

Exploring outdoor recreation in the West End

One of my go-to places to visit is the backcountry of west-central Colorado. Referred to as the West End by locals and visitors alike, this rim rock country is full of recreation opportunities and scenic wonders.

Roughly defined by the western Uncompahgre Plateau, the lower San Miguel and Dolores rivers and Paradox Valley, the West End is a diamond in the rough.

Outdoors

By Bill Harris

I first visited the West End in 1975 during a hunt-

ing trip with my next door neighbor in Grand Junction. He grew up in Uravan, so he knew the country well.

We spent a fall weekend in pursuit of those monstrous bucks for which the West End was known back in those days. My friend harvested a buck, I didn't, but that experience has stuck with me ever since.

The highlands of the Uncompahgre Plateau and the La Sal Mountains bookend the topsy-turvy canyons of the West End.

I was immediately taken by the diversity, ruggedness and beauty of the area. No need to limit my canyon country fix to Utah. The West End is just as intriguing and beautiful.

During a recent break in the cool, rainy weather Kathy and I spent a few days camping in the West End. We hauled our little trailer over Dallas Divide and parked it at the Ball Park Campground near the town site of Uravan.

The Rimrocker Historical Society has leased the property from Montrose County.

Flat ground, shady cottonwoods and the cool waters of the San Miguel River provide a restful backdrop to which tables, fire rings and a porta-john have been added for the weary traveler.

The Rimrockers host their annual Uravan Picnic at the campground.

One of the goals of our trip was to visit archaeological sites in the Spring Creek Mesa area, north of Uravan. Back in 1976, I hunted that area with friends. On one of my forays in search of elk, I stumbled upon a pile of stacked rocks



American Indian ruins are part of the landscape in Montrose County's West End. (Submitted photo)

If You Go

The Unaweep-Tabeguache Scenic Byway runs right through the heart of the West End. It provides numerous access points to the adjacent backcountry – visit www.utbyway.com for more information. The Paradox Trail and newly opened Rimrocker Trail are excellent ways to explore the West End. It's an off-the-grid experience, so go prepared.

along the Spring Creek rim.

When I described the pile of rocks to one of my hunting partners he responded, "Oh, that's an old Indian fort."

I filed that experience away in my memory bank.

So, 15 years ago my interest in the archaeology of the West End really increased. I had read several archaeological site reports and scholarly works about the unique Indian rock art, rock shelters and architectural sites scattered across the West End.

We followed the rutted jeep road up

Spring Creek Mesa, parked my truck when the ruts got too deep, then hiked in search of the fort. My memory served me well, so I had little trouble locating the Indian fort.

I carefully examined the stacked rocks, and the site's similarity to other West End architectural sites was apparent.

The current theory holding sway regarding the origins of the West End's unique archaeological sites is that they were related to or heavily influenced by the Ancient Puebloan people of the Four Corners we know as Anasazi.

Many of the architectural sites artifact assemblages contain Puebloan pottery. Charcoal found buried at many of these sites has been dated to the 10th and 11th centuries.

The story is a bit more complicated than just the Puebloan influence. Corn excavated from West End sites has been carbon dated to several hundred years B.C. How corn found its way into western Colorado at such an early date is unknown.

What we do know is the Basketmaker people of the Four Corners region were growing corn at that time.

The prehistory of the West End is unique, just like its geography. It's always fun to explore and wonder what it was like so many years ago.

Bill Harris is a long-time resident of western Colorado and author of "Bicycling the Uncompahgre Plateau."

Rattlesnake awareness could save your life

It seems nothing strikes fear in a person faster than rattlesnakes. The thought of a snake can make a normal person a quivering mess. In keeping with our series of columns about animals and the dangers associated with them, I thought it would be appropriate to write something about snakes.

According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, venomous snakes bite 7,000 to 8,000 persons every year in the United States. On average, around 10 people die annually from a venomous snakebite.

In Colorado, you have a better chance of being struck by lightning. This does not mean that you should not be cautious when in snake country.

I spent 24 years in Florida before returning home to Colorado. In Florida, everything bites, including all the species of venomous snakes.

Here in Colorado, there are around 30 species of snakes but only three pose a danger to people. They are the Prairie Rattlesnake, Western Rattlesnake and the Massasauga Rattlesnake.

The Prairie and Western are found in our area of Western Colorado, usually at elevations below 9,000 feet.

As spring turns into summer and the temperatures rise, snakes will come out of hibernation. On a warm day, it is not unusual to see a rattlesnake sunning himself on a rock. Running into a snake while on the trail does not pose a huge risk if you keep a few safety thoughts in mind.

Rattlesnakes like rocky outcroppings, grassy areas, stream crossings and ledges. They will den up in prairie dog holes, rock crevices and caves. You may see them on the trail or a roadway but more likely, they will be in the grassy area next to the road or trail.

If you happen to see a rattlesnake, and he is in a coiled position, be very cautious. Coiled and possibly rattling his tail means he is agitated and ready to strike. Keep your distance from him and move slowly away.

He can strike two-thirds of his length that could be two feet or more. Fortunately, rattlesnakes are not very aggressive.

If you see one crossing the



(Courtesy photo)

trail ahead of you, just wait and let him go. They do not see very well and any movement on your part could be interpreted as a threat.

Most bites occur on the hands, feet and lower legs. Be careful where you reach, step or sit.

Snakes love to hide and you don't want to reach into the brush for something without looking carefully first. If you have to walk in tall grass or thick brush, use a walking stick to prod along with in front of you.

Wearing snake boots or chaps is always a good idea when in known snake country. Again, looking first, before you move, is the best advice someone can get.

If you or a member of your group should happen to get bit, don't panic. Look for swelling and bloody colored blisters beginning to form in the bite area.

These symptoms would mean it was a venomous snakebite. Some bites are dry, where the snake does not release any venom. The pain and a burning sensation around the bite area could be present.

Immediately contact 911. Time is of the essence in venomous snakebites. Most deaths occur because people delayed in getting help. If you are unsure of it being a venomous bite, it is better to seek help than to wait.

Do not waste time trying to catch or kill the snake.

Keep the patient calm and try to immobilize the bitten area. Make a splint if possible but do not tie it tight. You do not want to reduce the blood flow.

Never use a tourniquet or apply ice to the area. Avoid cutting and sucking out the venom. Those old kits with the razor blade and suction cups are not recommended anymore. Many people were cut too deeply or got infections from using these, which only complicate the problem.

You should remove any tight clothing, watches or jewelry around the bite area in case of swelling. Try and call ahead to the medical facility and let them know the situation. This will enable the staff to get ready the anti-venom that will be used to combat the bite.

Being afraid of snakes seems to be common among outdoor folks but keeping some common sense about your activities should keep you safe. As with every other potential danger in the outdoors, prevention is the best medicine. 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.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay





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