

## Lightning safety a must when outdoors

I was 26 miles offshore of the Florida Keys on a sport fishing boat called the Tag 'em, when lightning struck the vessels tower. Nobody was physically injured but all were visibly shaken from the blinding flash and the simultaneous deafening crack of the thunder.

All the electronics on-board were destroyed. I took away from that experience a new respect for the power of lightning.

The Colorado Mountains are known for thunderstorms in the warm summer months, usually in the afternoons. Lightning strikes occur more often at higher altitudes because the air and climate are drier.

People outdoors should maintain an increased awareness for storms that produce lightning.

According to the National Weather Service there are, on average, 20 million lightning strikes annually in the United States. This results in an average of 273 injuries and 48 deaths annually. The state of Colorado ranks 3rd in the nation, with 17 deaths during the years 2005 to 2014.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, states that your chances of being struck by lightning during a storm is about 1 in 12,000. The chances of being struck in your lifetime is somewhere around 1 in 3,000.

NOAA further states that about 10 percent of all strikes are fatal. Many others usually



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

result in debilitating injuries and burns.

Lightning can strike more than 10 miles away from the center of a thunderstorm, well beyond the audible range of thunder. Most bolts occur along the edges of the storm.

Even though the storm is past your location, you are still in danger of a lightning strike.

In the event a storm catches you, here are a few things you can do to protect yourself:

- Avoid shelters with exposed openings such as picnic pavilions and camping shelters. Lightning can channel through the openings.
- Do not have close contact with the other members of your group. Spread out at least 50 feet apart to minimize the chance of everyone in the group being struck.
- Get away from water. Stay away from low spots that might accumulate rain runoff.
- Avoid a lone tree, or a small group of trees in the open at all costs. Also, stay away from



any object that is higher than the surrounding terrain. A group of small trees among taller trees, or a thick forest, is a much better choice.

• Drop and move away from all metal objects such as trekking poles and pack frames. Stay far away from ATV's when in a storm.

• Learn the lightning safety position as a last resort. Crouch down on the balls of your feet while keeping them as close together as possible. Don't allow any other part of your body to touch the ground and keep your ears covered. By keeping the surface area

of your body in contact with the ground to a minimum, the threat of electricity traveling across the ground and reaching you is greatly reduced. This position should only be used as a last resort.

If you suddenly feel the hairs on your arms, legs or head tingle or standing on end, it means you are in imminent danger. You are standing in a highly charged electrical field and your group should all respond immediately.

Quickly move away from metal conductors, such as fence lines, tall trees, power lines and high points.

Everyone should spread apart and assume the lightning safety position.

The afternoon storms bring much needed moisture to our mountains and help lower the temperatures on those hot days. I still love to watch a good "lightning show," just from a safer distance.

Until next time, see you on the trail.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

## Fourteener accessed through a keyhole



### Outdoors

By John T. Unger

In Lewis Carroll's famous story, to get to Wonderland, Alice went through the Looking Glass.

Had she lived in the Rocky Mountains, to get to a high altitude wonderland she might have gone through the Keyhole instead.

Our nearby San Juan mountain range boasts the highest number of Colorado's peaks that exceed fourteen thousand feet in elevation. On the other side of the state, Rocky Mountain National Park's eastern edge has a fourteener with a different kind of beauty.

On a recent trip to the Front Range in northern Colorado, I made a point of repeating a favorite run and hike. This one leads up and down Longs Peak, and has views that are literally breathtaking, as it is 14,259 feet high.

That makes it the highest point heading due north between central Colorado and the Arctic Circle.

One of the first questions asked by hikers who

may be considering their first fourteener is this question: "Is it a walk-up?" The answer to that is a very clear "Well, yes and no."

Yes, it is a walk-up in that it's Keyhole Route requires no harness, ropes, belay, or climbing hardware. Yet the more full answer is also "No," because one must use one's hands and feet simultaneously to ascend two of the five major sections of this climb to the summit.

The only actual climbing gear seen on this route is a climbing helmet, which is occasionally seen upon the head of one of the scores of people who are ascending this route on any given summer day.

Whether someone is attempting to climb Longs Peak on the Front Range or attempting another walk-up in the San Juans such as Mt. Sneffels or Uncompahgre Peak, he or she will need to first consider similar issues. Assuming good fitness and acclimatization to thin air, the next question to consider is this: "How far is the trip on foot from trailhead to summit and back to trailhead?"

In the case of Longs Peak, this distance is fifteen miles round-trip. For this reason, most of those who do reach it's summit in a single day are those who have followed National Park Service advice. This advice is to

leave the trailhead no later than 3 a.m. This gives the best chance to be off of the summit by noon, when lightning strikes commonly begin.

Do you still want to go? The views and the experiences are well worth it, but do take note that the average round-trip takes a person ten to fifteen hours.

Well-trained mountain runners are often successful in making it back in less than six hours, but the views are such that running it means missing out on some spectacular vistas from the top of the Continental Divide. In addition, overconfidence and rushing the trip can raise the chances of a dangerous hurried misstep or life-threatening hazards of exposure, dehydration, and even a summer season frostbite.

"The Keyhole Route is NOT a hike!" This phrase appears prominently and in bold letters on the most recent Rocky Mountain National Park handout for Longs Peak. In the morning of a good weather day, in the comfort of the Ranger Station at 9,406 feet elevation, the mapped route can appear deceptively easy.

However, that same handout points out that enormous sheer vertical rock areas must be crossed, where an unroped fall would likely be fatal. Furthermore, narrow ledges, steep



Well above timberline, the distinctive Keyhole and the stone hut lead the way to the top of Longs Peak. (John T. Unger)

### IF YOU GO

First, do plenty of research on park regulations, park recommendations, fitness level needed and equipment required. From the Front Range, take Colorado Highway 7 north from Boulder to the Longs Peak Trailhead. Be sure to know the weather forecast and to check in at the Ranger Station the night before to receive any last minute notices of conditions. Just as importantly, know your limits and those of your companions, and always be willing to turn back before the summit if necessary to manage your risks.

cliffs, and polished granite chutes are part of the journey, much of which has no actual trail.

Still, most people who succeed at it are far from being extreme athletes.

Good route-finding skills as well as scrambling abilities are listed as necessities right there in print, too. If storms roll in early and wet the route with even a light rain, some of the granite becomes impassably slick almost immediately.

These are considerations that also occur on other fourteeners in the Rocky Mountains. Many of these peaks do not require technical climbing equipment but are nonetheless beautiful but

sometimes unforgiving of poor judgment.

For someone who is not already a lover of the outdoors, this frank and realistic description may beg the question of why a person would undertake such an outing, if a person is not either being punished or being chased.

John T. Unger is a Diplomat of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, with over twenty-five years of practice in Montrose. He was thrilled to leave the summit by 10 a.m. on this most recent trip. Ideas for future columns are welcomed at sportsdocunger.com.

### Changes, closures for Blue Mesa boat ramps

The National Park Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife have been busy protecting Blue Mesa Reservoir from harmful aquatic invasive species this season.

Boaters at Blue Mesa Reservoir should be aware of the following inspection station and ramp closures and hours.

Beginning Tuesday, Sept. 6, Lake Fork, Elk Creek, and Iola, will be open from 6:30 a.m. - 7 p.m. Those hours will continue through Friday, Sept. 30.

Stevens Creek and Ponderosa will be closed for the season starting Tuesday, Sept. 6.

Boaters are reminded that it is their responsibility to be off the reservoir before the ramps close for the day.

Many boats will exit Lake Fork and Elk Creek in the month of September based on marina slip closures.

Boaters should plan for possible delays due to inspection and decontamination stations being busy with multiple vessels. Remember, boats that are cleaned, drained and dry, with plugs pulled, move through inspection more rapidly.

Any boat that is dirty, crusty or slimy below the water line; large and complex and/or has standing water in any section of the vessel will require a high-risk inspection and possible hot water decontamination.

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