

The mule deer in Colorado

I was born to a family that did not hunt. My father was a fisherman. He did not have anything against hunting; he just did not have any interest in doing it. Dad



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

took me to many places, from Canada, Costa Rica, all over the States and the Caribbean in pursuit of fish, but never hunting.

As early in life as I can remember, I always wanted to go hunting. I slobbered over every issue of any hunting magazine I could find. The one species I dreamed most of was the mule deer. Since I did not have a father who would take me, he enlisted an old man who was a hunter to let me go along.

I spent a season of my 12th year of life heading up to the mountains in a jeep with this old man. Drinking coffee from a thermos and watching the sun break over the snow covered mountains; I decided that this was what I wanted to do forever. Those of you, who know me personally, know that I have pretty much done just that.

The mule deer of Colorado is pretty common throughout the state. Muleys, as they are sometimes called, live on the eastern plains, throughout the canyons, the wooded areas of our National Forests, and even cohabitate our suburban areas with us.

An adult male will stand 42 inches tall and weigh upwards of 200 pounds. The bucks shed their antlers annually and grow a new set in the spring and summer. The antlers can grow as much as a quarter an inch a day.

Mule deer adapt very well to our arid and dry climate, as they use their hooves to dig in the ground in search of seep water. They bed up during the heat of the day, only moving in mornings, evenings and night, in order to conserve water.

Another interesting fact about mule deer is their vision has a 310-degree view around them because of the position of their eyes on the sides of their head. They are also extraordinarily sensitive to movement around them.

While they seem to be everywhere, populations have been actually going down. In 2012, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, CPW, estimated the state



A group of mule deer does feed near a corn field behind the authors house. (Submitted photo/Mark Rackay)

population of mule deer was around 408,000, which is well below the goal of 525,000 to 575,000 animals.

In the mid 1800s, when gold prospectors were pouring into Colorado, commercial hunters killed large numbers of big game for meat. By the beginning of the 20th century, the large herds of deer and elk were gone. The population boom of the 20th century continued to hurt the troubled population of game.

The first hunting license for deer was issued in 1903, as management of the near extinct deer herd began. Thanks to hunter's dollars, and careful management by CPW, the population of muleys peaked in 1989 with an estimated population of 600,000 animals. That is a far cry from the 6,000 that remained in 1900.

Development is no friend to mule deer. Thousands and thousands of acres of habitat are lost to the development of ski areas, residential developments and oil and gas development. We see the results of the development around town as just about

every subdivision has a few deer living within.

Nature also plays havoc on the herd. Severe winters can be catastrophic on the populations. During the bad winter of 1983-84, CPW launched a \$4 million feeding program to help the starving deer. In spite of the noble effort, fawn mortality that winter was as much as 95 percent.

Droughts and wildfires also harm the populations of deer. The wildfires, which come more in drought years, burn off much of the woody shrubs that mule deer need to eat. This allows cheat grass and other noxious weeds to establish on rangelands, and preventing the sagebrush and mountain shrubs a chance to grow.

Disease, such as hemorrhagic disease, can drastically affect deer populations. Chronic wasting disease is also a concern. The herd has seen losses of up to 50 percent of the population in areas affected by disease.

In many areas of the state, predators are to blame for problems with the deer populations. Mountain lions,

coyotes and bears can all play havoc on deer, especially young fawns.

CPW is working hard to control the population of our mule deer. By working with farmers, ranchers, landowners and sportsman organizations, many acres of habitat are being restored. The Colorado Wildlife Habitat Protection Program (CWHPP) is funded through the sale of the Colorado Wildlife Habitat Stamp. Since 2006, this program has protected 174,000 acres of wildlife habitat in Colorado.

We love our floppy eared deer here in Colorado. Hopefully we can have fewer droughts and less severe winters to help bolster the populations closer to the goal levels. I know I sure enjoy having them around and I think you do too.

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Humanity on the Rim

We all sense it.

Day after day, there seems to be a growing disconnect between people. You walk down the sidewalk and the person coming toward you quickly averts their eyes to avoid eye contact. You sit down on a plane and the person next to you pops in earbuds to stave off any efforts at small talk. You're hiking up a trail in the wilderness and the person coming down the trail passes right by without even a nod of the head to acknowledge the shared passion for the dirt beneath your boots. This same disconnect is apparent in much more serious issues, such as bystanders witnessing bullying, sexual assault, discrimination and many other injustices from human to human. I get it, too. Well, I sort of get it. Life is busy and life is hard. We all have demands on our time and energy and a limited supply of both to get us through, but, at some point, we have to take off those blinders and be open and mindful to what's happening around

Let's be wild

By Tisha McCombs

us and to the needs of those sharing our world.

This is something that I try to actively focus on improving in myself, and a recent experience on the rugged White Rim of Utah really brought it home and provided a guiding example of who I want to be and how I want to live. A group of us were headed to Utah to start a four day, 100 mile mountain bike ride through the wilderness that surrounds the White Rim route through the backcountry of Canyonlands National Park. Shortly before starting I realized I had forgotten something quite important, my sleeping bag. With no options around for a replacement, I did what any dirtbag adventurer would do and decided to push forward with the trip and wing it, knowing that there would likely be extra jackets and other items to use to stay semi-warm during the chilly

nights on the Rim. Now don't get me wrong, while I was determined to make light of it and just move forward, on the inside I was freaking out a bit. How can I sleep if I can't stay warm? How can I ride 100 miles if I can't sleep? And mostly, how can I keep from being the grumpiest person on the trip if I'm tired and cold and full of frustration at myself for making such a silly mistake?

Fifteen miles into the ride later that day we're taking a snack break and our support driver pulls up wearing a smile and holding a sleeping bag out the window. It turns out that a hiker we had chatted with earlier that morning had gotten a message out to his wife in Moab about my mishap, had her drive 50 miles to bring him a sleeping bag, stopped each vehicle passing him on the route to find out if it was our support vehicle, and finally found our driver and passed off the sleeping bag for me along with a note that simply had an address and the name of their business



(Submitted photo/Tisha McCombs)

in Durango. I don't need to waste words describing how shocked, amazed, and happy I was. First, I knew I'd sleep nice and warm that night. But mostly, to see so clearly the lengths that complete strangers went to in order to help someone on a trail, and to trust them with a very expensive piece of gear, made quite the impression on our entire group over the whole trip.

Once I returned home I made a point to look up their business website which includes a mission statement. I invite you to adopt this portion of that mission for yourself and to open yourself up

to being aware of the lives around you and extending a little bit of humanity, whether on the trail, walking down the sidewalk, or wherever else you see a need: Be nice to fellow man, be thankful, be generous, and trust the Universe. I've now boxed up the sleeping bag to return to them along with my favorite bottle of Colorado whiskey and a request that they share a toast to kindness and adventure for all of us.

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