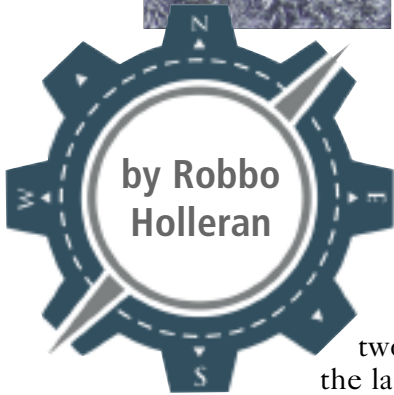


# LOST

## IN THE WOODS

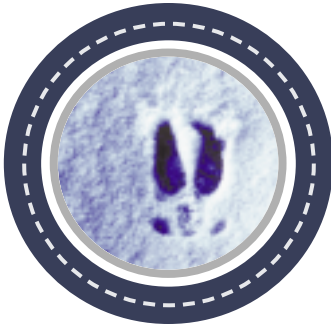


I got lost. It makes for a good story, and there are always lessons to be learned.

I have a remarkable sense of direction and have been really lost only two other times. I have been out in the woods about three days per week for the last 40+ years and often skip the GPS when my staff will almost always use one. I am usually in the forest with a purpose, such as “cross this brook to the next stand, mark it according to the prescription, all the way to the top of the ridge, and return by dinner-time.” (That last phrase is important...) I usually have a paper map and a compass, but even without them, I have the terrain and features indelibly in my brain. So, what went wrong this time?

I was deer hunting in central New York, in completely unfamiliar territory. My buddy, Christian, had hunted there before, and I had only driven by on the road to get an idea of the layout. There is a distinct slope; I dropped him off at the bottom and then drove uphill about a half-mile to walk in on a logging access road at the top of the slope. The plan was to slowly work our way toward each other, through various forest types, with the hope that any deer avoiding one of us might be found by the other. It was nearly blizzard conditions with about 5 inches of fresh snow from the night before, and our plan was to get right out before daylight, hunt a few hours, and see how it goes. It was a small area, along a slope, with a paved road as one boundary and a logging road for another. Plan B was to follow any fresh tracks we cross and see if we can sneak up on a deer that was bedded. We both had doe tags for that zone and were not trophy hunting. This was all about filling the freezer, and there are excess does there. This should have been an easy morning stroll through the woods.

I had never stalked deer in the snow with any success. In my home state of Vermont, only about one in five deer are legal bucks with forked antlers, so picking a random track has low odds. I also tend to be loud in the woods, so the deer see me first and scoot away. A short way in, below the logging access road, I crossed two tracks, medium-sized and crisply fresh. This was my chance! I followed them along through mixed-hemlock hardwoods, and they turned uphill into a two-aged hardwood forest. This had been shelterwood cut about 15 years before, with a sparse overstory and thick



understory of saplings 1 to 3 inches in diameter and blackberries. With 2 inches of snow on every twig, visibility was about 10 yards. I must have spooked them as the tracks changed from a meandering walk to a run through the hardwoods. They also crossed the logging road into the plateau above, with which I was not familiar.

## UNFAMILIAR ZONE

That should have been the first little warning light. I had moved out of the zone I had pictured at the start. I was using a new hunting app on my smartphone which has some great features: It shows my location relative to the boundaries of the state forest where we were allowed to hunt—main features like the roads and logging road and a pond way out back, plus it shared our locations with each other. So, I could see that Christian had gone back down into a spruce plantation. We were also texting each other with updates so I knew he was on another track. One aspect of the app I did not like was that the imagery was all “summer flown green mush,” which does little to discern forest types, except pure softwood plantations and openings. You have to switch out of the “location sharing” feature to get topography, or anything else. But it gave my location, relative to the features and my buddy, and that was very helpful.

The two deer had slowed to a walk, emerged from the thick hardwoods back into a hemlock type, and crossed into the next two-aged hardwood zone. These two types were repeated all through this plateau with no distinguishing features, and the snow was coming heavily. Tracking deer in heavy snow, looking down, following a big arc, is completely different from my normal woods-walk, and I knew my sense of direction was impaired. I was taking it very slowly, looking ahead through every “window” for any sign of the deer. I had trailed them for over 500 yards at this point. They were slowly wandering and went into another hemlock forest where I expected them to settle in for the storm. I proceeded slowly and carefully, focused on the direction of the track, looking ahead to every gap in the trees for anything ungulate. Finally, I glimpsed what might be ears silhouetted in the snow. I raised the rifle, flicking off the safety, and saw just the head and neck of the deer looking straight at me. I fired without hesitation.

Normal protocol suggests waiting at least 5 minutes after a shot, but I could not wait. I knew that if I had wounded the deer, I could simply follow the track again. I marked the spot relative to particular trees and paced off 110 yards. The small buck had fallen into his tracks for a clean kill. I was elated. We had hunted hard for many days and not seen much. I had finally tracked a deer in the snow and made a difficult shot under adverse conditions. I had hunted well. I noticed another bed about 15 feet away from the second deer, and she had bounded off to the right. I texted Christian my success, marked the location on the GPS, and proceeded to process the deer. It was now after 9 a.m., and Christian asked if I needed help. I told him that I did, but that I would go after the second deer first.



## LOW PHONE BATTERY

Once the buck had been tagged and made ready for dragging, I followed the other track. I still had a doe tag, and this was my last day to hunt. About this time, I realized my phone battery was quite low (a big red flag here...). The second deer ran for 200 yards, through the hemlocks, another hardwood harvest unit, and into more hemlocks. There, she slowed and mingled with several other fresh tracks. I think I picked the correct one and continued to follow her. This area had many tracks and continued the mix of hemlock groves and cut-over hardwoods, on almost flat ground with no terrain features. I followed fresh tracks several hundred yards all the way to a pond. I was now more than a half-mile from the initial logging road, and I had been out for over 5 hours, so it was time to head back.

I had turned off my phone to save battery but would occasionally refresh my location and text to my buddy. This will be helpful later. The program I used has another flaw in that it downloads the maps by cellphone data, so it has to refresh maps all the time, or each time I turned it on, and that



further drained the battery. Next time, I would select a program with maps stored on the phone.

I had cut another big arc and did not want to follow my tracks back through the thick hardwood regeneration, so I took a course through hemlocks with some fresh tracks in about the right direction. I still had some hope of another harvest and expected to cross my footprints at some point. After I had gone a couple hundred yards, I began to think I was lost. I had not kept a “breadcrumb trail” on the GPS and was down to about 10% on the battery. I had texted Christian to tell him where I was, that I had to keep my phone/GPS off to save battery, that I was off my tracks, might be lost, and would need his help soon.

Eventually, I had crossed my tracks, but there was another hunter also on my track. I texted my friend to tell him I was on my way to the deer, on my tracks, and would be glad for his help. I followed the tracks back toward the deer, and eventually lost my #10 boot track in a foot of fresh snow. How can that be? I had followed the other guy’s track by accident, partly. My initial track did not follow the deer directly, since she had gone down the blackberry-covered logging trails, and I had followed along through the saplings or more shaded zones. On the way back, I was not concerned for the noise and stayed in the logging trail, where the deer had originally gone. I must have missed the point where I came onto that trail. So, I went back, and circled around, but could not find it. I went further forward, circling again, but had lost my own footprints. I backtracked again but now had stompings all over. I was lost. My phone was essentially dead. I had no map or compass. I got off a last text to Christian with my approximate location and that I was lost.



I continued on the logging trail with two thoughts. This was essentially the basic direction the deer had traveled, though in the heavy snow and dim light, I really did not have a crisp sense of that. Also, the logging trail would eventually get to a landing on the main logging road. This was something I could rely on. After another long stretch, I came to something completely unfamiliar. There was a small hill, and everything I had seen had been flat. It was along a hemlock type, so I did a big arc through there and crossed my track, right near my dead buck. I had been within 50 yards of the original trajectory of the running doe, and now I had my buck, and some idea of my location.

## WHOOPING

I had initially followed a wide arc from the logging trail to the harvest location, so I did not want to drag the deer all that long way. The arc cut away from the end of the road where we could drive in with a truck, so I wanted to cut the corner for a shorter route even though it was risky. I did not know how far it was (about 500 yards) but knew my tracks were the long way. I was vague on the direction but knew I would eventually cross the logging road which went all through the forest—if my direction was reasonable. I rigged up a rope on the deer’s antlers and began to drag. I was glad it was not a big deer. I would occasionally “whoop” out loud to get the attention of my buddy, if he was looking for me. A good whoop carries through the forest for a quarter mile, though less in heavy snow.

I took frequent breaks and often walked ahead to find the best route. I really did not know where I was and thought of going back and merely following my tracks. That would be a long way, so I kept to my initial direction and slogged on for about 300 yards. On one foray ahead, without the deer, I found human tracks coming from the right. My perception was that straight ahead would intersect the logging road but to the right was the eventual destination, the log landing. The tracks might have been my buddy, or another hunter, but I trusted that whoever it was would have been entering the woods from where I wanted to exit. I carried my pack and rifle a couple hundred feet and returned for the deer.

## ORANGE

When I got back, I saw orange through the woods. It was Christian and our host, Josh. We were quite glad to see each other. There were congratulations on a successful hunt, and stories summarized for the morning activity. It was now almost 2 p.m. Both of these experienced hunters confirmed that they had been lost in these same woods, with no terrain features and similar forest groves. The story does not end yet. I asked which way the truck was, and they both pointed back the way they had come. I pointed in the complete opposite direction toward my pack and rifle. We laughed. I went back and

got my stuff, but before we started to follow their tracks, I suggested that Christian turn on his GPS and mapping. His phone still worked. The blue dot for location showed us at 200 yards from the landing. There is a little blue arrow that he said showed “the direction you are pointing the phone.” I suggested it was the direction you are traveling. I asked him to mark our current location, and then go a hundred feet to confirm it was correct before I dragged the deer. He came back looking sheepish. They were both wrong, and I had the correct direction from the start. Fifteen minutes later we were at the landing and Josh’s truck with the deer.

## LESSONS LEARNED

All’s well that ends well, but what are the lessons to be gleaned? What had I done well or poorly? Even on a short trip, bring water and food, compass, knife, flashlight, matches, extra batteries, flagging. I had most of that but did not bring the extra battery pack for the phone. I also did not have the paper map and non-electronic compass which I almost always carry. With these I would have had no troubles. I was trusting a new program that I had only used for a few days and did not have the standard GPS and extra batteries I usually carry.

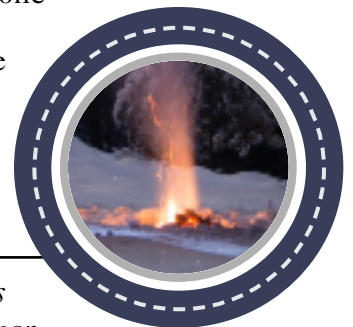
I had a buddy who knew where I was and more-or-less when to expect me, though we hunted far longer than the original plan. Someone should always know where you are and when to expect you, especially if you are out alone. Finally, trust your instruments. Batteries are a necessity and a standard compass is a must. As my phone was dying, I kept it under my shirt for more battery warmth, turned it on infrequently, and once I had a good location, kept that in my memory. I also texted my buddy with updates until it died.

You also need to be familiar with your GPS or smartphone app, before you trust it with your life. Going out on a big trip with a brand-new GPS and the instruction manual is a poor place to start. I was not familiar with the battery use and other features on my smartphone app. If you look at your compass and say, “That can’t be right,” you are almost always wrong. A compass can have error from “local attraction” such as an iron deposit, power lines, vehicles, and other metal objects which can introduce error. If the compass gets thrown off by a local attraction, this will usually be for only a short distance, so you can almost always trust that compass. A GPS can have substantial error, especially when you first turn it on. Once you have a good signal, it is usually within 10–30 meters.

If you get turned around, don’t panic. If you are in the kind of territory where you are within a mile or so of a road, there are a few basic options. I always had these in mind: One is to simply follow some water downhill. This will never bring you in a circle, and most roads follow the rivers, so the small drainages will eventually lead you to a road. In my case, once I had entered the plateau, the slight drainage would have led me to a different road, about 2/3 of a mile away. If I had stayed on the initial slope, it would have been much closer. From the pond “way out back” it was only about 400 yards to a further road. If you have some sense of a reasonable direction, you can try to follow the bearing.

With no compass, you can keep a straight line with some ribbons. Tie a ribbon and go about half the distance you can see for another, so you can sight down two ribbons for a straight line. Or look ahead through the treetops to a distant tree with unique features—a tall softwood in a hardwood forest or a particular hardwood crown. As you approach it, note some further feature and do it again. This is what I was doing. Following logging trails is another tactic. You can often tell which direction the wood was dragged by the trail layout, which trees are scraped, and other details. Loggers get paid by the ton, so they will usually have a direct route to the road. I also used this at one point.

If you are in the sort of country where you will be more than a mile into the woods, all this becomes more critical. You have got to have the correct tools and some survival gear to be prepared for a night in the woods. If you really get lost, find or create some shelter, build a big fire, and stay put. That might also be a good time to start praying. ■



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