

The Colorado Trail draws world's hikers

Hundreds of acres of wildflowers far above timberline glistened in the sunshine between storms. These were high basins I had never seen before, despite my several decades of hiking regularly here in Southwestern Colorado.

I had joined my daughter Heidi (Montrose High School Class of 2007, Colorado University Class of 2011) for 33 miles of backpacking over the course of not quite 31 hours. We met up at the Spring Creek Pass Trailhead, south of Lake City, beginning Segment 22 on the Colorado Trail.

She began hiking two days after she finished teaching summer school, and now four-and-a-half weeks later we set out for the day's 3,650 feet of elevation gain, hoping for more sun than rain.

We ended up getting more rain than sun, by far, and climbing our way toward Carson Saddle. So many incredible sights up on the Continental Divide existed even in the clouds, cold, and rain. Many times we were above the cloud tops, looking down on them scattered over the Rockies like scenes from the Scottish Highlands.

Carrying all of our own supplies, I quickly realized the benefits of the new lighter weight backpacking and hiking gear which she had researched and obtained, and which I had only briefly read about. My backpack, for instance, is a sturdy high-quality name brand item made for strength and heavy loads. It has served me very well in many winter camping situations where the ability to carry a sizable load may mean the difference between returning with 10 usable fingers instead

of just nine.

In this situation, however, where a through-hiker on the Colorado Trail may be logging more than 20 miles a day, for six days out of every seven, my six-pound (when empty) backpack was a liability rather than a benefit. Counting ounces always seemed like an unnecessary technological data-driven nicety, but each step in the thin air above timberline argued for an open mind on this topic.

This trail is famous among hikers from around the world, many of whom one meets along the way. Heidi estimated that, of each twenty-five hikers she would meet during an average two-day period on the trail, only one of them was from Colorado. All of the others had set themselves the goal to fly to the U.S.A. and tackle this nearly five hundred mile route. They come from Honduras, Austria, Spain, New Zealand, and Australia, and points beyond.

For her own part, Heidi stated that such a large block of time is unusual for a single focus in our fast-paced modern Western Civilization. This type of hiking, she finds, is stress-relieving and calming.

"You need to see places that have not changed in hundreds of years, to look at mountains and forests and valleys that have stayed the same since before your parents or you were born, and before all of your problems and anything weighing on you existed," she has written of her experience.

On a more immediate level, she mentioned taking surprisingly great pleasure in the fact that "you can see where you are going from a very very long way away."

"Also, to see back how far



Passing through the clouds on a second day of cold rain, Heidi Unger sights along the route to the next basin. (John T. Unger/Courtesy photo)

Outdoors

By John T. Unger

you have come on your own two legs each day" can be immensely satisfying.

Given the indescribable beauty we found, even on the stormiest segments of her five week hike, I cannot disagree at all.

If you go:

First of all, obtain the slender but critically important "The Colorado Trail Databook", available here in Montrose at Great Outdoors, on West Main and Selig Avenue. Important warnings and trail access details and much more are in it.

From Montrose, Segment 24 of the Colorado Trail can be accessed by driving 65 miles south to Silverton, then going

southeast another 10 miles on a difficult mining road to get to the Stony Pass Trailhead. Hiking three miles northeast on that trail brings one to the headwaters of the Rio Grande River.

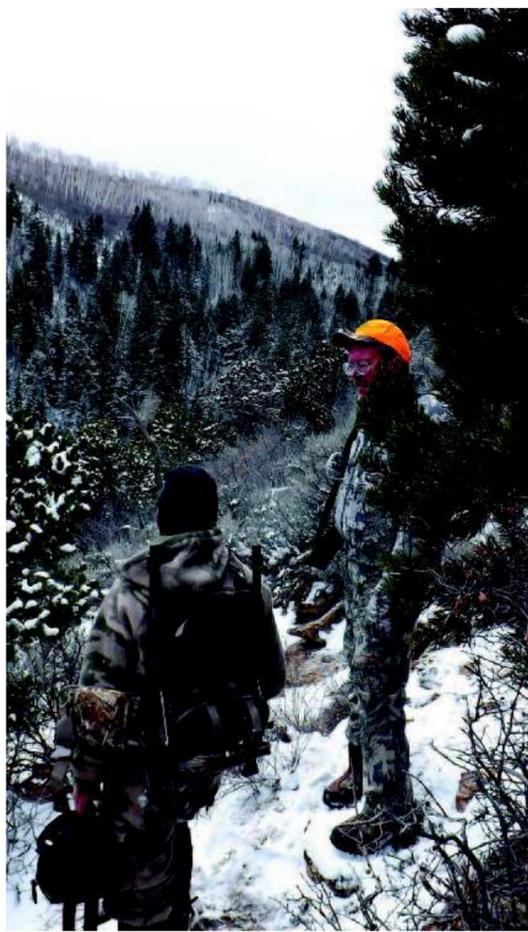
Choosing to hike 20 miles in the other direction from Stony Pass Trailhead leads through the spectacular beauty of the Weminuche Wilderness Area, ending then at Molas Pass. This would require a shuttle driver or a prearranged shuttle system of two groups starting at opposite ends in two different vehicles.

To hike the entire 486 miles of the Colorado Trail in one trip, most through-hikers choose to begin at the Front Range end (at the Waterton Canyon Trailhead, just off the end of Wadsworth

Boulevard southwest of Denver) and finish at the southern terminus of the Junction Creek Trailhead, which is just over three miles from Durango. Of course, this takes the already fit hiker months of planning, training, and organizing, along with the needed dehydrating of foods and shipping of same to predetermined pickup spots near the route.

John T. Unger is a Diplomate of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, with more than 25 years of practice in Montrose. He never expects to through-hike the entire Colorado Trail, but plans to explore many segments of it individually. Ideas for future columns are welcomed at sportsdocunger.com.

Preseason preps for the hunt is essential



There is a lot of rugged country in our mountains, along with ever-changing weather. Some advance planning is necessary for a successful and safe trip. (Photo courtesy of Mark Rackay)

September marks the beginning of the Colorado big game hunting seasons.

Archery, muzzleloader, all followed by several rifle seasons, will keep folks busy here through the end of the year.

In Colorado, it is expected that more than 180,000 people, both resident and non-resident, will take part in the seasons. Each will spend an average of eight days afield. Here in Montrose, we will see more than our share of hunters as well.

This is also the busy time for search and rescue people all over the state. I thought I would cover a few of the most common problems we encounter and what you can do to prevent them.

Many people arrive here from out-of-state locations that have a much lower altitude that we have here. When someone flies here, gets picked up at the airport, and heads straight to a hunting camp at 8,000 feet, the problem of altitude sickness becomes a possibility. This usually is not an area of concern for us residents, but can be deadly for out-of-state hunters. The best medicine for this is prevention.

Have your friends from lower altitudes come out here a couple days early. Spend a day or two here in Montrose getting used to the altitude before heading up. Watch the alcohol intake and drink plenty of water. No strenuous exercise for the first couple days will help get the body used to our altitude, making the transition to a higher camp much easier.

Be aware of your overall health before you make the trip.

Each year, there are folks with heart problems, asthma and other concerns that take to the hills. Add to that strenuous activity while hunting and sometimes poor weather conditions, and a potential health problem raises its head.

Be certain that you have plenty of your prescription medicine with you for the trip, allowing some extra days worth just in case. Having a conversation with your doctor before the trip is a good idea.

With cell phones and GPS it is easier for someone to stay in contact with the outside world than it used to be.

Still, it is a good idea to have an outside contact with all your information.

Pick someone in town to be your liaison. Provide this person with an exact location of where your camp is going to be. Set up times that you will contact your liaison during the trip. In the event you miss a call in time, have a plan set up where your contact will call for help. It is better to call for help and be found ok, rather than to wait. Better safe than sorry.

It is very difficult to expect a good outcome when help was not summoned for several days. If you move camp or change plans, let your contact person know immediately.

One of the problems for search and rescue is having a starting place. An exact location of their camp saves many hours, as there is the starting point.

When you leave camp for your hunt, write out a short note and attach it to a tent flap or some other readily visible location. You can provide the general area you are hunting in for that day, what you are wearing, and how many are with you. This also helps save precious time when rescue arrives, as it will give them the general direction you are heading.

If you take a truck or ATV away from camp, leave a note there as to which direction you are moving on foot.

Another area that has caused problems is people not being prepared for the ever-changing weather here. They leave camp in the morning with blue skies and warm temperatures. Suddenly, a fast-moving cold front comes through leaving freezing cold and much snow. If you do not have extra warm and dry clothes along, you might be in trouble.

Having a pack with you, loaded with some essential survival gear and basic first aid equipment is essential. We have covered the pack before and will discuss the specifics of it in the next column.

Until next time, stay safe, prepared and 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.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

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