



Tracking the Dutch Way

By Michel Grobbe

The art of tracking is almost lost in the Netherlands (as in the rest of Europe). This ancient ancestral skill is on the verge of extinction. Only a few people are still able to track; most of them can only identify the tracks they see. The real art of reading, interpreting and following is hardly practiced anymore. Luckily, through old manuscripts and books, some of the ancient knowledge is being passed down to us. It is in them that our tracking history is revealed.

From 500 AD until approximately 1200 AD, tracking was a legally accepted occupation in Western Europe. Professional trackers were employed by farmers and estate owners. One of the jobs of a way-pointer (tracker) was to retrieve stolen and runaway cattle (Trackers were called *speremon*, *vegii* and *proditor*, depending on the country of their origin, which can be translated as way-pointers).

The continental Germanic tribal leaders, and later their kings, made references to trackers in the laws they issued. Under continental Germanic law, it seems that the role of trackers was to track dead and hidden meat from stolen cattle, or poached wildlife, as well as tracking down live cattle, wildlife and people. In one of the old texts, we can read that trackers were frequently asked to help investigate "poaching" cases.

It says: "If a wolf kills an animal belonging to one man and another man skins it without its owner knowing it and the dead is discovered through a way-pointer (tracker) he who skinned the animal shall pay twelve solidi as compensation."

In another text, reference to the tracker's payment can be found; they were paid three solidi for the recovery of a horse, two solidi for a cow. They were tracking stolen horses, bondservants (mantracking) cows, sheep, pigs, bees (!!!) and goats.

So.... we in The Netherlands were once professional trackers, but, as I stated before, a lot of that knowledge has been lost in time. Still, some of it survived in old books, stories, legends and manuscripts.

It is from these books that Dutch tracking terminology can be re-learned. In one of the books, pressure releases were described. (I use the term pressure releases as used by Tom Brown in his book; *The Art and Science of Tracking* for a lack of better explanation). In there, you can find several Dutch tracking terms that were used to describe some pressure releases made by red deer and wild boar, together with their explanations. They have names like; *het neusje* (translates as: the nose), *het draadje* (translates as: the thread) and several others.

Many of you might know the Dutch word; *spoor* (e.g. a trail of tracks and sign). In Dutch, tracking is translated as *sporenkunde*. *Sporenkunde* itself can be divided in three different levels: *spoorzoeken*, *spoorlezen*, *spoorvolgen*. As far as I know these levels have existed for more than a century in our country. *Spoorzoeken* translates as finding and identifying track and sign, *spoorlezen* translates as reading and interpreting track and sign and *spoorvolgen* translates as following track and sign. In The Netherlands, trackers were, and still are, called *spoorzoekers*.

With the knowledge of the few remaining old hunters, and by using books and manuscripts, we can re-learn the tracking skills of the past. Together with newly published tracking books, and a lot of dirt time, we should be able to relearn the almost lost art of our ancestors.

In The Netherlands, as in the rest of western Europe, there is a tracking tradition waiting to be revived.

Michel Grobbe
Postal address:
Molenweg 59
6741 KK Lunteren
The Netherlands
e-mail: grobtrack@hotmail.com

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