

On The Hunt With Mantracker

High River cowboy kicks up dust in reality TV series

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Mantracker, a half-hour show, premieres April 12 at 9 p.m. on the Outdoor Life Network.

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Terry Grant speaks directly to the camera in a gruff tone: "Know your land. Know your prey."

Cue fast guitar music. Desperate people scramble through the forest. They run, they stumble, they cut themselves on barbed wire fences -- anything to get away.

Grant, the "Mantracker," is after them. The steely-eyed cowboy from High River gallops his horse to the top of a hoodoo and pulls hard on the reins to a dusty stop.

So ends the opening sequence of Mantracker, a new reality TV show on the Outdoor Life Network.

Watching a preview of the show at his bungalow in High River, Grant is amazed how the footage shot by two cameramen has been stitched together. He had no idea how flashy a modern TV production crew could make an old-fashioned chase seem.

"It's just impressed the poop out of me," he says.

For those who haven't guessed yet, Grant isn't your average well-coiffed TV star.

Mantracker is an action-packed chase show with a high-tech soundtrack and digital maps.

The setting for each of the show's nine episodes ranges from Yukon bush to Alberta foothills and northern Ontario lake-and-shield country.

Grant's "prey," a new odd couple each show who haven't met before, set off on foot through wilderness with a map, a compass and a few kilometres' head start. These not-exactly-uber-fit adventure racers have 36 hours to reach an objective that's usually about 50 kilometres away.

On their tails is a saddled-up Grant, 47, along with a local guide who has no tracking skills, and a cameraman. The hunters are on horseback, like any good posse. While the horses provide a speed advantage in open country, they're a liability in tight forests and deep water crossings. The hunters have no map.

It's a game of cat and mouse from the moment the prey set off a flare to start the chase. Galloping to the scene, Grant can't start chasing until he spies a clue indicating in which direction the prey have fled. All he needs is a partial footprint, a broken blade of grass or a stepped-on leaf.

Mantracker shines like the CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) series when Grant explains how he analyses each clue. In one segment, he relates how the colour of a crushed leaf can indicate how long ago it was trampled (the greener it is, the fresher the encounter). In another episode, he points out a footprint that's deeper on its outside edge, indicating the person was turning in the direction of the inside of the foot.

"Lots of people can find tracks," he says. "But the interpretation is 90 per cent of finding someone."

Unlike most actors, Grant did double duty as a technical director for the show. He says he feels "pride as a cowboy" when he watches the show.

"Things are done right," he says. "When I'm riding, I'm not flopping and jerking around like actors on some shows."

So how does a cowboy from rural Alberta get cast as the star of a national TV show by a Toronto-based producer?

The closest Grant had come to acting before Mantracker producer Ihor Macijiwsky came a-knockin' last spring was as an extra in the Alberta-filmed movie Heaven and Earth in 1992.

"I was quite shocked when they called me," says Grant, who gave up working as a cowboy a few years ago to become a custom carpenter.

Last spring, Macijiwsky heard about Grant's rare combination of skills from Dewy Matthews, Grant's cousin in Turner Valley. Macijiwsky had met Matthews while filming a documentary on Turner Valley for History Television a few years ago.

Rushing out to meet Grant just weeks before Mantracker filming would start, Macijiwsky found the "Clint Eastwood kind of character" he sought -- a rugged cowboy who exudes calm grit, even if he is more likely to crack a six-pack than work out to build six-pack abs.

"He's a natural," says Macijiwsky. "He's the real deal."

Grant's resume would impress most trackers:

- 25 years spent as a cowboy working at ranches across southern Alberta;
- A lifetime spent honing his tracking skills during hunting trips;
- 12 years as a trained search-and-rescue volunteer in southern Alberta.

Grant talks and acts tough in the show. His determination and rough demeanour quickly turn each chase into a grudge match between himself and his prey.

In the second episode, his macho challenges get to the usually friendly Liisa McMillan, a freelance writer from Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

"I'm really beginning to hate him," she says as she hides behind some bushes.

Grant says he's not acting when the tension gets high on the show.

"Ninety-nine per cent of it, the words fell out of my face and they filmed it," he says.

Grant's wife, Kim, is shocked at his on-screen persona. She cringes while watching a preview of the show when he yells out in anger at two women he's chasing.

"You ladies better kiss your ass goodbye," he says.

" 'Cause I'm coming to get it."

Kim laughs and shakes her head, embarrassed.

"Normally, he is really respectful of women," she insists.

Mantracker isn't all about analysing tracks. Prey in the show can be devious in their efforts to conceal their path.

Before the chase, Grant studies a brief biography about each of his prey. Details given about each person are scant -- job, hobbies, gender -- like the biographies given to search-and-rescue trackers trying to find missing people.

When route-finding, Grant factors in these tidbits as possible clues to how his prey will act. He also considers the limitations of his and his guide's horses in various terrain.

"Cowboys have been doing this for hundreds of years," he says.

Grant is keen to do another season of the show should it catch on with audiences. Is he worried the Mantracker producer might find a heartthrob from Hollywood to replace him?

"Finding somebody that can ride and do the Mantracking thing is half tough," he says.

Spoken like a true cowboy.

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