



(Submitted photo/ Bill Harris)

Exploring the Mayan ruins of Central America

For years I have read articles in magazines about the Mayan culture and listened to friends talk about their visits to ancient Mayan cities. Well, I finally experienced some of those places for myself. A few weeks ago, Kathy and I flew to Belize.

Our goal was to visit the Mayan cities of Caracol and Tikal. Caracol is at the foot of the Mayan Mountains of Belize, and Tikal can be found in the lowlands of northeast Guatemala. We stayed at the Table Rock Jungle Lodge, roughly equidistant from both ruins.

The Mayan culture held sway over a large part of Central America in what is now southern Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula, eastern Guatemala, Belize and northern Honduras. Between 1,200 B.C.E. and A.D. 950 the Mayans developed a complex civilization. They transformed the tropical rainforest into cities surrounded by agricultural fields. Roads, known as causeways, connected many of the Mayan cities.

The Mayans are known for their monumental architecture and complex, intricate



Outdoors

By Bill Harris

hieroglyphs. The Mayan temples, pyramids and other structures were made of native limestone. That many of them stand today is a testament to the Mayans' skill and workmanship.

First, we visited Caracol. Caracol is Spanish for snail. The name is an apparent reference to the many snail shells found at the site when it was

first discovered. Getting there involved a 56-mile drive from our lodge on a mostly unpaved road akin to the Transfer Road west of Montrose. Our guide, Dora, is the undisputed Danika Patrick of Belizean backcountry roads.

She led us on a tour of the epicenter of Caracol that included the main temple, Caana or Sky Palace and temples and altars associated with the Central Acropolis. Caracol was a center of Mayan political, economic and religious life. At its peak, it sprawled out over 15 square miles with over 100,000 inhabitants.

We climbed up high steps to the top of Sky Palace. Going up was easy - getting down was a bit more problematic. From the top of Sky Palace, we could see over

the rainforest canopy. Off in the distance I spotted a rare King Vulture. Later in the tour we were introduced to large family group of howler monkeys high in the trees above us. Their vocalizations are raucous and quite intimidating.

A few days later we headed for Tikal. The drive was much smoother than the one to Caracol. Our guide for the day was Billie. He adeptly shepherded us across the Guatemalan border and provided a non-stop narrative about the geology, the landscape and the cultural makeup of Guatemala as he drove.

Tikal is a much busier and more developed than Caracol. We encountered hundreds of other tourists. A well-beaten path led to the Grand Plaza - a focal point of Tikal's religious life. The Grand Jaguar Temple and Temple of the Masks tower over the Grand Plaza. Climbing on the temples isn't allowed, so we walked up a set of modern steps that leads to an upper level of the Temple of the Masks. We had a bird's eye view of the Grand Plaza and surrounding temples.

Tikal was also a center of Mayan economic, political and religious life. In fact, Caracol was a rival city, and the two cities fought a series of wars; one competing with

the other for influence and power.

During our hike through the jungle we encountered many bird species including a black-headed trogon, a chestnut woodpecker, a purple-crowned fairy and the rare orange-breasted falcon. We also spotted a spider monkey leisurely sampling fruit high in a tree.

Our tour took us through Mundo Perdido, a major astronomical observation complex. The Mayans had an advanced understanding of the night sky. The solar equinoxes and solstices were observed and used to time crop planting and set annual celebrations. The last stop on our tour was to Temple IV, or Temple of the Two-headed Snake. Built in the mid-eighth century, the temple is over 210 feet tall.

Our trip to Central America was a dream-come-true. The places we visited and the people we met during our journey were fantastic. Experiencing the world outside our comfort zone has given us a broader perspective of the human condition and what we have in common.

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

River otters — do they bite?

Many people are under the misconception that the Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) is only here to take care of animals, just for hunters, and spend the rest of their time writing tickets for game violations. This is simply not the case.

I have a hunting buddy who is a game warden. He would tick his own mother for swatting a mosquito out of season. Whenever we are outdoors together, I have to be sure and stay on my best behavior, lest I go home with a stack of citations. But the fact is, he cares more about Colorado's wildlife than anyone I have ever met.

What got me thinking about this was something I saw on social media. Amongst all the stories of "what I had for lunch" and "I am angry about," was a story of a child who was bitten by something while in the river. The injury was two gashes above the knee that required a number of stitches to close them up. The consensus of the computer experts was that it was a bite from a river otter.

The river otter, like many of the furbearers of Colorado, were victims of the Europeans settlement of the western United States. Trappers, for the value of their pelts, actively sought them. Active trapping went on through the 1800s until the five species of river otters native to Colorado were gone. By the 1920s, the river otter was a victim of extirpation, extinct in our state.

There are 11 species of the otter, which are all members of the weasel family. Smaller than sea otters, but larger than a mink, the



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

river otter will weigh 15 to 25 pounds and reach a length of up to 48 inches. One-third of their length is the tail. They have a flattened head, rounded ears and an incredibly flexible spine. The color of their soft fur ranges from gray and white to black and brown.

Being a water animal, otters can stay submerged for up to eight minutes and swim at speeds over 7 mph. And they can dive to a depth of 60 feet.

On land, they can run up to 18 mph. Their ears and nostrils actually close when they dive underwater. During the winter months, otters will swim under the ice to catch fish.

Mating season occurs usually in December. In April, the female will give birth and the litter may have up to five pups. It is possible that otters may be somewhat more aggressive during mating season, but unlikely to humans.

Otters have a very sharp set of canine teeth and molars capable of crushing shells of crustaceans. He can deliver a terrific bite, capable of breaking hard bones, but mostly punctures of the skin.

River otters primarily eat fish but have been known to eat mollusks, crawfish, birds, insects, frogs, rodents and turtles. You will note that humans are not on that list, but there is a story floating around about a river otter that killed and ate alligators in Florida. I am not able to confirm the story, and it may be an urban myth. Either that, or it was a small alligator.

Otters are extremely nearsighted, which may explain why they come so close to humans. While they are very territorial, usually



A river otter lounging in the grass for the camera. (Photo courtesy of Wayne Lewis of Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

they will move away from you when your presence is detected. Otters really don't want anything to do with humans, and who can blame them?

What otters are really known for are their playful antics. Otters will slide down muddy banks on their belly and juggle pebbles and sticks. Sometimes they will play hide-and-seek or wrestle with their companions. River otters can be very entertaining to watch, but remember they are nearsighted, so keep your distance.

After missing in Colorado for over 50 years, CPW began a reintroduction program for the river otter. The program began in 1976 with the release of three juveniles in the area of Cheesman Reservoir. In August of 1976, several river otters were released in the Gunnison River, in our neck of the woods.

The otter is an incredibly difficult animal to census because of the wide area they occupy. Still listed as endangered in Colorado, the outlook is bright, thanks to the efforts of CPW. Nationwide, population estimates exceed 100,000.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife has a form

on their website, wherein they request you report any otter sightings. CPW continues to promote and monitor the river otter re-entry back in Colorado, as they do for all the animals of our state. The otter stands as another success story for CPW, along with the reintroduction of the lynx.

After all this research, I seriously doubt a river otter bit the child. I admit it is possible but would think only a rabid otter would ever go after a human. Being a mammal, an otter can become infected with rabies, but it is a rare occurrence.

As for me, I will continue to enjoy all the wildlife of Colorado and applaud the efforts of CPW in being stewards for their protection. In the meantime, I will be very careful whenever I am afield with my game warden buddy. I don't want to kill a mosquito out of season. I doubt I could afford the fines.

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