

Winter hiking in canyon country

With the recent uptick in daytime temperatures, the urge to visit canyon country could not be ignored. It's February, but lately it feels like late March. The mild winter weather and lack of significant mountain snow is worrisome, but it sure gets the spring fever juices flowing. I scrutinized a map of Western Colorado to explore the options. My focus landed on the Colorado National Monument.



Bill Harris
Outdoors

The Colorado National Monument near Grand Junction is red rock canyon heaven — a result of a geologic uplift known as the Uncompahgre Plateau. The monument features deep canyons of colorful sedimentary rock formations that form balanced rocks, deep alcoves and dramatic rock spires. Over a dozen trails travel along the rims, cliffs and slopes of the monument.

During my time at Mesa State College (Colorado Mesa University) many years ago I would ride my 10-speed bike to the east entrance of the monument then hike the Devil's Kitchen area. It was my first encounter with the desert canyon landscape. I was intrigued by the variety of trees, shrubs and plants that filled the desert flats, canyons and mesas. A landscape, so common to the intermountain west, was strikingly different from the wooded plains of my youth in Illinois.

As we climbed the Rimrock Drive from the Fruita entrance to the Colorado National Monument, the scenery transformed into a wonderland of slopes, cliffs and narrow benches. The Rimrock Road itself is a man-made wonder, a 23-mile long road built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression — no doubt one of the top scenic roads in Colorado.

My hiking companions were my wife, Kathy and grandson, Marcus; our destination, the Upper Monument Canyon Trail. By the time we reached



The trail wastes no time switchbacking and contouring to the canyon below.

COURTESY PHOTO

the trailhead the outside thermometer in my truck read 53 degrees. The sky was cloudless with the hint of a breeze coming off the sun-warmed cliffs below the trailhead. A final pack check and we were headed down the trail.

From the Rimrock Road a handful of the monument's trails descend into one of several canyons. The Monument Canyon Trail wasted no time

switchbacking and contouring its way into the canyon below. Within a few 10ths of a mile we reached a fork in the trail. The left fork continued to drop into Monument Canyon. The right fork traversed a bench out to a viewpoint overlooking the Coke Ovens — an erosional feature of Wingate sandstone. We took the right fork.

Much of the trail was in the deep shade of mid-winter.

Patches of crusty snow and ice covered sections of the trail. The footing was a bit tricky. Marcus negotiated the icy sections more sure-footedly than his elders. After a quick stop at the viewpoint we backtracked to the main trail, and resumed our descent. In short order we reached the bottom of the side drainage that led to the main canyon. In about a half mile of hiking

we had descended 500 feet in elevation.

A trickle of clear water ran along the sandy floor of the side drainage — no hint of ice anywhere. I paused to examine the intricate patterns created by ripples of running water. Much to my surprise a wasp and bee flew away from their resting places at the water's edge. February and the wasps and bees were already active! After a brief discussion about the crazy winter weather we continued our journey.

The trail mellowed out as it contoured around shallow arroyos and slopes near the canyon floor. The predominant geologic formation of brick-red Chinle soon gave way to the dark 1.7 billion year old Precambrian rock heavily laced with quartz and mica. The interface between the two formations represents a 1.36 billion gap in the geologic record mostly the result of uplifting and subsequent erosion.

After a brief lunch we continued our hike. What really grabbed my attention was how quiet it was. The muted roars of a few high-flying jets, the distant calls of ravens and the buzzing of bees and wasps were the only sounds I heard. That sort of quiet isn't part of city life, so enhances the experience of being outdoors.

Our goal was to get far enough along the trail that we could observe several of the monolithic rock spires for which Monument Canyon was named. Several miles in we rounded a low ridgeline, and both Independence Monument and Kissing Couple came into view. Both features are quite impressive reaching up several hundred feet from these bases.

The hike back to the trailhead was uneventful until we had to negotiate the steep climb out of the canyon. The incline didn't slow down Marcus, but Kathy and I took regular breaks to catch our breath; all the better to take in the scenic wonders around us. By the time we returned to our vehicle the thermometer read in the low 60s — not bad for a winter day in eastern Colorado.

Bill Harris is the author of 'Bicycling the Uncompahgre Plateau'. He has traveled the backcountry of the Colorado Plateau since 1976.

Make sure to put on your hat during cold days

We have been told all our lives that "If you are cold, put a hat on." I have even read on many occasions that up to 70 percent of your body heat can be lost through an uncovered head. Well, hold onto your hats because all of that is just a myth. If it were true, you could probably dance around in the snow wearing a stocking cap and nothing else, without getting cold, although you might get arrested. Mothers who were trying to get their kids to wear a hat when they went outside to play in the snow probably started it. There are however, a number of good reasons to wear a hat in the winter months when you are outdoors.



Mark Rackay
Tips from the Posse

In previous columns we have discussed wearing proper layers to keep your core warm, gloves and mittens for the hands, and boots for your feet. Your head is equally important and requires some special consideration.

Truth is, your head only loses about 10 percent of your body heat. Keep in mind that there is a lot of blood flow to the head and face. Anyone who has suffered a rap near the eye knows how much this swells from blood and bruising. Areas such as your ears do not have as much circulation and are especially susceptible to frostbite. And by the time your ears feel numb, it is probably too late.

Due to a certain flaw in my anatomy, one that seems to appear with age, I have had to begin wearing a baseball style hat in the summer months. Seems that a certain area on top of my head gets a little too much sun. I have now gotten used to that type of hat and try to stretch



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK RACKAY

These late season Hunters are wearing the traditional watch cap with a hooded coat (left) and a balaclava with a ball cap and a hooded jacket as a backup. These head coverings are about as good as you can do for our outdoor activities.

the seasons and wear one in the winter. This does not work well for overall ear health, especially when there is a cold wind blowing.

One of the best things to cover your head with is a balaclava. These cover the entire head, ears, neck and throat. Most are very thin and comfortable. I even size my ball cap up a notch or two and wear it over the top. This is especially useful when you have to wear a blaze orange hat during the numerous rifle-hunting seasons. When the temperature warms up during the day, the balaclava can be removed and placed in a pocket or pack until needed again. The balaclava should be made of a moisture wicking synthetic because if your head sweats from exertion you need the moisture drawn away from the skin. Once again, cotton is not your friend.

The standard watch type knit caps are very popular although they do not cover your neck area. These caps are mostly made of synthetic materials and work nicely keeping

moisture from your head.

My favorite tip is to have a jacket with a hood. The hood can be raised or lowered over your head as needed. If it is snowing out, the hood does a great job of keeping snow from going down your back. The hood is also very effective during windy times. I generally have the hood over my balaclava during the harshest times and that combination has worked well for me.

Like any other article you wear to fight off the cold, it is best to put it on before you get cold. Having an extra hat or balaclava in your pack can be a day saver if the first gets soaked, either from weather or sweat.

Paying attention to your head and ears will make your time outdoors that much more pleasurable. Besides, no one wants to deal with frostbite on his or her ears. Until next time, see you on the trail.

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IN BRIEF

Online resources aid big-game license applications

Hunters: Don't wait until deadline to apply for a big game license. There are plenty of resources online to help hunters complete their applications well before the April 7 cut-off date.

At <http://cpw.state.co.us>, prospective hunters can determine their hunter-education requirements; find information about draw for deer, elk, pronghorn, moose, bear, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and turkey; get the skinny on game management units; review season dates by species and take methods; become informed about the preference point system; peruse statistics on license quotas, application status, post-draw stats and more; find out about additional options for those who do not succeed in the draw for their first choice hunt code; and watch a video about completing an online application.

To complete an application, have the following information handy: Current and valid photo ID and/or customer identification number; proof of Hunter Education certification (card number); proof of Colorado residency (if applicable); a 2015 Habitat Stamp, which will be automatically added to your online application if required. It can also be purchased separately; Social Security number for customers 12 years and older, unless already on file; hunt codes (up to four for each species); and credit card info.

Hunters can also purchase an over-the-counter bull elk tag, available for the second or third rifle seasons, starting on July 21 online, by phone at 1(800) 244-5613, at any license agent, or at CPW offices. Colorado's over-the-counter bull elk license is unique in that it allows a hunter to hunt anywhere in 93 units, which includes some of the best elk hunting in the state. Customer service representatives are available from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time at (303) 297-1192 and specially trained Hunt Planners are available to assist hunters by phone at (303) 291-7526. Hunters can also get personal assistance at one of CPW's regional service centers in Denver, Grand Junction, Colorado Springs or Durango or any CPW office or state park.

To view the interactive version of the 2015 Colorado Big Game brochure or download the PDF, go to: <http://case.epaperflip.com/colorado/Parks-and-wildlife/>.