



The Oak Flat Trail at Black Canyon National Park offers a great chance to see Gambel oak leaves up close. The season is turning, so don't delay a trip to enjoy the fall colors. (Submitted Photo/National Park Service)

Staying safe during the hunting seasons

Hunting season in Colorado is my favorite time of the year. Like many others, I plan and prepare all year long. The big game season starts around the end of August and runs off and on through the end of the year. The rifle seasons start in October.

The State of Colorado sells around 580,000 hunting licenses annually. In 2015, 331,906 big game licenses were purchased statewide. Colorado is a popular destination for big game hunters because it offers such a wide variety of game.

Surprisingly, with that many hunters afield, hunting is one of the safest sports around. Colorado sees very few hunting accidents annually. Truth is, you have a better chance of getting beamed by a baseball at a Rockies game than being hurt in a hunting accident. One of the reasons is the mandatory hunter education requirement.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Any hunter born on or after Jan. 1, 1949, must successfully complete a hunter safety education course before hunting in the state of Colorado. The course covers everything a hunter needs to know, in order to be safe while hunting.

During the hunting seasons, there are many non-hunters out enjoying the cooler weather and fall colors. I thought it would be appropriate to offer a few tips to help everyone interact well and stay safe while afield.

I spoke with Garrett Watson, the District Wildlife Manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and he said: "Wildlife officials have tracked hunting accidents and injuries since the early 1960's. In all that time, a non-hunter has never been injured by a hunter."

Watson had the following suggestions to help keep you safe:

- Hunting is one of the safest forms of outdoor recreation, but if you are concerned being afield while hunting seasons are open, you can try making plans to go between the seasons. The seasons are all staggered, with breaks in between.

- Avoid being out during the peak hunting times. Most hunting activity takes place in the early morning or late afternoon, when game is the most active.

- Enjoy your activities in areas than are not necessarily popular with hunters. There are many trails for biking, hiking or off-roading in areas that hunters generally do not frequent.

- Wear bright colored clothing. Daylight fluorescent orange is a perfect color. All hunters are required to wear this color on their body (vest) and a head covering. Hunters are trained that seeing this color afield represents other people. A vest can be purchased for just a couple dollars and it will make you more visible to hunters.

- Keep your dogs on a leash and under control. It is a good idea to have your dog wear a blaze orange vest also. Loose dogs have been known to chase game. Not only is this unethical, but it is illegal in Colorado.

Watson said, "If you see a hunter, be courteous and give a wave to acknowledge them, and move off in another direction. Hunters wait all year long for their hunt and go through many preparations. Be respectful of their hunt. Remember, it is against the law to willfully interfere with a lawful hunt. At the same time, hunters must also be respectful of the other folks recreating as well."

While you are outdoors, be observant for any unlawful activities, such as poaching or illegal hunting practices. Most hunters are very ethical, safe and careful folks. Like everything else, a couple can give all a bad name.

Any illegal activity can be reported anonymously to the state of Colorado's Operation Game Thief at 1-877-265-6648.

Autumn is a marvelous time to be in the mountains of western Colorado. The colors are in full swing and the temperatures are turning cooler. It is all here for everyone to enjoy, just do it safely and respectful of others. 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@mcsppi.org.



A hunter clad in a bright orange vest walks through an aspen grove. (Submitted photo)

Overlooked oaks of Autumn

Because the Earth's annual oscillation has caused the northern half of the globe to tilt away from the sun, our days are growing shorter. Maybe you noticed the shortening days starting in August, and the recent change of color in the leaves of local trees. A common thought is that the colder weather forces the color change. Yet some trees, including the mid-elevation oaks, have adapted to measure the changing daylight rather than temperatures.

Most people just speed past the oaks as they drive to witness the flashy aspen in their autumn performance. But the supporting role of the oaks in this seasonal drama is equally dramatic and enduring.

Wild oaks growing at mid-elevations in western Colorado are predominately Gambel oak. William Gambel studied birds with Thomas Nuttall, but shortly after fell in with a group of trappers as they made their way across the American Southwest. He first saw the tree that would bear his name in 1844 outside Santa Fe, and went on to discover some 100 additional species new to science.

Head out of town and look up. The slopes surrounding the valley are full of oranges and deep reds of the Gambel oaks that grow at elevations from 7,000 to 9,000 feet. These small trees – some call them glorified shrubs – track the amount of daylight versus darkness to guide the color change. So they noticed the increasing amount of night back in August as well.

Photoperiodism – big word with a simple concept – was first noted by scientists shortly after Gambel's death, but not tracked or fully understood by botanists until the 1950s. Many plants measure the changing amount of night against the amount of daylight, which triggers a response to flower in the spring or to prepare for dormancy in the fall.



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

Spring temperatures can be fickle and unpredictable. Although many plants respond to the warmth of May, the oaks are shy. They won't succumb to the temptations of 70-degree days too early.

Oak buds respond to the amount of red light found in the spectrum of sunlight. We see the red, along with the other colors found in visible light when a rainbow forms. As the amount of night time recedes, the amount of red light reaches a trigger point to prompt a pigment within the bud.

The buds burst forth with flowers and fresh light-green leaves. This all usually happens in late May or early June. The earth tilts the northern hemisphere toward the sun in springtime as it moves through its annual cycle. In fact, the solar clock is so reliable that the oak hedges its flowering bet on the sun rather than on a series of warm spring days.

This gives the tree the best chance of new generation. A killing frost can roll in behind a passing cold front in late May and kill the flowers and the potential for acorns.

Similarly, the oaks measure the diminishing daylight in late summer. Chilly nights came to Colorado earlier this autumn. Waiting for a sun stimulus affords them the longest growing season to benefit the acorn crop.

Drive up towards Owl Creek Pass. Like many drives, you'll pass by hundreds of acres of oaks.

IF YOU GO:

Owl Creek Pass: <http://www.visitmontrose.com/143/Owl-Creek-Pass-and-Silver-Jack-Reservoir-Black-Canyon>: <https://www.nps.gov/blca/planyourvisit/hiking-trails.htm>
Grand Mesa: <http://www.visitgrandjunction.com/areas/grand-mesa>

Pull off to feel the leather-like leaves. Notice how insects have chewed the edges. Only three to four inches long, the leaves are probably somewhat curled. They might be rough to the touch. The acorns, if they had them, have turned brown. You might see some on the ground nearby. Some tell-tale caps might still be attached to the branches.

The monsoonal rains never really materialized this summer. These durable oaks held on through the stresses of burning sun, parching winds, and stingy storms that were too few back in July and August. These pressures have affected the trees. The foliage started drying out and turning color earlier this year, compared to recent years.

Yet, the trees persist. Soon the leaves of these trees will be down. They are a reminder that adaptations are sometimes cyclical. Rather than skipping by them as you drive to see the aspens of the high country, stop for the oak's crimson, ginger, and deep orange. Let the waning warmth of those colors soak into you as a reminder of how we too should be adaptable to the changing seasons of life.

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.

Outdoor brief

Gates going up for seasonal closure

In partnership with Stay the Trail, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Delta Correctional Center work crew, the Bureau of Land Management is installing new gates within the Dry Creek Travel Management Area west of Montrose to protect

habitat for wintering big game animals.

The gates notify motorized and mechanized trail users of seasonal closures from Dec. 1 to April 15 between Colorado 90 and Rim Road.

The seasonal closures are part of the 2009 Dry Creek Travel Management Plan. While

motorized and mechanized travel is prohibited during the seasonal closure, the public can access the area at any time by foot and horse.

The closures are important in protecting the winter range for declining mule deer and elk herds, according to Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

For more information, contact Julie Jackson, BLM outdoor recreation planner, at jmackson@blm.gov or (970) 240-5310.

To learn more about the Dry Creek Travel Management Plan or to download maps of the area, go to http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/ufo/travel_management/tmp_amendment.html.





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