

Finding the lost art of the porcupine

The sky was clear and the air was crisp first time I saw a porcupine. He was a little guy (I assume it was a he) waddling on top of the snow near the road. I stopped and trotted over to see him. He raced for the trees. To him I must have been a gigantic boot-stomping monster chasing him across the snow.



Paul Zaenger

Outdoors

He slowed down when he got to the thicket of oak. I was too big to get very close, but this yearling creature pointed his back and raised the quills for protection.

Few mammals have been so misunderstood. Yet, as one of the species of rodents, they have made a home for themselves in mountains and northern woods and are an important part of the life of the forest. I was reminded of my first encounter recently when a man and his grandson were in the visitor center. I introduced them to the microscope where a quill was ready to be examined. It's possible to see the overlapping barbs when looking through the lens at one of these fearsome spears.

In fact, the barbs can only be seen with a microscope. The man gave me a quizzical look as I shared my enthusiasm in their discovery. His expression led me to think that I was Capt. Nerd in their eyes. I had



PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Perched in a Gambel oak tree this porcupine will feed on the branches and buds that grew last summer.

no cape or mask, but the porcupine, and its overarching defense, provides us a way to see a bigger picture.

Perhaps, only the skunk has made itself as unappealing to predators as the porcupine. Females usually bear one young in the spring with a good coat of fur and quills, soft and pliable at first, already in place. They are covered from head to tail. Only their face, legs and underbelly are free from daggers.

When danger is near, porcupines will provide a few warnings. Like skunks, they have contrasting black and white coloring to ward off experienced predators. They also emit a cautionary smell. Not as strong as a skunk but distinctive. Next they clack their teeth for an auditory alert. If all of those fail, an arched

back reveals some of the 30,000 to 40,000 quills in a random but noteworthy pattern projecting every direction.

An energetic, but poorly informed predator (sometimes an eager dog) will self-embed the quills into its muzzle. Usually one thrust is enough for the education to take hold. Although they cannot "throw" or "shoot" their quills, porcupines have a stout tail which can offer a knock-out punch. The base of this appendage can be as large as a human wrist. With such power, they can swiftly strike with the lance-rich tail. These results usually bring about a rapid retreat from the attacker.

Most animals, including humans, should maintain a healthy respect for porcupines. In fact, many of the first Americans found a

means to confer not only respect, but through the art of quillwork, a relationship across generations.

I spoke with CJ Bradford, director of the Ute Indian Museum, about this art. It turns out that there are different techniques to express creativity. Although they are lightweight, quills are not hollow. Filled with a spongy matrix, they are firm, and able to absorb dye. Quills were used for adornment and decoration on clothing, cradle boards, pipe stems and much more. How the art came into being has a story specific to each individual tribe, but their use spans generations, marking the passage of time through ceremonies and occasions.

Bradford related some of the same information that she shares with her classes given at the mu-

IF YOU GO

Contact the Ute Indian Museum for news of quill-work classes. The website is <http://www.historycolorado.org/museums/ute-indian-museum-0>, phone contact is (970) 249-3098. Consider joining Friends of the Ute Indian Museum for updates and information. Look for porcupines in the oak brush community. Roads to consider: South Rim Drive and East Portal Road at Black Canyon National Park (after it opens), Dave Wood, and Highway 90. The Cerro Summit Recreation Area, roads above Ridgway and Highway 65 near Cedaredge on the south slopes of Grand Mesa also provide habitat for porcupines. If you see aspen and tall conifer trees, you have driven too high in elevation. Be aware of traffic on roads. Pull over and be careful if you walk along the roads. Unpaved roads may not have winter maintenance. Some roads may be closed until free from snow in late March and early April.

seum. Quills vary in size and thickness, so after they are cleaned, they are sorted. They are still sharp; she has been poked and bled from handling them. The art of quilling developed well before the arrival of Columbus. Beads brought by Europeans were easier to develop into artistic expressions and decorations. Tribes tended to prefer beads over quills and quill-work fell off. Still, there is a connection between family members as one generation hands the tradition down to the next. Recognizing the role porcupines play in this relationship is crucial.

Many see that porcu-

lines were placed on earth with all of the other creatures. Finding this nearly lost art is to see porcupines as part of the earth as a whole. Realizing the art as a means to connect generations through a relationship with a common creature in Colorado is to see people as a part of that whole, rather than separate from it.

Thinking back on my first porcupine encounter, I recall that we saw quite a number of porcupine tracks that winter. The tell-tale wide, flat, tracks punctuated at times by their feet were unmistakable. They are inactive for much of the winter, but as March brings warm temperatures, they venture out to forage during the day. Their habits are nocturnal in woodlands and forests from late spring through fall, but they are visible during daylight hours as winter turns to spring.

They perch in Gambel oak trees eating the ends of branches. The ends, like soft new stalks of asparagus, have tender stems from last summer and buds waiting to emerge when the sun is warm. As the conversation with the grandson, back at the visitor center microscope unfolded, the boy pointed out that we might often overlook many of the creatures, especially porcupines, in our woodlands. It is for us to cultivate the art of seeing the small animals, so we might grasp that greater whole.

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.



Spring Programs and Support Groups

Program: Living with Alzheimer's - Early Stage

Thursdays, March 12, 19 & 26 from 4-5:00 pm

Presented by the Alzheimer's Association

Hosted by Brookdale Sunrise Creek, VOA, Region 10 & Heidi's Chateau

Colorado Mesa University Montrose Campus

234 S Cascade Ave, Montrose

RSVP to Melissa Hannah 970-240-0600

Program: Healthy Eating - Specialty Diets

Adult Education Series by Senior Community Care PACE

Wed, March 18 - 10:00 am - 2377 Robins Way, Montrose

Wed, March 25 - 1:30 pm - 11485 Hwy 65, Eckert

Contact Tai Blair with questions: 970-901-7768 or tblair@voa.org

Caring Conversations - Caregiver/Recipient Support Group

Danielle McCarthy from Vibrant Caregiver will lead with support for your loved one from our Therapeutic Recreation staff

Montrose Pace Day Center- Wed, March 18 - 3:30 (3rd Wed of each month)

Eckert Pace Day Center - Wednesday March 27 at 3:00pm

(4th Wed of each month)

Contact Tai Blair to RSVP : 970-901-7768 or tblair@voa.org

Dementia and Memory Loss /Validation Support Group

April 9 - 6:00 pm - Valley Manor Care Center

1401 S Cascade Ave., Montrose

Group meeting alternate monthly between Horizons Health Care in Eckert and Valley Manor Care Center in Montrose. Contact Brandi Garcia at bgarcia@voa.org for more information. Visit www.voavalidation.com for information on Validation communication.

1-844-VOA-4YOU (toll free help line)

www.facebook.com/VOAWesternSlope

Helping America's most vulnerable™

Ice safety is no accident, requires a buddy system

When I was a kid, the ice was something on which we played hockey. We would wait ever-so-impatiently for the neighborhood pond to freeze over so we could get out there with our skates and sticks and start playing. Of course, we had safety in mind because none of us wanted to break through the ice. Our test required us to throw pebble-sized rocks onto the ice. If they did not break through, go get the skates.

Of course, we need to be more serious about our ice safety than a bunch of us wild kids were. Quite a number of our Posse members are certified in ice rescue. This required taking a class, passing the tests and actually getting into the water through a hole cut in the ice while wearing a dry suit and climbing out.

When you are outdoors in the mountains the ice you encounter can be everything from a stock pond, beaver dam, lake, stream or a manmade reservoir. Sometimes these are chance encounters, happening upon it while hiking, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling or other activity. Then

sometimes, it would be on purpose such as ice fishing. Either way, some basic safety guidelines and possible self-rescue tips are in order.

Keep in mind that ice needs to be at least four-inches thick to support your walking across. Even then, six-inches thick is a much better number for safety. Ice should be closer to 10-inches thick to safely support a vehicle in the event you have to drive over it. If at all possible, it is much better to go around the ice rather than cross it.

Never assume the ice is safe. Remember, the only true way to measure the ice's thickness is to cut a hole in it. Since that is not always practical, here are a few other things you can look for.

Slack ice would show chunks of ice that have frozen together and are floating over the water. This is new ice and definitely not safe. Beware of slushy ice, especially late in the season. Ice weakening features should be looked at carefully, such as cracks or possibly vegetation growing through the ice. Clear-blue ice is usually the strongest.



Mark Rackay

Tips from the Posse

If you are going to cross the ice there are a few other safety things to keep in mind. It is best to not cross by yourself even if you think the ice is safe. Having a second person to follow behind a safe distance. The buddy system is the safest plan. You must also have a pair of ice pitons. Pitons are a hand held spike that will allow you to crawl out of the hole should you break through the surface. Without something to dig into the ice with it would be impossible for you to pull yourself out of the hole. Pitons are the best method of self-rescue there is. They do not weigh much and the expense is minor. If you venture onto the ice they are essential equipment. Take off the heavy clothes, back pack and other gear. It may sound crazy but you do not want to fall through the ice with all those heavy clothes and equipment on.

Should you actually fall in, the first thing to worry about is not hypothermia but getting yourself out. You probably only have about 60 seconds. Turn around and face the direction from which you were coming, as that is probably the strongest ice. Jam your pitons into the ice and begin kicking with all your might while you pull and inch your way back out onto the top of the ice. When you are on the ice again, don't crawl. Roll your body away from the hole and get off the ice as quickly as possible. That means dry clothes and a warm fire immediately.

Now is the time that your buddy can really help, which is the big reason for the buddy system.

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

THE SPIRITUAL AWARENESS CENTER

"The Blessings of Challenges" - Sunday 10:45 am
"Mindfulness and Art" - 12:45 pm

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Everyone is Welcome!