

Have awareness on the trail



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

As a young kid, I always retreated to the woods as an escape from the outside world. Fact is, I always felt safer and more secure in the woods than I ever felt in the city. Sure I have received more than a fair share of injuries, mostly from my own mind-boggling acts of idiocy, but I can't blame that on the outdoors.

I have encountered hundreds of bears, dozens of mountain lions, and countless game animals after more than five decades outdoors. Proudly, I can say, I was never a blue plate special for a wild animal.

Statistically, the woods are still a much safer place than life in the city. The city has more ways to stamp your carcass "cancelled" than the woods have. Everything from car crashes, plane crashes, sickness ... the list goes on. But in the words of Bob Dylan, "The times they are a changin'."

What many of you don't realize is that my long-time associate, Mr. Murphy of Murphy's Law fame, can appear as a criminal. We always credit him with everything from injuries, lost, broken and lost equipment, and just about anything that fails. The erudite and cunning Murphy can also appear as an attacker, robber and even as the Cookie Monster.

One FBI statistic shows that the Appalachian Trail sees around 2.5 million visitors annually. Since 1974, there have been nine murders on the trail (four men and five women.)

Montrose seems to have a larger population of transients and homeless than ever before. Tent camps and temporary living set-ups are scattered all around the county. Law enforcement is seriously understaffed to tackle the problem, but they do a great job with what they have.

Probably only a small percentage of the transients are here with criminal intentions, but that number is growing. Anyone who frequents the trails closer to town has probably witnessed some of the problem. I'm sure that meth, heroin and other drug problems play into this somewhere.

An area I frequent is Dry Creek. There is a trail that makes a fairly steep climb but lands on a saddle with a beautiful view of a heavily timbered draw. I took a hike up this trail recently and was shocked by what I found.

Clearly, several groups of people were — or recently had been — living there. Piles of clothes, garbage, old mattresses, shoes, beer cans and old campfires rings were in three places about a quarter mile apart. My guess was at least a dozen people had occupied the area. Since I was alone on the hike, it was fortunate nobody was home at the camp when I passed through.

This scenario plays out in many of the places I have been to in the last couple years. A close friend of mine was planning on meeting his 19-year-old son at a designated place in the BLM lands east of town for some ATV riding. The young man arrived ahead of schedule and sat in his truck waiting for his dad.

Two males approached the young man, beat him severely, and stole his wallet, cell



(Above) On a hiking trail I came across a place some people were living, in a very primitive campsite. (Right) Mattress, discarded food and water containers, and clothes from this site show someone has been living here. This area is near Dry Creek. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

phone and tools from the truck. His father found the boy with a fractured skull, broken ribs and a severe concussion. Fortunately, the young man made a full recovery.

These little stories play out all over the state. Most seem to occur closer to metropolitan areas, but even the very remote trails see a small amount of crime. There are a few things you can do to keep yourself safe from the two-legged cookie monster while you are on the trail.

First and most obvious: Don't go alone. The bad guys are looking for an easy target. They do not want to get into some big fight where they could wind up injured. They are looking for an easy score, and the secret is to not appear as an easy target. There is safety in numbers.

Train yourself to maintain situational awareness at all times. Lose the ear buds and talking on the cell phone. Use all your senses when outdoors. There is an old adage pertaining to cavalry officers when out on patrol. It is alright for them to lose a battle to an enemy, but they should never be taken by surprise. The same should hold true for you.

Situational awareness is simply a state of general awareness that allows you to take the element of surprise away from the threat. Be constantly aware of your surroundings and see people before they see you. If you see the cookie monster on the trail before he sees you, there is an opportunity for you to safely escape.

Always check your back trail. Attackers generally come from behind. Ask any fighter pilot about watching their six o'clock. There are no eyes in the back of your head, so you must constantly look back there.

Be aware of anyone who approaches you deliberately on the trail. Watch out for distractions, such as him saying, "Gotta light?" This may just be a ploy to get closer to you.

When you run into someone on the trail, leave him or her with the impression that you are not alone. Let them think you have a partner who should be along any minute. Be polite to people you meet on the trail,



but don't be overly outgoing.

Carry a cell phone with you when you go. Even if you are in an area of no service, a text message may still go out. I carry a backup power supply with me. Keep the phone in airplane mode or off when not needed to conserve power. Report any suspicious activity you encounter; you just might save someone else from a problem with that person.

Be especially aware of closed in areas and places with limited visibility. These places could make an "ambush point" for a bad guy. Remember, they want to surprise you.

I have intentionally not discussed carrying a weapon. The sad fact is, most people who use weapons stand a better chance of becoming a victim with their own weapon because of a lack of training. Weapon use is a personal choice and the words train, train, train, are the secret to success. Remember, it is better to avoid the confrontation than to engage.

The truth is, you will probably spend your lifetime bouncing around outdoors

and never have a bad encounter with someone. Most folks we run into on the trails are there for enjoyment, just like us. Staying aware of your surroundings will help keep it that way. You may also notice more wildlife as you pay more attention to your surroundings.

I teach situational awareness classes to businesses, churches and law enforcement/first responders, and have for many years. It has worked well for me so far, as I have not had any negative encounters with Mr. Murphy in a criminal way. I guess he has always been too busy breaking my equipment and messing with the weather. Stay safe and stay alert.

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. Also email Rackay directly at elkhunter77@icloud.com.

Outdoor Notes

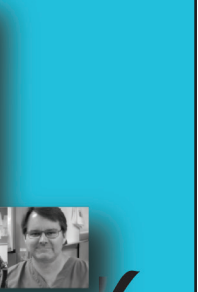
If you come across a campsite that may be occupied by vagrants or transients, and you suspect illegal activity, contact one of the following agencies:

Montrose Field Office
Colorado State Forest Service
970-249-9051

Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Montrose Office
970-252-6000

Montrose County Sheriff's Office
970-252-4023

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THANK YOU!!

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