



## IRC Volunteer Becomes a Member of the OC Trackers

By IRC Volunteer, Aleta Walther

As an active IRC volunteer, I've been intrigued by the wildlife and nature within the Irvine Ranch Natural Landmarks. In an effort to better educate myself, I decided to join the OC Trackers. Here is a summary of what I discovered:

I am now an official member of the Orange County Trackers having earned my Tracking and Scatology Award for spending a considerable amount of time studying the rotting remains, tracks and scat of various animals. Recipients of this award are actually commended for displaying a perverse interest in the subject matter.

A dozen aspiring trackers participated in the two-day training program on July 10 and 17. The class is designed for biologists, rangers, animal control officers and naturalists who are familiar with the local wildlife. Greenhorn trackers with significant experience as naturalists are welcome to participate but are encouraged to research tracking before the first class.

The hands-on program was hosted by IRC and presented by Dick Newell and Don Millar of the Orange County Trackers. The class included six hours of classroom instruction and another day exploring the mouth of Fremont Canyon, applying what we had learned in the first session. Among other things, we studied the subtle differences between the tracks of domestic dogs and coyotes and the differences between toad and lizard tracks. We learned to tell whether a predator was stalking or chasing prey by the length and width of its stride and depth of its tracks.

"Tracking is not a skill one acquires in one class or series of classes, but rather it's a lifelong pursuit, a way of looking at life through the eyes of a naturalist; always wanting to know more," said Dick, who has had an enduring interest in animal tracking and founded Orange County Trackers about seven years ago. "I spend virtually every day in nature and learn something new each day," he said.

My least favorite aspects of the class were examining scat to determine the owner's diet and backing into a stand of poison oak, which was my fault as I was warned. What I liked best about the class was how knowledgeable and patient Don and Dick were, the camaraderie among all of the participants, the serenity of the Natural Landmarks and seeing three deer bounding up a nearby hillside.

Retirees and good friends, Dick and Don are highly respected naturalists and are often called upon to confirm animal sightings across Orange County using their highly-honed knowledge of animal behavior, tracks and movements.

"Tracking has become the corridor through which I introduce my guests to nature appreciation," said Dick, who was formerly a university professor. Orange County Trackers is a loosely formed coalition of wildlife biologists, interpreters, rangers, naturalists, docents and others who are interested in enhancing their tracking skills and applying their knowledge to monitoring wildlife activity in Orange County.

There are no dues or fees for experienced naturalists to take the Animal Behavior and Tracking class or to participate in the tracking workshops. The Orange County Trackers mission is to "enjoy the wilderness experience while learning more about animal behavior and the tracks and signs they leave behind for us to contemplate." To learn more about Orange County Trackers scheduled classes or animal tracking and behavior, [click here](#).