

Odawa tracker shows the way through nature

BY TOM TRACEY

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WINTER

It is winter, and we are at Sabin Pond. A fresh dusting of overnight snow encases the tracks of creatures who, just hours before, scurried under a February moon.

Paul Raphael of Peshawbestown knifes silently through the forest. An Odawa of the Raven Dodem and a Peace Maker for the Grand Traverse Band of Indians, his movements are spare and purposeful, his gait swift. My movements are clumsy and animated by comparison.

I busy myself viewing the clouds for obvious birds and the meadows for fleeing mammals when Raphael stops. He picks up a twig and probes a dimple in the snow as a surgeon would probe an artery.

"What's this?" he asks.

I see only faint brushings, specks of dirt. The track remains a dull ghost. I stare at the spot in awkward silence. Raphael says nothing. The answer is to be worked through, to be deliberated and to be earned. After all, that is nature's way.

"Look where the animal has been, not where it is going," coaches Raphael.

I regroup, looking backwards. I see the tracks have formed a chain across the snowy trail. They link a grove of oak on one side to a spindly hemlock on the other.

"Squirrel tracks?" I offer.

Raphael smiles a bit, knowing I have invested little in this process. I am a slacker, and he is here to work.

"Which direction was it going?" he asks.

"Well, front paws are smaller than rear paws, so it was running in the direction



Record-Eagle/Doug Tesner

Paul Raphael of Peshawbeston examines the forest for signs of animal movement. He stresses animal tracking techniques, storytelling and culture to help preserve Native American beliefs and traditions.

of the front paws," I answer.

"Are you sure about that?" asks Raphael. "Have you ever seen an animal run?"

I pause. In my mind I conjure up an image of a mountain lion bounding after its prey. The muscular back legs lunge forward and out, the slender front legs tuck inside and back. The rear feet hit the ground first, not the front.

"Wow. That's not what I expected," I say.

Raphael kneels to the ground, pulls out a tape measure and hands me his field guide.

I flip the pages, seeking a matching track. Raphael drops to the ground, scans the faint path and follows it to the base of the hemlock. He takes a twig and deftly lifts a sliver of slate-colored hair. It is just a tuft, snagged on an exposed root.

"Gray squirrel," he says.

After one tracking with Raphael, I have learned

such things as the depth of previous snowfall (marked by the nibbled edge of a hackberry bush — the height of a snowshoe rabbit atop the snow), signs of deer feeding (they pull off twigs when eating, leaving a bark tail) and the presence of unseen predators (birds jump down a tree to avoid hawks circling in the sky and up a tree to escape a bobcat or fox on the ground).

Tracking with Raphael is about much more than just paw prints; the tracks are merely a thread weaving the journey before us.

SPRING

Raphael has graciously invited me along on a group hike he is leading in the vicinity of the Sleeping Bear National Lakeshore. The participants include a physician, a professor and a refugee from the Hollywood entertainment scene.

"There is a danger to this," says Raphael. "The more time you spend in the woods with the rhythm of nature, the harder it is to adjust to the outside world. Finally, you may want to throw away your planner."

The hike starts innocently enough from a pull-off on highway M-22, but the scene quickly changes as we submerge into the woods. A rolling forest canopy unfolds, criss-crossed by creeks and tranquil ponds. Chiseled stumps of hardwood, the diligent work of beaver, surround us like a picket fence.

A hiker questions Raphael about being attacked by a bear, and Raphael questions back.

"How is it that man does not know when a bear is approaching? All the other animals in the forest know the bear is present," says Raphael. "Here, where we are, the birds have detected our presence and are silent. We are in the 'Tunnel of Silence.' Out there, in concentric circles, you can hear the birds alarming, warning of our approach."

We arrive at a sandy knoll joining two bodies of water. The knoll has been smoothed into a bridge, and something is giving off a metallic glint.

"What do you think happened here?" he asks.

A thought or two sparks inside us, but years of television and freeways have dulled our senses.

Somehow, we cannot pull the answer to our tongues.

"Otter. Where you find beaver, you find otter," says Raphael.

The smooth ramp was created by otter to ease access between the two ponds. The otter have enjoyed a meal of fish from one of the beaver ponds, leaving behind tiny

silver scales. He points out the benefits wildlife enjoy by living in harmony with one another: the beaver creates the ponds which holds the fish which feed the otter.

"We can learn something from the animals," says Raphael.

By the time our group leaves the woods, the quiet hours have transformed us. We have dropped to our knees to sniff the minty musk of beaver, poked at porcupine pellets chock-full of sawdust and reconstructed a nighttime drama involving coyote tracks and deer fur.

We have learned not by lecture, but by patient self-awareness and open-minded discovery. This is what Raphael describes as "Coyote Teaching."

"This is not a drag and brag," he says. "I have to trick you into learning."

As we filter back to our vehicles, Raphael informs us that he will offer a prayer, giving thanks to the fact that "no one got speared by a branch while hiking in the woods today." Looking around at our group, I know that he is only half-joking.

"Being in the woods presents a problem," says Raphael. "You have to face yourself, and you may not like what you see. You might be forced to change."

SUMMER

Weeks of stormy weather finally pass. We meet at a trailhead near Good Harbor, and the morning sun warms our faces. This is one of Raphael's favorite trails.

"It has a little bit of everything — forest, ponds, beach," he says.

It reminds him of the

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