



Aspen trunks gather on the Oak Flat Trail in Black Canyon National Park. A very large colony of aspen can be found near Kebler Pass, east of Paonia. (Submitted photo/National Park Service)

The root of the aspen clock



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

It's a crisp, cold winter day. I'm snowshoeing out among a stand of aspen trees, huffing and puffing in the frosty air. They are a small group, but they frame a classic Rocky Mountain winter scene. Perhaps no other tree is as iconic in the American West as the aspen.

Populus tremuloides, quaking (or trembling) aspen, provide a botanical chorus with the fluttering of their leaves in summer and fall. Overlooked in winter, they are as beautiful now as in the other seasons of the year.

With their leaves gone, it's easier to think about this living tree system and its roots. In fact, all of these trunks are connected to the same root system. In that regard they are all clones in this colony or stand of aspen. At the close of the year, they have a quiet message as their trunks stretch through the land.

Found in much of Canada and the northern tier states of the U.S., they have spread throughout the high country in the west as far south as New Mexico.

Snowshoeing among them, it's possible to see the interconnection. Their white bark trunks, some thick, some more spindly, all seem to have a similar structure of their branches. I touch the raspy bark; massage the crusty warped wounds of the trees. I walk around and through most of the stand. All of them are part of the same living being.

IF YOU GO:

There are many places to experience aspen groves within several short drives of the valley. Here are a few choices:

- The Grand Mesa Nordic Council offers a variety of adventures at <http://gmnc.org/>.
- Ridgway State Park: aspen are scattered along several trails: <http://cpw.state.co.us/placestogo/parks/Ridgway>.
- Black Canyon National Park: Oak Flat Trail, <https://www.nps.gov/blca/planyourvisit/hikingtrails.htm>.

An initial sprout grows to tree size. As it grows, roots fan out horizontally just under the soil surface. Perhaps less than a foot underground, a sucker shoots up from the root. This sucker, coming from the same root as the parent (or original tree) has the same genetic code. It's a clone.

The genetics do vary a bit from tree to tree, but being connected into the same family (such as it is) they are all virtually identical. Aspens have used this way to reproduce to their advantage to beat the challenges of the high country.

Biologists have tracked the web-like system of roots that create aspen stands. They are finely dissected to catch water and snow melt in the dry climate of the Rockies, but also stretch out over long patches of ground. It's possible to map out tree stands to find that they can cover many acres. Dozens of trees might be rooted as one organism.

Of course, it takes a long time for these beings to spread out and cover the land as they do. The colonies can be thousands of years old.

The largest of these is "Pando," an aspen clone living in south central Utah. Pando is Latin for "I spread," but it's also called

the Trembling Giant. Its size is enormous.

Research found that it covers 106 acres across the landscape. It is huge: Pando would cover more than 80 football fields. Yet it isn't about the size, but about its age. Studies suggest that it is 80,000 years old. There is not entire agreement on the number, but longevity is clearly a hallmark of Pando and this family of trees.

Drought and floods have come and gone, rock and soils have shifted across its plateau, and water courses have altered the landscape. And over the millennia Pando spread its roots, sent up new shoots, and endured beaver, elk, porcupines, rabbits and a host of other hungry and active critters.

We love aspen. We love to smell its earthiness on a hot summer day. We strike up fires in winter to heat our homes with dry aspen logs. The white trunks and green leaves of summer expand the forest colors. Shepherders have carved artistic expressions in their bark. We go to the high country to revel in the brilliant gold of autumn.

Embrace the snows of winter. Ski or snowshoe out to a stand of aspen. Let your fingers slowly slip over the bark of a few trees. Study the wounds and imperfections of the trunk. Rest and listen to the quiet. Can you feel the pulse of time? Can you feel the grounding of life at the cusp of an old year in its passing?

Few groves of aspen will be measured as Pando has been, but it doesn't really matter. You set aside the clock in order to be in touch with trees that live as though time is irrelevant. Maybe we find resolve for ourselves in that notion. . . out there in an eternal woodland.

Paul Zaenger has been a supervisory park ranger at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park since 1993. Other park assignments include Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

CPW urges residents to not bother wildlife

STAFF REPORT

Colorado Parks and Wildlife is asking residents to avoid disturbing wildlife during the cold-weather months, according to a press release.

"Wildlife are uniquely adapted to survive the winter; and by understanding the animals' biology, people can help wildlife survive the winter," said Patt Dorsey, Southwest Region manager for CPW in Durango.

All wildlife feel winter's effect, but big game animals – deer, elk,

pronghorn and bighorn sheep – can be most visible and vulnerable during the winter. The big game store high-quality food during warm months, which allows them to develop the fat stores they need to survive the winter.

"They are essentially in a starvation mode and any disturbance means they will burn extra calories they need to survive," said Dorsey.

Throughout Colorado, CPW and other land management agencies restrict access to areas with high

concentrations of wintering big game. These "winter range" areas are critical for the animals' survival.

CPW asks people to understand the demands winter places on wildlife and to minimize disturbances that stress wintering animals. If animals appear alerted to your presence or start to move away, you are too close and forcing them to burn energy.

Big game is highly sensitive to disturbances of any kind. Even while engaged in quiet activities

such as cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking or taking photographs, people disturb big game if they are nearby.

Another problem during the winter is dogs chasing and killing wildlife. Law enforcement officers are authorized to shoot dogs that are seen harassing wildlife. CPW asks the pet owners keep their dogs secure and not allow them to run unattended.

It is illegal to feed big game. People-provided foods, such as hay, can kill them.

Snowmobile safety

Each year a select number of residents anxiously wait for the heavy mountain snows to accumulate. These folks are not skiers in the traditional sense. They are snowmobilers.

My first introduction to the sport came on frozen lakes on the eastern side of Colorado in the 1960s. While it was a great deal of fun, it was not without its own special set of problems. I remember absolutely freezing off various parts of my anatomy. Fortunately, the machines are much more dependable than the earlier models. Also, the clothing and gear to keep you warm has come a long way as well.

Here are a few things for you to consider before taking to the hills in the dead of winter.

- First, make certain that your machine is in top working order. This would include a recent tune up, full of fuel, batteries fully charged and all lights working. There are several excellent dealers in the Montrose area that can keep your machine snow ready.

- You need to make certain all of your equipment you wear and carry is in top-notch order as well. Your headgear, suits, boots and gloves should all be in top shape and tested. Make sure everything is sturdy and leak proof before you leave for your trip as you don't want to find the problem when you are up there.

- Plan your trip. Map it out at home before you leave and stick to the plan. Be sure someone at home knows your plan and what time you will be back. This person should have a cut off time with you arranged where they will call for help if they have not heard from you. If for any reason you deviate from the plan, immediately notify this person of the changes.

Pay attention to the weather as it changes minute by minute here in the mountains, especially in the winter months. The last thing you want to do is head out with a storm moving in. Remember, it is very possible to become snowbound in the back-country, even with a sled.

- It is a great idea to never go it alone. Not only is it more fun to share the adventure with friends, but it is much safer too. Having multiple machines and equipment in the event of a breakdown can make a huge difference. If one machine gets stuck, having those extra hands can make it easy to get back on the trail.

There are a few other things that should always accompany you on the trip. Aside from your normal survival pack that we have discussed many times here, and a good first-aid kit, some things are specific to snowmobiling. Snowshoes or skis are very important. If you break down and have to walk out, you may never make it with just boots. Some of the areas you will be in could have many feet of snow and would be impossible to traverse without snowshoes.

Other important items to consider would include a tool set with any specialty tools for your machine included. An extra drive belt and spark plugs, along with some extra fuel and oil would be a good idea. A good length of rope or tow strap and a block and tackle will help you get unstuck. I also carry a shovel for just the same reason.

As always, plenty of high-energy food should be in your pack. You burn lots of calories in the cold just keeping warm and they need to be replaced. Extra clothes should be with you as well in case temperatures drop or you get wet.

There is a special area of concern for snowmobilers and that is avalanches. You are running around in prime avalanche country and every year we lose a number of folks to them. I recommend everyone attend a safety and avalanche class. This will help you identify and avoid some of the perils of an avalanche. Avalanche warnings are updated daily and a check for the area you are heading into before you go is a great idea. You can stay up to date with the latest avalanche information with the Colorado Avalanche Information Center at www.avalanche.state.co.us.

The Colorado Snowmobile Association has lots of information for beginners and experienced people alike. Check out their website at

www.snowmobilecolo.com for more information.

I have always considered snowmobiling as the winter sport of riding my ATV. It extends our season and allows us to spend more time in the mountains. The area around Montrose is beautiful in the winter and there are not crowds of people up there to break the solitude. Besides that, it gives us another reason to wish for more snow. Until next time, see you on the trail.

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



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By Mark Rackay



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