

Bighorns and the power of surprise



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

It had been a long day hiking in a nameless rocky gulch across the canyon from East Portal.

It was one of those July days when the morning heat ramps up quickly, powered by the strong summer sun. As sometimes happens, the clouds gathered just as quickly and started dumping rain on the North Rim of Black Canyon.

Researcher Russell Grater had been in that remote country for weeks hiking in and out of gulches and draws. Scrambling down and up boulder-strewn gullies in the heat and dust, he was now faced with a drenching monsoonal storm that had him thoroughly soaked.

The tempest finally forced him to make his way back to camp. Running through the downpour he rounded a clump of oak, "and almost ran over a large [bighorn] ram standing there under the bushes waiting for the rain to cease."

The most impressionable wildlife encounters anyone could have are those where both animal and human are surprised. Bighorns are so intrinsic to the western landscape that such a shock put Grater at the fundamental heart of life in the west.

"So suddenly and unexpectedly did I make my appearance on the scene that the ram stood still for one or two seconds looking at me in apparent astonishment before dashing by me into Poison Springs Gulch," he recalled.

That was the closest meeting Grater ever had with a bighorn sheep. Heart pounding, sweating and panting, it's safe to say he forgot about the rain. He was studying the Black Canyon bighorn population in 1937, and no doubt found their namesake horns to be mammoth when seen close up.

Although both males and females have them, the males have horns which develop the full curl. And they weigh a lot; for males, up to 30 pounds – quite a bit more than your average Stetson that you might wear around town.

Such weight gives them a neck full of muscle comparable to that of your typical NFL lineman. They seem to



A bighorn ram browses near Sunset View at Black Canyon National Park. A full curl of 360 degrees could grow nearly as long as four feet in length. (Submitted photo/National Park Service)

IF YOU GO:

Never approach wildlife, but enjoy them from a safe distance. Here are some places to experience bighorn sheep.

- Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. <https://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca.html>
- Colorado National Monument. <https://www.nps.gov/colm/index.htm>
- Bighorn may also be found in the Uncompahgre Gorge in the canyon surrounding Ouray.

be agile enough on steep slopes in spite of the overall weight, but it almost seems as though they could be easily thrown out of balance.

The horn develops around a boney core, and elongates in a manner similar to fingernails. Starting at the base of the skull, cells producing keratin form a sheath around the bone. Attached to the skull through connective tissue, new keratin-rich cells are produced, pushing the old

ones forward.

The horns grow throughout the life of the sheep. Used for defense or dominance, males will challenge each other, rearing up and charging at some 20 miles per hour to meet an opponent head on. The clash produces the characteristic clamorous "crack" during the rut in late fall.

Bighorn populations, prior to European exploration of North America are estimated at up to 2 million. By the late 1800s, the Colorado population was nearly exterminated (hunting, habitat loss, disease), and efforts to transplant the animal into suitable habitat were launched in the 20th Century.

That was part of Grater's mission. Efforts to reintroduce bighorns around Colorado took on a many decade effort, even through the late 1980s at Black Canyon.

Bighorns are well established in the state today and are placed at center stage of the Colorado Parks and Wildlife logo. It almost begs the question of why we would go to such great lengths, for most of the last century, to restore a species to the land.

I was hiking to the Gunnison River in Black Canyon, about 60 years after Grater was here, and stopped to take a break in the shade of a few Douglas fir trees. It was a hot July morning. I chugged some water, admired the scene and stood up to continue the hike. And in that instant, there was a crash of rocks and talus only a couple dozen feet away from me.

Heart racing, eyes piercing the scene, I twirled around the slope to see what caused the thunder. His eye met mine as the bighorn ram trotted his way down the gully and eventually disappeared, leaving behind stunned surprise.

Bighorn sheep are intrinsic to the wildlands of the west. Those are the lands which are a part of our heritage. Those are the wide open lands which form our level of thinking. Those are the lands, enhanced by wild bighorn sheep, which make us who we are.

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.

Duct tape is an important survival tool

We all know how important it is to carry a survival pack with you while outdoors. It is equally important to have it stocked with items that are useful in an emergency.

An item that has multiple uses is definitely something to include. What is arguably one of the most versatile items with many uses is duct tape.

The origin of duct tape is not totally clear. Some accounts credit its invention by the heating industry, while others place its origin with the military. The U.S. military needed a flexible and waterproof tape to make field repairs during World War II.

Permacel created the tape, which was a division of the Johnson & Johnson Company. The GIs nicknamed the tape "duck tape" because it is waterproof like a duck's back.

Duct tape has hundreds of uses in an outdoor situation. Here are a few:

Repairs: Duct tape can be used to repair tears in the fabric of tents, sleeping bags, tarps, clothing, rain gear, water bottles and hydration bladders. The list of "temporary fixes" is endless.

Boots: You can add a little extra insulation to your boots by taping the insoles, shiny side up. The shiny side will reflect heat back into your boots. A loose sole can be fixed by taking several wraps around the boot. You can also wrap tape around the top of your boots to prevent snow from coming in.

Seal: Food packages can be resealed with a piece of duct tape. Just about any box can be made waterproof by wrapping it up. Important if you want to keep matches and tinder dry.

Shelter: With a few large trash bags or a couple tarps, you can tape together some pieces and make a handy shelter or wind break.

First aid: The uses in an emergency medical situation



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

are almost endless. You can wrap a sprained ankle or wrist for support, or fashion a sling for an arm or shoulder injury. Butterfly sutures can be made to help close a gaping wound. A broken ankle or leg can be stabilized with splint material, padding and duct tape.

Splinters: A splinter can be removed with duct tape by covering the area where the splinter is located. Yank it off quickly and usually the splinter comes with it. Be

certain the skin is completely dry.

Signal: If you use a brightly colored tape you can use it to signal for help. It can also be used to blaze a trail so that you can find your way back.

Carrying a roll or two in your vehicle or ATV is an excellent idea. An emergency repair can be made on a leaking water hose or radiator bottle. Tears in the upholstery can be covered to prevent them from getting worse.

A roll of tape in your vehicle or ATV may not take up much room but it sure does in a pack. I wrap about ten feet of duct tape around a wooden Popsicle stick or a tongue depressor. The tape can also be wrapped around a pencil so you will always have a writing instrument. This is light and takes up very little space in your pack.

I try and purchase the better brands of tape, rather

than the discount types. The better duct tapes seem to have a more powerful adhesive backing. In a survival situation, where the elements can be harsh, I opt for better quality so I know it will stick where I need it to.

Duct tape used to be available in only a silver/gray color. Today, every color of the rainbow, including camouflage is obtainable. I prefer the blaze orange as it can be used for a visible marker.

I have seen race cars held together with duct tape, so they could finish a race. With all these uses in a survival situation, it makes sense to include some in your kit. It's not just for rednecks anymore. Until next time, see you on the trail.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a director and public information officer 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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