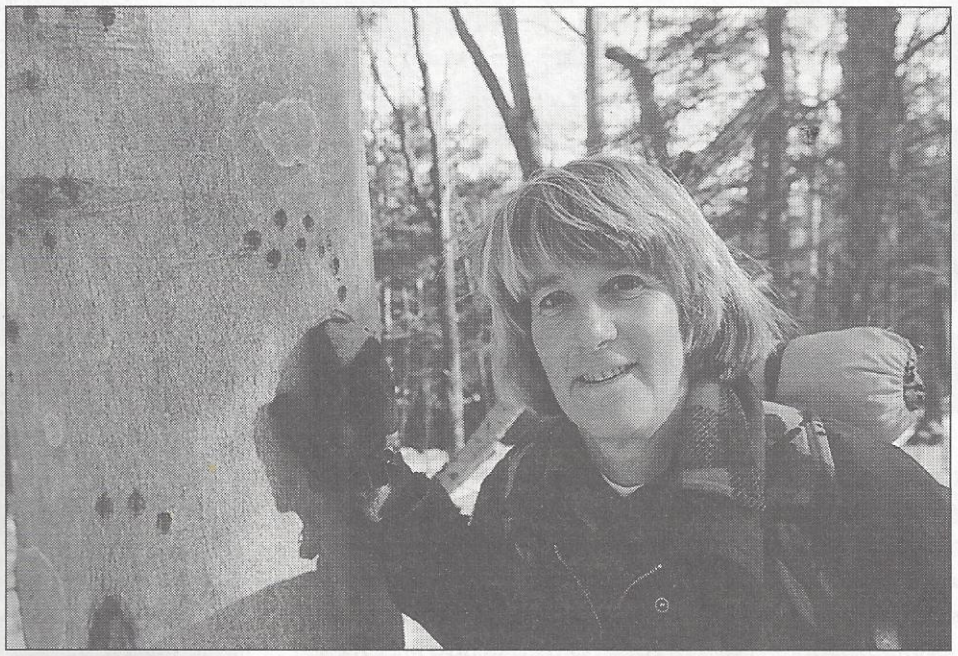

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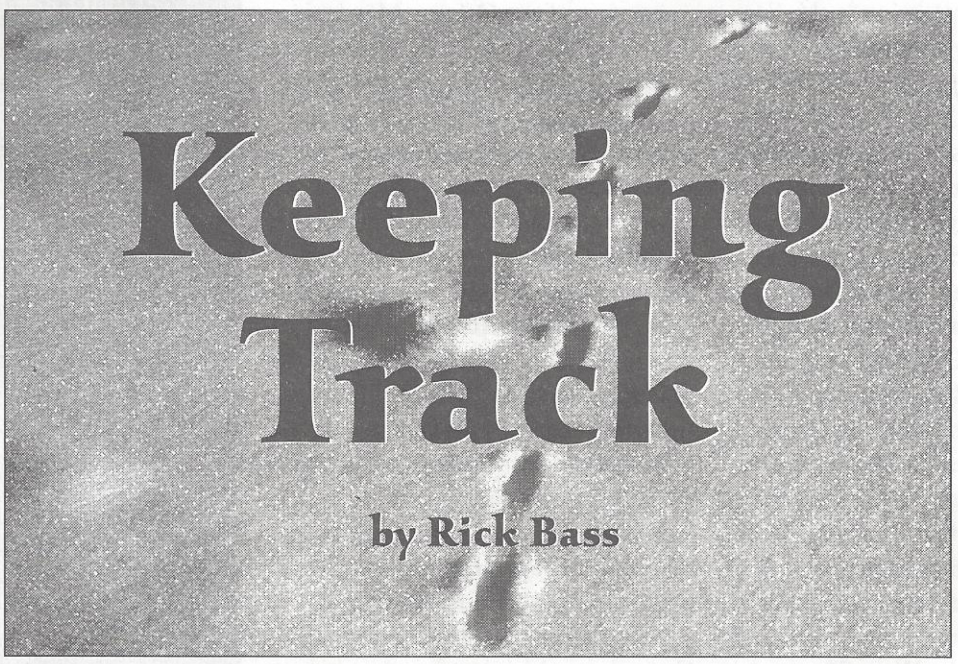

Keeping Track

by Rick Bass

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It's five below zero when I leave Concord, New Hampshire, snow scrunching underfoot and stars flashing, and drive north and west into Vermont, driving through the night toward a visit with Sue Morse and the tree farm that she caretakes. She is a professional tracker and a forester, and will be leading a class the next day on a walk through her wild woods, just south of the region known as the Northeast Kingdom. Sue lives in country that wolves will probably one day reinhabit, not simply because human beings desire it, but because it was once partly their country before. The shape of the land is still the same, has not changed much at all since the last glaciers; and once again, like a tide, wolves will slide back down over the hills and mountains and through the forests, laying down tracks upon their own ghosts.

Driving through the hills, up knolls and swales, through the snowy darkness, along the winding back roads past sleeping hamlets, it's hard to imagine even a single wolf navigating its way secretly through this countryside. But perhaps it could. Perhaps if it kept traveling, it could move through these sleeping woods with care.

Sue Morse radiates some-thing; I'm not sure what. You could call it health, strength, vigor, even wildness. Whatever it is, it's vital. Her short strawberry-blond hair is burnished as if from much sun, and in the thirty-below wind chill this crystal-bright March morning, her face is ruddy, which gives her broad smile extra cheer. It's clear that this morning's joy comes from the prospect of getting to go out-of-doors today, weather be damned, to simply be in the woods. It is always a great and specific joy to be in the presence of one who finds such good cheer in the midst of—because of—harsh or inclement weather.

Sue takes people on woods walks, and teaches them tracking, throughout the year. She's helping coordinate a training program in Vermont called Keeping Track, wherein volunteers conduct wildlife inventories in the woods around their homes. Across the years, these inventories will provide the state with a bank of reliable biological data and trends that could not otherwise be obtained.

Sue passes out walking sticks to the couple dozen participants, and we start up the mountain, shuffling through knee-deep snow. The forest is covered with snow from the day before, glaringly brilliant in the morning sun, and the sky possesses that depth of blue that you see only against new snow, and only at temperatures well below zero.

Because she brings so many people on these walks over the course of a year, Sue asks that we take extra care to stay in single file and, where possible, to stay in each other's footprints, to keep from bruising or trampling dormant plants and seedlings beneath the snow.

This isn't to say that humans haven't been active in this forest. Sue and her neighbors have logged portions of these woods selectively, with care and pride, always toward improving, as they can, the health and vigor of the aging forest. She has a hunter's eye for which trees to leave, which to take and which to let grow a bit older, just as a hunter might pass on a certain deer, even a nice deer, as long as the deer was still in its prime and growing vigorously. (Sue is an avid muzzleloader.)

She also recognizes the full value of a dead or dying tree, an aging giant, to be left in the woods forever. She knows her forest intimately—the comings and goings of the seasons, the curves of the land and the qualities of the soil in each little fold and pocket.

It gives me solace to be in her company, to be walking along behind the aura of her strength and confidence, her passionate moderation. So often, when I am seated at the computer, pounding away at the keyboard and feeling under the activist's siege, I feel that I am becoming evermore a lightweight, always bending over backward to take into account the opposition's position, considering their opinions and perspectives. I'll find those concerns factoring into my every thought, and

Sue Morse, left, knows her Vermont woods—and the creatures that traipse through them—intimately.

because it feels like battle, and because I do not want battle, I'll often feel as if I'm being too radical—even when I'm writing what sounds to me like the sanest, most reasonable things. I feel like an extremist.

But then, whenever I get out into the woods and get up on some windy ridge, and look out not at some computer screen but at the rise and fall of the landscape I know so intimately—such a small piece of the West, but so important—always, always, I'll feel a thing like anguish: not that I have been too radical, but that I have been too moderate, in the face of what is at stake, and the dangers surrounding and encroaching on these last wildlands.

Listening to Sue talk about her hunting experiences and her belief that we can still have "wilderness *and* logging, rather than wilderness *or* logging," inspires me. Her confidence, as well as the authority of her experience, inspires me to believe that the middle path *can* be had, just barely, if we hurry, and that we can still save the last corners of untouched, unprotected wilderness and repair the injured lands in between.

It's a gamble: cutting trees to save them, cutting trees to save forests, cutting trees to try to save threatened and endangered species, rather than simply committing to a 500-year plan of hands-off and stepping back to let things sort themselves out with nature's customarily intricate and unfathomable grace. But it's a gamble I believe in. It's a pleasure to find the company of another who feels the same way.

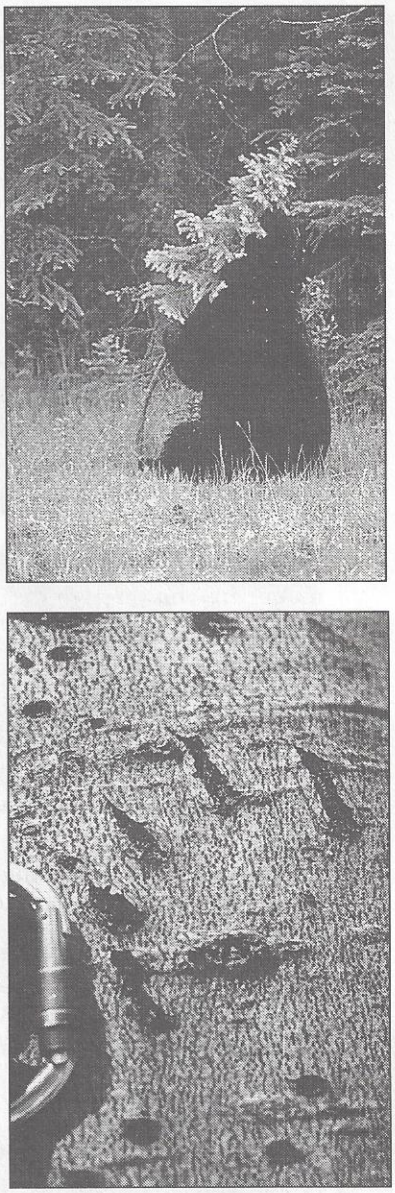
It's astounding, really, to meet someone who is so similar to one's self in so many ways, and yet who seems upright in the world—so unfloundering.

Is the East only a less frantic reflection of the West, or the West a more panicked reflection of the East, as more and more of the West's wild treasure is spoiled, ruined, as the East's once was? (And what irony, too, that as Congress continues to urge onward the liquidation of the public lands of the arid West, the lusher, more resilient East is recovering; there now exists in northern New England alone more than 26 million acres of forested wildland.)

East or West, for my part, I can only laugh. The face in the mirror over here isn't the same, but nonetheless, other mirrors seem to be reflecting the same hungers and desires.

Sue Morse loves to build stone walls! She can be fierce and ornery with "the opposition," though infinitely patient with the students she's teaching. She loves books. She loves feathers, stones, driftwood, hides, bones: the physical beauties that anchor this world of spirits, the structures

black bear



Photos © Susan C. Morse

Above, a black bear marks a spruce tree. Below, claw marks from a black bear on an American beech tree. The carabiner is for scale.

and frames for the sparks within.

How different, how individual, really, can any of us be from one another—especially when we love the same things?

The forests and fields, beaches and deserts of the world are far more individual than our various hearts can ever be. When we're lucky, we are but echoes and shadows of those landscapes. When we have destroyed them, our own lights will cease to exist; we will vanish, cut off from the thing that had for all the centuries and millennia before mirrored and shaped us, and shaped our hearts.

We haven't traveled far before we hit the first tracks; another living thing has passed before us. A young coyote has been scavenging a deer carcass, and Sue shows us its tracks. Loose deer hair is scattered here and there, and newly frozen scats punctuate the coyote's wandering sentence of tracks, scat wrapped also in deer hair and studded with pearls of jaw-cracked bones.

In an open area, Sue shows us other sentences that pass over and across the coyote's sentences, the feather-swept strokes where a raven had swooped in for a bit of bone or flesh, or perhaps to visit the coyote.

I don't want to dwell overmuch on the notion of spirits—such thoughts and discussions almost always wither when inked onto paper, and are instead best explored, I think, in private caldrons and eddies of each person's heart—but I can see how for Sue Morse, having the knowledge, experience and ability she does, it might be a little like being able to look into the spirit worlds in motion all around us.

As she moves through the woods, noticing the residue of tiny and not so tiny passages of others, it must be for her like a kind of second vision. She is able to see the hidden past as clearly as you or I might were we to take a few steps into the future and then look back to view the present from some slight distance ahead.

Not much farther beyond the coyote tracks, we find fisher tracks. In the soft, deep snow, the prints are not very distinguishable. But the distinct, loping, sinuous carriage of the animal—only the wolverine is larger among the mustelids—identifies it. Sue makes a few hops of her own, imitating for us that weasel-like swimming motion with which the mustelids attack the world, as if part fish, part snake, part mammal.

Deeper still, we find bobcat tracks. The sunlight in the old interior forest of leafless beech and maple is dense, seeming somehow from another time; columns of buttery gold slant against the winter-pale bark of the trees, mixing with the deep shadows to create a yellow and black mosaic that is nearly identical to the coloration of bobcats; and again, it is like a kind of vision, seeing those tracks pass through that light and knowing that we are only hours or even minutes behind the real animal.

Sue even knows this bobcat by name; she knows its patterns, its reproductive history, its size and temperament. She has been hiking these woods almost daily for the last twenty-three years.

"It gives me solace to be in her company, to be walking along behind the aura of her strength and confidence, her passionate moderation."

Loosely formed as they are, the tracks are hard to distinguish from those of a coyote. Sue has us follow the tracks backward—she doesn't like to push an animal ahead of her, is impeccably polite and courteous that way—and finally we come to a spot of diagnosis, a spray of fresh urine, which she instructs us to kneel down and smell. *Cat.*

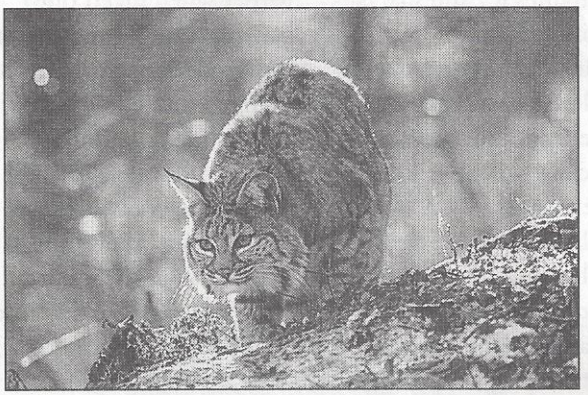
In a recent *Audubon* article by David Dobbs, Morse explained the strategy behind her Keeping Track classes: There is scientific as well as activist value in having citizens gathering data from their home terrain throughout the state, recording the patterns and occurrences, the comings and goings of things, with a degree of coverage that no state or federal budget could ever afford.

"Only by doing this sort of homework—literally keeping track of wildlife use—can we know a given habitat's true value," she said. "And only by knowing its value can we work effectively to conserve it."

The place where we're walking is, she says, a case in point. "Twenty years ago, if we had discussed as a town what to do with these lands, [all] I would have said was, 'Whoa! We can't build a Wal-Mart here! These woods are too pretty! I've seen moose here. This is special!'"

Now, however, with the weight of her documentation behind her, she can say, "The area functions as core habitat for bear, bobcat, fisher, mink, moose and otter, and it's essential to the health of those species and everything they draw on. It's a big difference."

It's brutally cold back in the shade of the forest. Everyone is flapping their



© Susan C. Morse

A bobcat in the wild.

bobcat

river otter

moose

beaver

arms and gloved hands like stunned chickens, laboring unsuccessfully to stay just this side of suffering—it is only the beauty of the old forest that allows us to push back the pain in our toes and fingertips even remotely. Amazingly, Sue Morse is striding along bare-handed. She's breaking trail for us, so I'm sure her blood is running a good bit harder and hotter, and you can tell just looking at her that she's thrilled, always thrilled, to be in the woods. But the wind chill is still way below zero, and I can't help but marvel at all the different tones and variations of wildness in the world, including among our own kind.

We come out of the old bottom, ascend a ridge and begin to find more bear sign. The great beech trees have been climbed and clawed, the smooth bark latticed with the ancient hieroglyphics of bears past and present. Sue points out the ladder-stacked clusters of branches in some of the higher trees: large nests that the bears have pulled together by climbing out as far as they can on limbs and then reaching for the smaller branches, breaking them off and wedging them in sturdy crotches of the trees. There the bears strip off the nuts and fruit, eating them the way you or I might pluck grapes from vines.

We hike all day, crossing the occasional tracks of bobcat, otter, fisher, deer, ascending cliffs and descending along rushing creeks, until it seems certain that we have left Vermont and are in some other, wilder place.

Nearing the end of our loop, returning to Sue's cabin, we pass along the boundary line of the property she tends, which is punctuated by immense, ancient maples—"witness trees" that were not cut but blazed to serve as survey markers—trees that were substantial even back in the days of the land grants, 200 years ago.

We pass the rusting hulk of a crumpled wood stove, moss-anchored, being

swallowed by the forest. At the beginning of the century, Sue tells us, almost all of the forest we're walking through was cut-over fields and denuded sheep pastures. There were accounts of wolves being so hungry back then that they would come out into the meadows and gnaw on the maize from farmers' fields. Then, like the forest itself, the wolves went away for a while.

Now the woods are coming back, and the wolves will be coming back, and barely a single human lifetime has passed, two humans' lifetimes.

Our little cycles are nothing, compared to the world's. Our greatest dramas are like those of the mayfly. We spend a few weeks scrounging gravel and building a little edifice. Then some force summons us—we ascend to warmth and light, spin with violent beauty and a strange mix of joy, confusion, instinct and desire—then fall from the sky, back to the river, or to the gravel bar at river's edge.

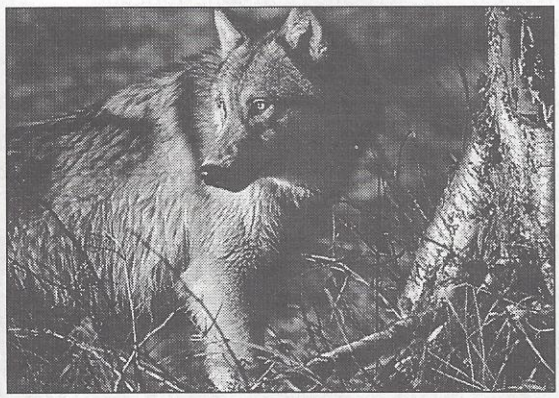
Farther downstream, all around us, other mayflies rise, like the lifting and falling of the world's threadlike pistons. As if, daily, all disappears, is buried, is lifted up, returns.

That night, we dine in Sue's cabin, which is filled with more books than I've ever seen in a cabin. The stuff of her life surrounds her—spotting scopes, telescopes, binoculars, hides, pelts, antlers, rocks, feathers and bones—all beautiful, testimony to the great grace and design of the world. But what strikes me most is the books: shelves of books, books on tables, and books resting in chairs, half-read. What magnificent paradoxes we are, for a woman as fully engaged in the out-of-doors as Sue Morse is, to also have her life, her spirit, so immersed in ideas, the invisible and abstract concepts of words and sentences, each of which always drifts a slightly different path for each reader, rather than possessing the clarity of a track in snow or a claw mark upon a tree.

We dine on hot lamb chops and cold beer, sitting cross-legged around the wood stove, surrounded by those great books of poetry and natural history, novels and field notebooks, journals and scientific books; and we discuss, as it seems environmentalists are always doing, the future.

Sue raises organic, free-range sheep on her farm. We're eating one of her lambs tonight. She doesn't trap coyotes, but instead uses guard dogs to protect the sheep. She wants the wolves to come back. It seems at first a wild and wonderful paradox, her wanting both sheep and wolves, but then, after a day in the richness of her country, it comes to seem natural. There's still—with resolve—barely time and space for both.

It's her job to take care of the sheep; it's her job to take care of the wolves. *Stewardship.*



Photos © Susan C. Morse

Left, a Canada lynx. Right, a timber wolf.

porcupine

The scholars, professors and activists Chris Klyza and John Elder have joined us. Chris, an intense and intelligent young man, talks literature for a while, until, like magma seeping from vents in the earth, numbers and statistics instead begin to issue from him. The fact that 20 percent of our population is already experiencing a shortage in fresh water supplies, and that in the next twenty-five years, more than 30 percent will be lacking or stressed.

The fact that the world's human population is expected to double in the next fifty years.

The fact that 60 million people live within a day's drive of where we're sitting.

"It must be for her like a kind of second vision."

Are we—moderate environmentalists—blind to the reality of the situation? Are we blinding ourselves, perhaps as a defense against the awful weight of the truth, while we move through the world neck-deep in our own ferocious consumption, and continue to proclaim that hope for the future still lies in words like *sustainability*, *stewardship* and *moderation*—that indeed, we can (and must) have more wilderness and, at the same time, more (but smarter) logging?

Can we still find a middle way to carry forward these two desires, these two needs, rather than abandoning one or the other?

Probably, for one or two more years. This is probably the last cusp of time in which an environmentalist can be afforded the indulgence of believing such things. Surely it is our last last chance.

John Elder agrees. "The game is now," he says. He's talking about Vermont, and the rest of New England. "The pressures to develop are going to become even more intense in just the next few years," he says. The booming economy, the astounding affluence, the eagerness of the large landholding companies to divide their land into the smallest possible fragments …

Where are the wolves in this story? They're still a couple hundred miles north, still out in the future. An unconnected triangle still separates wolves and this landscape, and the

desire in our hearts for the wolves to move back onto this landscape.

But it seems that the pieces are beginning to move closer together, almost like a thing that is getting up and beginning to walk.

And later that evening, as we're talking about innovations in forestry practices, value-added products, sustainability, the night's frigid silence is broken by a coyote's howl.

It's so close and so loud that we can hear it even through the walls of the cabin, through the old logs from the forest, through the closed windows.

"It sounds like a *wolf*," I say, and I look at Sue with some suspicion, wondering if she's not keeping some sort of secret.

"The coyotes are really big around here," she says. "They can weigh up to seventy pounds" (the size of a young or small wolf).

The four of us wander out into the depth of the night. It's like walking into a dark ocean. John and Chris are marveling at the stars. We truly could be at the edge of a wilderness. Places like this, pockets and patches, still exist in the East.

The coyote's howls are wild and fierce and strong: *so close.*

One of us murmurs something, and the coyote hears it and falls silent. We wait for it to resume, but it's too smart, too wily. For us, it's too cold outside; we linger as long as we can, a few moments longer, stamping our feet and waiting and listening.

Sparks and the smoke of burning trees rise from Sue's chimney, up into the leafless canopy of the trees; higher still, then, the sparks seem to be drifting through the stars themselves.

We stand a few seconds longer in the icy night, just outside the glowing yellow cabin, caught perfectly between domesticity and wildness, as if that's where we're most meant to belong.

If so, when there is no more wildness, or no more wilderness, what shall we do? What will become of us?

It's so cold that we can see the long crystals of ice slashing and glimmering in the starlight as they mix in a slight stirring breeze. They look like teeth, long sharp teeth, falling upon the land, gnawing and tearing at the land, but causing no damage.

Rick Bass, who lives in the Yaak River valley, on the Kootenai National Forest, in northwest Montana, last wrote for Forest Magazine *about the need to protect national forest roadless areas. To reach Keeping Track, contact Executive Director Lars Botzojorns at (802) 434-7000, or by e-mail at keeptrak@together.net. The mailing address is P.O. Box 848, Richmond VT 05477.*

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