



A half million lightning bolts hit the ground in Colorado each year. Here are a few tips to make sure one of them does not find you.

When lightning strikes

The chances of being struck by lightning are actually pretty slim. The odds, if you are the Vegas type, are roughly one in 10,000. Not all lightning strikes are fatal, but I doubt you want to play the odds on that one.

I guess the odds must increase if you spend your life outdoors. During my time in Florida, I spent many days offshore fishing. My boat was hit on two separate occasions in 24 years of fishing. Both strikes caused severe damage to the boats, especially the electronics, but did not harm the occupants.

I feel that luck was on my side during both of those typical afternoon thunderstorms. The hits were severe and strong enough that they could have killed me, leaving me to write this column posthumously. My wife still questions my reasoning for even being offshore on those days, but I digress.

A friend of mine tells a childhood story about lightning. A thunderstorm was bearing down on him while he was walking home from school. The last crack of thunder sounded pretty close, so he hightailed it to his house for cover.

The bolt struck his house just as he got hold of the metal screen door. Fortunately, it was not a direct hit, but a ground strike, or he and I would have never become friends. Several burns on his hand and 10 years scared off his life was the injury. Sometimes Mother Nature's curveball is a little wide of the strike zone.

Of all the hazards we face in the Colorado outdoors, lightning is the No. 1 killer. On average, three people die in our state each year because of a bolt from the sky.

Colorado sees roughly a half million lightning strikes a year, placing it third in the nation. Florida is first, followed by Texas.

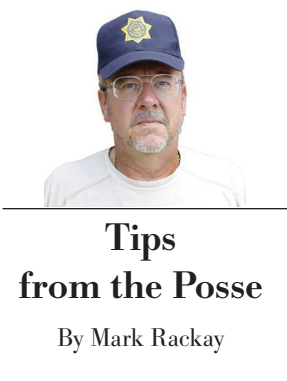
Thunderstorms can occur any time of the year but are most common during our summer months. The National Weather Service states that 70 percent of all lightning fatalities occur during June, July and August. Those summer months are when most of us are in the high country recreating so some situational awareness is called for.

A lightning bolt can strike more than 10 miles away from the center of a thunderstorm. Most lightning occurs along the edges of the storm, so even though the storm is past your location, you are still in danger of a lightning strike.

The most deadly lightning strike is the direct hit. If you get this one, you had best have all your codicils in order, because very few people survive. This one has a bolt on you that carries a million volts and exceeds 50,000 degrees. Direct hits are responsible for about 5 percent of all lightning fatalities.

Side flashes are the most common strike. When lightning strikes a taller object, such as a tree near the victim, a portion of the current jumps from the taller object and strikes the victim. Most side flash victims have taken shelter under a tree to avoid the rain. Guess they forgot to see if Murphy was under the tree with them.

Conduction lightning strikes are another of the many types of strikes you may encounter. Lightning is not attracted to metal but metal provides a path for it to follow. Conduction lightning strikes can travel long distances in wires or metal plumbing. Most indoor lightning casualties



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

occur when someone comes in contact with something connected to metal wires.

Naturally wet ground, like next to a creek, isn't any more dangerous than dry ground. It was once believed that wet ground conducted more current than dry ground. Fact is, wet ground serves to dissipate current faster.

However, standing water is never safe and should be avoided.

The entire process of a lightning strike takes place in a 10th of a second, so there is no time to react once the story unfolds. The area on the ground affected by a strike is a circle 50 to 100 feet across. That circle is roughly the same size as the kill radius of a hand grenade.

You are twice as likely to be killed by a tornado, hurricane or flood than being struck by lightning. However, in the high country where you are sometimes in the center of the storm exists, your chances increase greatly.

Sometimes you can use the 30/30 rule during a storm. If there is less than a 30 second delay from the flash of a lightning bolt, to the sound of thunder, you should seek immediate cover.

I don't really like to rely on this rule because sometimes it is impossible to determine which clap of thunder went with which flash of lightning. Generally, if you are hearing thunder, seek shelter. In the event you are hearing thunder, here are a few things you can do:

- Avoid shelters with exposed openings such as picnic pavilions and camping shelters. Lightning can channel through the openings.
- Do not have close contact with the other members of your group. Spread

out at least 50 feet apart to minimize the chance of everyone in the group being struck.

- Get away from water. Stay away from low spots that might accumulate rain runoff.

- Avoid a lone tree, or a small group of trees in the open at all costs. Also, stay away from any object that is higher than the surrounding terrain. A group of small trees among taller trees, or a thick forest, is a much better choice.

- Drop and move away from all metal objects such as trekking poles and pack frames. Stay far away from ATV's when in a storm.

Whenever you are enjoying an outdoor excursion, and encounter the erudite Mr. Murphy, best to keep your wits about you because there is definitely a storm on the horizon. I don't want to play the odds with lightning a third time, so I will leave Murph on the trail behind me. You should too.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and 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.

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