and sometimes sex of the animal, its direction or change of direction, travel speed, and even, in some instances, its state of health. To the discerning tracker, a track is an open book that he knows how to read and interpret.

Track interpretation starts with identifying the animal that made the track. We dealt with this in part 4 of this series. That is the relatively easy and straightforward part. The more challenging part now follows as the tracker gleans information from the track.

When was the track made?

Signs imprinted in the track, or changes in the track structure, enable the tracker to determine how old the track is. Track age is based mainly upon track definition – the "sharpness" or clarity of the track, which is clearest just after being made. Sharply defined edges begin rounding the older the track gets. Wind and water will age the track quickly as they erode the definition. It will also be distorted or damaged by other creatures walking across it **(Figures 2 and 3)**. Therefore, it is important to consider past weather when determining the age of tracks. When was the last precipitation (rain, dew, sleet, snow), breeze or strong wind? A track will maintain its definition for longer in certain substrates such as mud or damp sand but will lose it quickly on hard ground or dry soil, grass or litter **(Figure 3)**. High humidity slows the track aging process. Low humidity will dry the track out quicker and make it more susceptible to breakdown by wind or water.



Figure 2: A fresh track has detail and clear definition. However, as it ages and is weathered by wind and rain or damaged by other animals, birds or insects walking over it, it loses its sharpness. These are white rhino tracks.



Figure 3: A fresh impala track (left) has good definition while an old one (right) has lost most of its detail



Figure 4: The type of substrate on which a track is registered will influence what it looks like and how long it will maintain definition

Track age may also be deduced from other superimposed tracks. For example, the track of a nocturnal animal registered over that of a diurnal (active during the day) animal will indicate that the track of the diurnal animal is at least 8–12 hours old.

Debris blown into the track depression, or small spider webs spun within it, can also indicate how old the track is.

Is it possible to determine the age class of the animal that made the track?

Young animals have smaller feet/hooves/paws than subadults or adults. Thus, it should be at least possible to classify a track as belonging to an adult, subadult or young (year-

ling) age class. Young animals seldom travel alone and are usually in the company of adults. As a result, their tracks will generally be found together with those of adults **(Figure 5)**.

Can we find clues as to the sex of the animal?

There are instances when one can determine the sex of an animal from its tracks. Generally, the male of a species has larger tracks. However, there are exceptions, hyena being one such example. When antelope and dog species urinate, the wet urine patch will lie behind the rear tracks in females, whereas it will be forward of the rear tracks in males.



Figure 5: Tracks of an adult warthog sow with young



Figure 6: Tracks of an impala herd

Alone or in a group

A lone track will indicate that the animal was by itself, whereas other tracks of the same type and in the same immediate area can indicate that the animal you are tracking was in a group (herd/pride) **(see Figure 6)**.

In which direction was the animal moving, and is there any indication as to changes of direction?

The way the track is facing will indicate in which direction the animal was travelling. There is usually also a small amount of soil displaced forward of the toes **(Figure 7)**. In a reversing animal (such as when a stronger adversary is forcing a weaker animal backwards when fighting), the soil will be displaced backwards of the heel. A track will also be deeper on the side in which the animal was travelling. In other words, if it was moving forwards, the track will be deeper on the leading (front) edge of the track **(Figure 8)**.



Figure 7: Small amounts of soil, stones and debris are displaced forward of the toe in this elephant track



Figure 8: In this figure of a buffalo track, the front of the hoof is making a deeper impression, indicating the direction of travel

It is also possible to determine a change in direction from a single track. Furthermore, you can establish in which direction the animal was looking when it registered the track. We will discuss these aspects in greater detail in the next article on pressure releases.

How fast was it moving?

It is possible to establish how fast an animal was moving by the pattern of sequential tracks on the ground. This is referred to as gait and is described as walking, trotting or galloping. It is also possible to see from a single track whether the animal was standing still, walking, trotting, running, accelerating or braking. These aspects will also be addressed in the next article.

Are there any clues as to the condition of the animal?

Gait patterns are extremely useful to determine the condition of the animal you are tracking. The gait of a normal, healthy individual looks decidedly different from that of a sick or injured animal. The gait usually shortens in a sick or hurt animal. It may follow a weaving line of travel between two points instead of a straight line, and stumbling may occur, which will be indicated by distinctive track characteristics. The straddle width (distance between left and right tracks) will also increase in a sick, weak or injured animal as it begins struggling to maintain its balance and remain upright. Signs in a single track may also be indicative of the state of well-being.

What was the animal doing when the track was registered?

Take a good look at some wildlife videos showing animals going about their usual activities – feeding, drinking water, resting, walking, running, playing, fighting, mating, fleeing from predators or chasing after prey. Now imagine how the feet are placed during these different activities. It will become clear that foot placement and the tracks that are registered will indicate what the animal was doing when the tracks were imprinted in the soil. The tracks of a stalking predator will look different to those of one just ambling along. Tracks of a browsing or grazing animal will also have a distinctive signature, as will those of animals mating or locked in combat. After a good look at some tracks, a skilled tracker will generally be able to deduce from them what activity the animal was busy with when they were laid down.

Experienced trackers usually have a good understanding of how animals behave and go about their daily lives. People with little or no bush knowledge and a limited grasp of animal behaviour cannot read into the track. This can be equated to someone who has never been taught to read. When they open the covers of a book, the letters they see mean nothing to them – it is all gibberish which the illiterate person does not know how to interpret. Experienced trackers have been taught to read the track and understand the letters written into it.

A track is not just a track – it is a story written in the sand.

I have a series of six "Teach yourself tracking" presentations in interactive PowerPoint format. To order, please email me at bufftraka@gmail.com (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Teach yourself to track

