



COURTESY KIM CABRERA

Tracker Kim Cabrera, shown measuring the entrance of a vole tunnel, reads the behavior of local wildlife from subtle clues in the land.

ANIMAL TRACKER SEES THINGS OTHERS MISS

*Kim Cabrera Will Share
Her Skills at Community
Park's Fall Family Fair*

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Nature is a book with many stories to tell. The problem is it's a book most people don't know how to read.

Kim Cabrera, a skilled animal tracker who lives on a rural property outside Redway, is an exception.

Take, for example, the time this past spring when she spent two days tracking a black bear as it made its way through the forests of Southern Humboldt.

Because she was following the ani-

mal's paw prints, she knew when she came upon ripped-open logs — she found half a dozen — that the bear had been looking for grubs. For the same reason, when she saw a bent-over sapling, she knew that the bear had pulled it down and climbed over it, taking care to rub its belly on the plant in a technique known as “straddle marking.”

A few months later, when she was once again out tracking a bear in the same general area, she found something a little more unusual. Two wasps' nests had been pulled out of the ground. That wasn't the unusual part — bears frequently eat bees and wasps, a good source of protein, not to mention the nests themselves. A little more out of the ordinary was a

nearby slide mark down an embankment into a pond. That led Cabrera to a deduction both impressive and amusing.

“He must've gotten stung and slid down the hill into the water to get away,” Cabrera said.

Cabrera is one of the featured attractions at this Sunday's Walk in the Park and Fall Family Fair to be held at the Southern Humboldt Community Park and Tooby Memorial Park [see story, *Page 1*]. The event, which will benefit local schools, the Community Park and Tooby Playground, includes pony rides, craft and activity booths, music, a martial arts demonstration — and a guided walk along the South Fork Eel River led by

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Tracker Kim Cabrera Sees Things Others Miss

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Cabrera that will focus on how to spot animal tracks and animal scat.

Unless it rains the night before, Cabrera said finding signs of wildlife is all but guaranteed.

"Last year we found [tracks of] mink, otter, turtle, opossum, skunks, red fox and herons," Cabrera related.

When asked to assess Cabrera's tracking skills a fellow tracker, Del Morris, who lives in Rohnert Park, said this: "Her observing skills are very good and she has great perseverance. Slow and steady wins the race when it comes to Kim. She's a steady force."

Cabrera, who is 46, learned how to track from her father, who was part Apache and frequently took her on hikes into the hills surrounding her Southern California home.

"He wasn't an expert, but he enjoyed tracking," Cabrera confided. While the animal signs weren't nearly as abundant as in Humboldt because of the arid conditions, Cabrera said her father would nonetheless regularly point out to her evidence of wildlife, such as coyotes and skunks.

Inspired by her father's teachings, Cabrera got a field guide when she was still in junior high that taught her the different shapes of animal tracks. "I drew them over and over," Cabrera recalled. "Instead of drawing silly things in my notebooks [like other students], I would draw tracks."

When she got older Cabrera took a weeklong class on tracking and wilderness survival skills taught by Tom Brown, the author of a series of nature field guides. The workshop, in the Pine Barrens region of New Jersey, took place in 1989 and cost Cabrera what then seemed like a fair amount of money: \$500.

But the investment was worth it as Cabrera learned a host of skills, including shelter building, how to make a fire by rubbing sticks, flint knapping, how to identify and gather edible plants and how to cook a meal with such plants.

Not long afterward, as a wildlife biology student at Humboldt State University, Cabrera suffered a physical setback. She developed an abscess on one of her lungs and almost died. The lung was removed, and while Cabrera recovered, she was left somewhat impaired — enough so that doing fieldwork, a requirement for a degree in wildlife biology, was out of the question. She switched majors and in 1995 earned a degree from HSU in natural resources planning and interpretation.

From 1995 to 2005, Cabrera worked summers at Humboldt Redwoods State Park, leading campfire programs, nature walks, junior ranger programs — and designing the park's original website. She also did a stint at Richardson Grove State Park as a summer park aide and campground manager.

But since 1997, Cabrera's main job — and it's a full-time gig — is as a computer technology expert with the Humboldt County Office of Education. She works at two different school sites — the Garberville Community School and the Eel River Community School in Fortuna.

Her computer skills help explain the sophistication of her own website — *bear-tracker.com* — which is chock full of information about tracking and other nature-related matters. She also has a second website — *dirt-time.com* — which she calls her "store website." There, among other things, is a computerized guide

to tracking on CD-ROM that can be had for \$16.

Dirt time, in case you're wondering, is tracker jargon. "When we go out to practice, we say we're getting 'dirt time,'" Cabrera explained.

A member of the International Society of Professional Trackers, Cabrera is giving a presentation at the group's next annual meeting, slated for southern Washington in October, on a subject she has strong feelings about: Cougar tracks.

Cougar tracks, Cabrera explained, are often confused with dog tracks. As a result, cougars are often mistakenly blamed for attacks, particularly on livestock.

"Lots of times people blame cougars for taking their chickens when it's really dogs," Cabrera said. Also, people often misread dog tracks for cougar tracks, setting off needless alarms. "Cougar hysteria" is what Cabrera calls it.

As for tracking the most dangerous game — i.e. humans — Cabrera has done it, most notably in May 2008 right after her house was robbed. She spent the better part of a day following the perpetrators, who went on a winding odyssey through the hills near her home.

Cabrera, who took care to arm herself with pepper spray, never caught the crooks, but she did learn a couple of things about them. From a hat they discarded she learned that one of them had curly brown hair. And from a dirt clod she was able to deduce that one of them had tripped and fallen into a ravine, where a bent-over patch of poison oak had broken his fall.

Knowing that, at least, was a revenge of sorts for Cabrera. "It was like justice was served," Cabrera said. "Nature got them."