

9. Spoor Theorist

Bears, like many wild creatures, rely much more heavily on their sense of smell than people do. Ted rejects the argument that they are forced to do so because their brains are smaller.

One of the many things that a bear's excellent sense of smell is used for is to monitor what other animals are in the vicinity. This is important, for bears as well as other animals, to keep track of what there is nearby to eat, what there is nearby that might want to eat you, and whether or not there are sexually receptive females in the area. One of the main ways that this is done is by analyzing spoor, which can tell a well-trained bear a lot about the species, gender, age and estrus status of the dropper of the spoor.

So, when Ted went online to enroll for his undergraduate degree program at the University of Phoenix, he was thrilled to discover that they had a joint program in mathematics and spoor identification. Ted was good but not truly gifted at mathematics, but he thought he might have a paw up on the other students at spoor identification.

Before going into the field to engage in actual spoor identification, Ted first had to go through a rigorous course in Spoor Theory. He was surprised to discover how many different words (just in English) there are for basically the same thing, including: bolus, crap, defecation, do-do, droppings, dung, excrement, fecal matter, feces, guano, manure, pellets, poop, road apples, scat, shit, spoor, stool, turds, and so on. (In fact, relating his studies in mathematics to those in spoor theory, there might be a *countable infinity* of such terms, which means that you could put all of these terms in a list, but the list would never stop.) He also had to learn the most common terms in other languages, like merde (French), Scheisse (German) and byun (Korean).

He had to learn the biological role of elimination, and the various types of eliminatory disorders and their consequences. He summarized this material in his prize-winning poem, "Poop or Perish."

Pooping is important.
If you don't poop you'll die, die, die.
So even if
You think you can't
You still have got to try, try, try.

He had to learn what species eat what foods, since undigested food in the spoor is an important clue as to the identity of the dropper. And he had to learn what species commonly inhabit what areas, since it would be embarrassing to identify kangaroo spoor in Uruguay, for example.

By the end of his course of studies, Ted could make incredibly detailed and accurate spoor analyses. Just as a professional wine steward can identify an unlabeled glass of wine ("Crozes-Hermitage, Paul Jaboulet, 2003, or perhaps 2001. It was stored in too warm a place."), Ted could provide a lot of information about a sample of spoor ("Cow, Guernsey, about four years old, not in estrus. Has eaten a lot of clover recently. Moderate iodine deficiency.") Ted did, in fact, have a healthy respect for the work of professional wine stewards, though, perhaps because of his own training, he sometimes detected a trace of bullshit in their opinions.

When Ted graduated, he took a part-time day job doing actuarial work for a life insurance company, and he still had his night job as Kristin's sleep object, but he did have time to start and run a small spoor identification business, called Questionable Shit, out of his (actually Kristin and Piotr's) home. Much of his work was forensic in nature (for example, was a string of home invasions in Livonia really the work of a cat burglar?). There were also neighborhood disputes (whose dog is crapping all over Mr. Smith's yard?), environmental issues (what is the source of the fecal contamination of the Saginaw River?), and even some work for zoos determining the

correct species identification of their animals (“I don’t know, Lou, that looks a lot like a lemur to me.”) He also spent a lot of time explaining that not everything involving the word “shit” was within the purview of his firm (“I’m sorry you feel that way about your congressman, Mrs. Jones, but that’s not the kind of bullshit we deal with. Perhaps you should run for office yourself.”).

Ted’s breakthrough case was clearly the case of the second swing bridge, which took place in New Zealand. Kristin (and Piotr and Ted) spent part of a year in Wellington, a lovely town perched on a set of hills above a large harbor (actually, harbour), with arguably the ambience and charm and level of vehicular traffic of San Francisco in 1952. While they were there they took a trip to the South Island and went to Mount Cook, where they stayed in the one suite of the famous Hermitage Hotel. Mount Cook is the tallest mountain in New Zealand, and is really quite impressive. From the Hermitage Hotel, spectacular walks spread out in several directions. The best of these is the walk to the Hooker Glacier, which Kristin and Piotr took at daybreak so as to have the experience all to themselves. The walk crosses two swing bridges -- think of the pictures you have seen of Sherpa porters on their way to Mount Everest, crossing swaying bridges over a chasm filled with a raging torrent, and you have the idea roughly right -- and ends at the lake below the ice wall of the glacier, where you can see moderately large icebergs floating around and melting very slowly to provide water for the raging torrent under the bridges. In any case, the puzzle to be solved was that every morning, exactly in the middle of the second swing bridge, there was a tidy pile of fresh spoor. Park officials were baffled as to who or what was making this possibly authentic but nonetheless unwelcome addition to the ecology of the park. They considered preventive measures, such as nighttime electrification of the entire bridge, but were worried about the bad publicity they might get if a hiker who got up

too early or returned from their hike too late were electrocuted. They considered surveillance cameras but were afraid of the reaction of the libertarians, who currently held the balance of power in New Zealand's often fractious parliament. They considered sending a worker every morning, even earlier than Kristin and Piotr got up, to remove the spoor, but found out that this would be a violation of the union contract they had just signed.

As a result, Ted was called in. He almost immediately identified the spoor as being from a chamois, which raised the obvious issue that there are no chamois in New Zealand. Still, it was a pretty firm identification ("Chamois, about six years old, male, apparently with a sense of humor") and Ted stuck with it. And, as it turns out, there *are* chamois in New Zealand, having been brought there in 1907 as a gift from the Austrian Emperor Franz-Joseph I and released in the area of Mount Cook and the adjacent (just over the tops of the mountains) area of the Franz-Joseph Glacier. So Ted's brilliant identification won him instant fame, gratitude, and even modest payment. About the only fault the park officials found with the report is that they felt he had misspelled "humour."

The park officials were especially happy that the spoor deposits were the products of an *introduced species*. New Zealanders are violently opposed to all non-native species except people and sheep, which of course are the only two that have had very significant ecological effects. So a troublesome chamois can be removed without mercy, and only the threat of a diplomatic tussle with the Austrian government prevented stern action. In the end a wind-powered sprayer was installed which would wash the bridge clean at one hour before sunrise, with the spoor-water mixture being sent into a small solar-powered sewage treatment plant discretely hidden behind a wall of glacial scree, where it was thoroughly depooed before being used to water native plants in the area. This amazing system itself became a tourist attraction,

luring busloads of eco-tourists, many of whom stayed to eat the mediocre, overpriced buffet in the Hermitage's Alpine Room. This caused the chamois to go on strike for a cut of the profits ("no pay, no poop") that ended only when Ted threatened him with the possibility of spending chamois eternity drying cars.