

Adaptive Patrolling

Understanding readiness in conservation patrols



- ✓ **Match readiness to what the environment demands**
- ✓ **Move smoothly between conditions as things change**
- ✓ **Sustain performance over days, not just hours**



2026 Version

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Understanding readiness in conservation patrols

Series

LEAD Little Guides

Development and collaboration

This Little Guide was developed through a collaboration between **Panthera** and **LEAD Conservation**.

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Review

This guide was reviewed by practitioners with experience in conservation security operations, planning, and training.

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The Little Guide series is part of the
Integrated Threat Reduction (ITR) framework.

Download ITR here:



This little guide was written for people doing real work, in real places.

SECTION

I

INTRODUCTION

Conservation security is physical work. Teams walk long distances, in difficult terrain, often in heat, sometimes at night. What they face changes constantly. The threat picture on Monday may not be the same on Thursday.

Most experienced patrol teams already adjust to what is around them. They read the environment, pick up on changes, and shift the way they move without always having a name for what they are doing.

This Little Guide gives that instinct a structure.

This Little Guide introduces a simple framework for patrol posture — the level of readiness a patrol operates at, and how it changes in response to what is happening around it. It is based on the Cooper Colour Code, a well-established model of mental readiness adapted here for conservation patrol teams. The idea is straightforward: **match how you move to what you are facing.**

The aim is not to make patrols more aggressive. It is to help teams operate at the right level, at the right time, for the right reasons.

Who is this guide for?

You do not need to be a tactician or a military veteran to use this guide. This guide is written for people involved in conservation security at different levels, including:

- **Field rangers**
- **Team leaders and supervisors**
- **Operations room personnel**
- **Managers responsible for planning and training**
- **Training staff responsible for vocational training**

The terrain changes. The threat changes. The principle does not.

- You do not need formal policing or military training.
- You do not need specialist equipment.

If you lead patrols, plan operations, or train rangers, you have enough background to begin.

You also do not need to change how your organisation is structured before you start. You do not need to abandon existing SOPs, formations, or planning tools you already use.

What will this guide do — and not do?

This Little Guide exists to help conservation security teams think more clearly about how they patrol — and to match the way they move to the environment they are actually operating in.

This guide will not:

- **Teach tactics or patrol procedures**
- **Tell you exactly what formations and tactics to use in your area**
- **Make your patrols more aggressive. Readiness is not aggression.**

This guide will:

- **Explain patrol posture in clear, practical language**
- **Give teams a shared way to talk about readiness**
- **Help move from “always the same” to “right for the situation”**

How can I use this guide?

You can read this guide from start to finish, or focus only on the parts that matter most to your role. Each section is written so it still makes sense on its own. The guide is organised as follows:

- **Section I** is the introduction and you are in it already
- **Section II** explains the problem with patrolling at the wrong level
- **Section III** introduces the four conditions and how they work as a team
- **Section IV** shows how patrol posture works in practice
- **Section V** uses a real situation to show how this plays out on the ground
- **Section VI** provides quick reminders and checklists

If patrol posture is new to you, start with Section II.

If you are already familiar with the Colour Code, Sections III and IV will be most useful.

How can I stay involved?

The QR code on the cover page links to the most current version of this guide.

A second QR code on the back of the guide links to a short feedback form.

This is an open invitation to contribute. Questions, comments, and lessons from the field are welcome and will be used to improve future versions.

This guide is meant to be used, tested, and improved over time.

SECTION



**THE
FOUNDATION**

What problem are we trying to solve?

Many conservation patrols operate the same way regardless of the threat. Same formation. Same spacing. Same level of alertness. Every day, every patrol, every environment.

Sometimes this means teams are too relaxed. They move through areas of genuine risk without adjusting. The signs are there, but the patrol does not change.

Sometimes the opposite happens. Teams are trained to patrol at a high level of alertness — tight formations, strict silence, full tactical posture — in environments where the actual threat does not demand it.

On paper, the second problem looks like good training. On the ground, it creates a different kind of failure.

The problem is not effort.

The problem is a mismatch between what is done and what is needed during the patrol.

What happens when the posture does not fit?

Think about how you carry your valuables.

Walking through your own quiet village, your phone is in your hand, your bag hangs loose. You are not worried. The place tells you there is nothing to worry about.

Walking through a busy city market — the kind where pickpockets work — you behave differently without being told. Phone in your front pocket. Bag zipped and held close. You check around you. Nobody asked you to do this. The environment did.

Now imagine someone said: walk through your own village the way you would through that market. Every day. Hand on your bag. Phone hidden. Checking behind you.

You would do it for a day, maybe two. Then you would stop. Not because you are tired — you could easily keep walking. But because everything around you says it is not necessary. Your eyes, your experience, and your instincts all tell you the same thing: this effort does not match this place. So your brain quietly lets it go.

That is what happens when the standard is not supported by the environment. It does not fail because people are weak. It fails because people are human.

The same thing happens on patrol. A team that is trained or told to operate at a level of readiness that the environment does not support will maintain it for a while.

But over days and weeks, the standard quietly drops. Rangers begin to relax — not because they are undisciplined, but because their daily experience tells them the posture does not match the ground they are walking on.

No one decides to lower the standard. It just drifts.

The gap between what is expected and what is practised grows wider. And because the drop is uncontrolled, the team does not settle into something well-managed. It settles into something vague — sometimes alert, sometimes not, with no shared understanding of what the current level should be.

This affects everything.

The patrol leader cannot enforce a standard that does not match the environment. Instructions become something people follow when they are being watched and set aside when they are not. Rangers know they are not doing what they were trained to do, and over time, the training itself loses credibility. If what you learned in the classroom does not apply in the field, why would you trust the next thing you are taught?

The answer is not to train harder. It is to train right.

Match the posture to the threat. Teach teams to operate well at the level they will actually spend most of their time in. And give them the tools to move up and down deliberately, not by accident.

That is what the Patrol Colour Code provides.

SECTION



**CORE
CONCEPTS**

What is patrol posture?

A simple way to think about it

Imagine two patrols leaving camp on the same morning.

The first team walks out in single file, close together, weapons ready, everyone watching a set area, no talking. They move like this for eight hours through open grassland where the last incident was three months ago. Nothing reinforces the posture. By afternoon, the standard has quietly slipped — not because the team is weak, but because the ground has told them all day that the effort does not match the situation.

The second team walks out in a relaxed formation, comfortable spacing, talking at low levels where needed, watching their environment. Two hours in, the person at the front finds fresh human tracks heading into a known snaring area. The patrol leader gives a hand signal. Within seconds, the formation tightens, conversation stops, everyone knows what arcs they are watching, and the team moves differently.

The first patrol held one level of readiness all day, regardless of what the environment told them.

The second patrol adjusted. They matched their posture to the environment. When the environment changed, they changed with it — and the shift was sharp and immediate, because the team had been operating at a level that made sense all morning. The higher posture felt justified, so the team committed to it fully.

The difference is not courage or discipline.

The difference is posture management.

Patrol posture is the level of readiness a team operates at together — visible in how they move, watch, communicate, and behave.

The Patrol Colour Code

The framework uses four conditions, based on Cooper’s Colour Code — a model originally developed for individual readiness and adapted here for conservation patrol teams.

Condition	State	What it looks like on patrol
White	Unaware. Switched off.	Not a patrol state. Rest, sleep, off-duty time. Everyone knows what this feels like. The point is simple: when you step out on patrol, you leave White behind.
Yellow	Relaxed alertness. No specific threat expected.	The default for most patrols. Sustainable pace. Comfortable spacing. The team is watching their environment, noticing what is around them. Conversation at appropriate levels. Alert, but not tense. This is where a patrol spends most of a routine day.
Orange	Heightened readiness. Something has changed.	The patrol has picked up signs that raise the chance of a threat. Formation tightens. Everyone knows what arc they are watching. Movement gets quieter, more deliberate. The team is preparing for something that may happen and thinking ahead: if this happens, we do that.
Red	Threat confirmed. Act now.	The threat is real and present. Rehearsed drills take over. The team is not deciding what to do; they are doing what they have already practised. This could be a dangerous animal at close range, a suspect encounter, or a medical emergency.

One team, one condition

Col. Jeff Cooper designed the Colour Code for one person. This guide applies it to an entire patrol.

That is a deliberate choice. In this framework, the patrol moves as one body. It has one posture, one condition, one state of readiness. When the patrol is in Yellow, every member is in Yellow: their spacing, movement, observation, and communication all reflect the same condition.

When the patrol shifts to Orange, everything changes together. The formation tightens. People watch more carefully. The noise drops. The pace adjusts. Non-verbal communication becomes the norm.

A patrol where different people are at different levels is a patrol that is not working. If the person at the front has shifted up but the rear of the patrol has not noticed, the team is split. If one person has jumped to Red while the rest of the team is still in Orange, that person may do something the team is not ready for.

The patrol leader sets the condition, based on observations by any patrol member. The signal communicates it. The team adopts it.

The result is a patrol that moves as one, not because people have been drilled into identical movement, but because they share a common understanding of what the current situation demands. Experienced patrol leaders already do this.

The Colour Code gives it a name and makes it teachable.

Transitions are the real skill

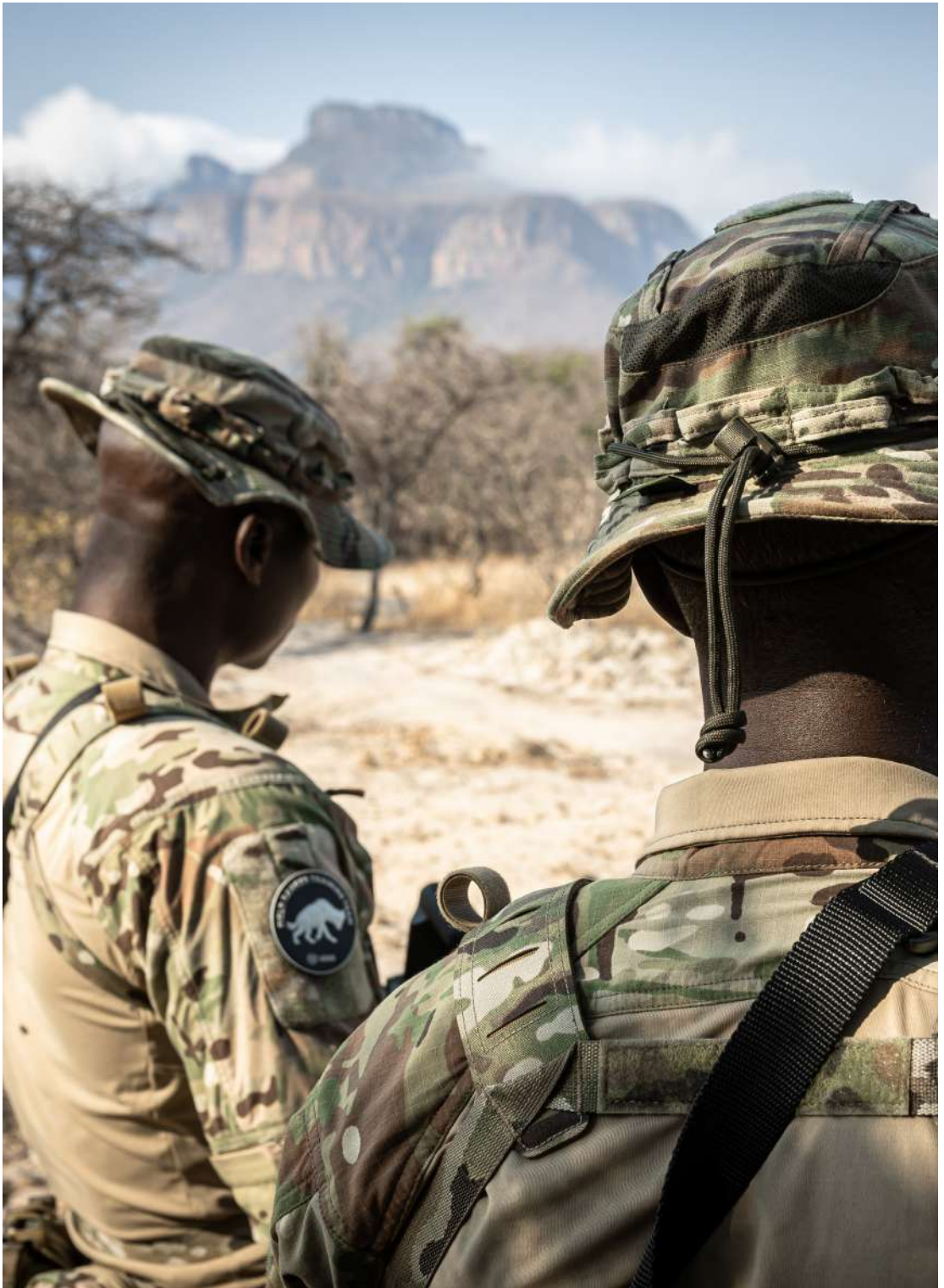
Knowing what each condition looks like is not enough. The skill is moving between them.

Going up must be quick, quiet, and shared. When the patrol leader signals a shift from Yellow to Orange, every team member must recognise the signal and change their behaviour without hesitation. The signal must be simple, rehearsed, and able to pass through the patrol even when people cannot see each other.

Coming back down is harder. There is a natural tendency to stay heightened once you have gone up. The patrol leader must be able to signal that the situation has settled, and the team must trust that call and actually ease their posture. Without this, the posture stays high when it does not need to be — and the mismatch begins. Both directions matter.

- A team that can go up but cannot come back down will see its standards quietly erode.
- A team that can operate at a higher level but cannot recognise when to go there will be caught off guard.

Smooth, confident transitions — up and down — are the mark of a well-trained patrol.



SECTION

IV

**PRACTICAL
APPLICATION**

How does this work day to day?

Patrol posture does not replace existing planning. It gives it purpose.

Before a patrol steps off, the briefing sets the scene. Information from previous patrols, spatial and temporal analysis, community reports, seasonal patterns — all of this helps build a picture of what the team is likely to face. The briefing may suggest a starting condition and flag what to watch for.

But once the patrol is on the ground, posture belongs to the team.

The patrol leader reads the environment and adjusts. The team responds. A fresh track where there should not be one. A cut fence. Alarm calls from animals that suggest something has disturbed them. Wildlife behaviour that does not fit the time of day. These are the signals that tell a patrol the environment has changed — and the team shifts accordingly.

Good rangers notice these things. The Colour Code gives them a shared way to act on what they notice.

Each condition tells the team what posture to adopt. In Yellow, the formation is loose — spread out, covering ground, looking for sign. As the team moves to Orange, the posture tightens: closer spacing, quieter movement, everyone watching their area.

Each step up the Colour Code brings a more deliberate way of moving through the environment.

The team does not wait to be told. They are trained to read, signal, and adjust.

Choosing the right starting point

The starting condition is set before the patrol steps off. It is based on an honest look at the threat picture; not the worst thing that has ever happened, but what patrols routinely face.

Most conservation patrols globally operate in environments where the main risks are environmental: dangerous animals, difficult terrain, weather. People encountered illegally may be resource users, trespassers, or snare setters — often carrying tools like pangas, wire, or axes. These are generally manageable situations, but they are not without risk.

Yellow as the starting point is not a lower standard. It is the right standard for these environments. It allows the team to cover ground, observe widely, and stay alert without burning through their energy before anything has happened.

When the threat picture is different — when information suggests increased activity, when recent patrols have found fresh signs, when the area has a history of armed encounters — the starting condition moves to Orange.

The framework matches the posture to what the environment actually demands.

Energy and sustainability

Patrol posture has a direct relationship with energy.

Rangers are fit. They can sustain demanding work. But when the posture does not match the threat, the effort becomes harder to justify — not consciously, but instinctively. The brain stops investing in a standard that the environment does not support. Over time, alertness fades, observation narrows, and the quality of decisions drops.

When the environment does demand a higher posture, teams can sustain it — because the threat reinforces the effort. The problem is not capacity. It is match.

This is why the framework focuses on the ability to move between conditions, not just the ability to operate in them. The skill is not knowing what Orange looks like. It is knowing when to go there, how to work well at that level, and when to come back to Yellow.

Does this require training?

Patrol posture only works when people are trained.

Both the people who assign tasks and the people who carry them out need to understand what the conditions mean and how to work with them.

This does not mean free improvisation. The conditions are defined. The transitions are rehearsed. The signals are agreed. Adaptation happens within a trained framework, not outside it.

Training ensures that:

- Conditions are understood the same way across the team
- Transition signals are recognised and responded to correctly
- Stepping back down is practised, not just stepping up
- Decision-making improves instead of becoming chaotic

Without training, patrol posture becomes guesswork.

With training, it becomes professional judgement.

How does this fit in the operational cycle?

- Patrol posture anchors the entire operational cycle.
- Briefings set the starting condition and explain the threat picture.
- Execution adapts posture to conditions as they change on the ground.
- Debriefings assess whether posture matched the environment and what should change next time.

When posture is part of the cycle, every patrol becomes a learning opportunity. Teams get better at reading the environment, adjusting their level, and explaining why they made the choices they did.



SECTION

V

**IN THE
REAL WORLD**

A day on the ground

Imagine you are on patrol. Five of you. Three days out from base, moving through mixed bush on the edge of a dry-season waterhole circuit. The briefing was clear: snare activity has picked up along the river, but no fresh sign of anything more serious. Your starting condition is **Yellow**.

You know what that means. Comfortable pace. Good spacing. Heads up, watching the ground and the bush around you. Conversation happens — low, easy, between people who know each other. Nobody is pretending the area is more dangerous than it is. Nobody is switched off either.

You cover two ridges before mid-morning. Check a waterhole. Old ranger tracks, nothing fresh. The bush is quiet. A pair of francolins flush from the grass ahead. Somewhere to the east, a go-away bird calls. Normal sounds. The kind of day where nothing happens...

Before the riverbed

After lunch, the ground changes. Open grassland gives way to thicker vegetation along a seasonal river. Visibility drops. Game trails narrow. You have walked this stretch before. It is the kind of place where encounters happen at close range — with wildlife, and sometimes with people who should not be there.

The patrol leader gives a hand signal. One movement. No words.

Orange.

You know exactly what to do. The formation tightens. Spacing closes. Your low-voice conversation stops mid-sentence and neither of you needs to explain why. Movement slows. Each person is watching their arc. You can feel the whole patrol change — not

just your own body, but the patrol body around you. Five people shifting together, like a breath drawn in.

This is not fear. It is focus. And it happened in five seconds because everyone was already alert enough to receive the signal, and act.

After the riverbed

You find a snare line. Six wire loops set across a game trail, anchored to cut saplings. Recent. The wire is still bright, but the saplings have started to dry out. This is an older snareline. Whoever set these should have been back by now.

The patrol holds Orange. Two rangers secure forward while the snare line is checked, photographed, and removed. Two members check for tracks. The tracks have been washed out by light rain. The patrol leader reports by radio. Everyone is exactly where they should be.

You move through the riverbed and out the other side. The bush opens up. Grassland again. Long sight lines. The patrol leader checks behind, ahead, and gives the signal.

Yellow.

You feel it leave your shoulders. Spacing opens. Pace lifts slightly. After a while the team halts. Someone says something about the wire gauge on the last snare and the conversation picks up again — in low voice, while some patrol members take the opportunity to drink some water.

You did not decide to relax. The environment told you, and the patrol leader confirmed it, and you trusted the call because it matched what you could see with your own eyes.

What made the difference

You held Yellow all morning without keeping up pretence for a posture that did not fit the ground. When the ground changed, you went up to Orange together — quick and quiet. When it was over, you came back down to Yellow. And tomorrow, when the threat picture is different, the starting condition will be different too.

That is patrol posture. Not one level for every day. The right level for this day, adjusted when the day changes, applied by the whole patrol as one.

A note on signals

This guide does not prescribe the signals themselves. That is deliberate. Most organisations already have hand signals their teams know and trust, and this framework is meant to work with them, not against them.

If you are choosing signals for the conditions, keep two things in mind. Each signal should be clearly distinct from the others. And each should work with one hand — on patrol, the other hand is usually busy.

There is one more thing worth knowing. Once a team knows the conditions well, certain actions become signals on their own. The person at the front stops and takes a knee. A hand goes up to halt. A rifle comes up. The patrol reads the action and shifts to a higher condition before any dedicated signal is given.

Those are the true signals of a well-oiled team.

SECTION

VI

**THE PART OF
TENS**

This part is here because lists are useful.

They help you check your thinking, spot patterns, and remind yourself what really matters.

You don't need to read this part in order.

Ten signs posture is not being managed

- 1. Every patrol looks the same.** If there is no visible difference between a patrol in a quiet area and one near a known hotspot, posture is not being managed.
- 2. Rangers cannot explain why they are in their current formation.** If the answer is “because that’s how we always do it,” posture is habit, not choice.
- 3. The training standard does not match daily practice.** If rangers were trained for high-threat operations but work in low-threat environments, the gap will quietly erode discipline.
- 4. Teams can go up but not come down.** If patrols raise their readiness but never deliberately step back down, the mismatch builds and the standard quietly erodes.
- 5. There is no signal for changing condition.** If there is no agreed, rehearsed way to shift the team from one level to another, changes will be slow, noisy, or missed.
- 6. Declining performance is treated as a discipline problem.** If alertness drops through the day and the answer is “try harder,” the posture may not match the environment.
- 7. Observation drops through the day.** If teams are sharp in the first hour but miss obvious signs by the afternoon, the posture may not be matched to the environment.
- 8. The patrol leader does not set a baseline.** If patrols step off without a clear statement of what condition they are in and why, posture is left to each person’s guess.

- 9. Posture is only discussed after something goes wrong.** If readiness only comes up during incident reviews, the approach is reactive, not preventive
- 10. Rangers describe their training as unrealistic.** If the common feeling is that what was taught does not apply in the field, posture mismatch is likely the reason.

Ten benefits of managing patrol posture

- 1. Better energy management.** Teams save energy when the threat is low and have more to give when it matters.
- 2. Sharper transitions.** Practised shifts between conditions are faster, quieter, and more reliable.
- 3. Sustainable alertness.** A team at the right level can keep it up for hours without fading.
- 4. Stronger team cohesion.** Shared posture means the patrol moves as one body, not as individuals in different states.
- 5. More honest training.** When the trained standard matches the real operating environment, respect for the training system grows.
- 6. Better decisions.** Patrol leaders who manage posture make clearer, calmer choices when things change.
- 7. Less unnecessary risk.** Teams that match posture to threat avoid the gradual erosion of standards that comes from operating at a level the environment does not support.
- 8. Clearer communication.** A shared language for readiness — White, Yellow, Orange, Red — removes confusion from briefings, changes, and debriefs.
- 9. Stronger leadership.** When the standard is realistic, patrol leaders can hold it with credibility. Instructions reflect reality, not wishful thinking.
- 10. Greater long-term effectiveness.** Patrols that manage their posture well keep performing over weeks and months, not just hours.

Glossary

Baseline condition

The readiness level a patrol starts at, set before stepping off. Based on the current threat picture. For most conservation patrols, the baseline is Yellow.

Colour Code

A framework of four conditions — White, Yellow, Orange, and Red — describing levels of readiness. Originally developed by Jeff Cooper for individual awareness and adapted here for conservation patrol teams.

Condition

A defined level of readiness that describes how a patrol is operating at a given time. Each condition is visible in how the team moves, watches, communicates, and behaves.

Patrol posture

The level of readiness a patrol team operates at together, visible in their formation, movement, observation, and behaviour.

Posture mismatch

The gap between the posture teams are trained or told to hold and the posture they actually operate at. Happens when the standard does not match the real environment.

Threat picture

What threats are present, how likely they are, and what form they may take. Used to decide the right baseline condition.

Transition

Moving from one condition to another — up or down — signalled by the patrol leader. Requires training to do well.

How this guide aligns with the Global Ranger Competences

The International Ranger Federation and the Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA) publish the Global Ranger Competences — a shared benchmark for what a professional ranger needs to be able to do. This guide puts several of those competences into practice.

The patrol

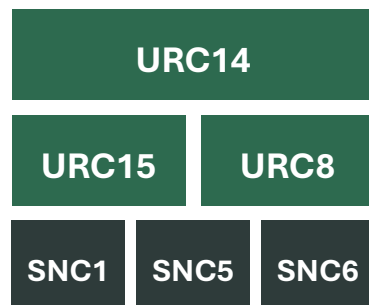
Plans and procedures — the briefing sets the starting condition

Reading the ground

Recognising unauthorised activity and threats, moving safely at the right level of attention

Patrol leaders

Briefing language, supervision, teaching the Colour Code



Universal competences in green · senior competences in slate

The strongest link is the patrol itself. Patrolling according to plans and procedures (URC14) is where posture begins — the briefing sets the starting condition. Identifying signs of unauthorised activity (URC15) depends on operating at the right level of attention for the ground you are on. And working and travelling safely (URC8) is what posture protects.

For patrol leaders it goes further: supervising teams on patrol (SNC5), preparing plans and procedures (SNC1), and training and mentoring rangers (SNC6). The Colour Code serves all three — a shared language for briefings, a standard to supervise against, a framework that can be taught.

Maintaining welfare for self and co-workers (URC23) does not only mean rest and health checks. A posture that matches the environment keeps effort sustainable, patrol after patrol. That is welfare too.



International Ranger
Federation



Universal Ranger
Support Alliance

ursa4rangers.org

“Relaxed but alert. I have
trained my whole life for
this.”



A practical *Little Guide* to adaptive patrolling

Adaptive patrolling sounds complicated. It is not. This guide offers a clear, practical way to think about readiness — how a patrol carries itself, and how that changes in response to what is happening on the ground.

Instead of training every patrol to operate at the same level regardless of the situation, it shows how to set the right baseline, read the environment, and adjust when conditions change — turning everyday movement into deliberate, sustainable performance.

- **Keep your readiness where it belongs** — understand what patrol posture really is, how it differs from simply being alert, and how matching it to the environment prevents quiet erosion of standards
- **Make transitions the skill, not just the state** — go up quickly, come back down deliberately, and move the whole patrol together using simple, rehearsed signals
- **Use what your patrols already know** — apply the Colour Code framework without changing patrol structures, SOPs, or existing systems
- **Learn what good looks like** — recognise the signs of posture mismatch and the benefits of a patrol that adjusts its readiness to what the day actually demands

Little Guide

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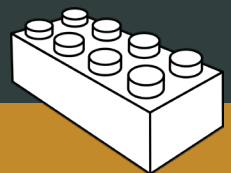
What are Little Guides?

Little Guides are short, practical documents designed to be read and used quickly. Each guide focuses on one idea or way of working that supports better conservation security on the ground.

A typical Little Guide takes about **30 minutes** to read. You do not need to study it, memorise it, or read it in one sitting. You can dip in, return to it later, or use it as a reference during planning, training, or discussion.

Each Little Guide stands on its own feet. You do not need to read the others first to make sense of this one. At the same time, the guides are designed to fit together. They share a common language and logic, and all sit within the broader framework of **Integrated Threat Reduction (ITR)**.

Think of Little Guides as building blocks. Each one helps clarify a specific part of conservation security work, while supporting the bigger picture of reducing risk and harm, shaping behaviour, and achieving lasting impact.



Staying involved

This QR code links to a feedback form feeding directly into LEAD's review and update cycle.

