

Virginia and the straight up North Star

Honesty can be found when looking at the night sky. The winter night sky, particularly, has a crisp vibrancy that is unmatched at other times of the year. And of the some 9,000 visible stars in the sky (for the unaided eye), it's easy to overlook any single one of them.



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

One of those commonly overlooked is Polaris, typically known as the North Star. There are closer stars – the Alpha Centauri triple star system is only 4.3 light years away compared to Polaris' 433 light years. Much brighter stars are also in the night sky, like Sirius (which rises in the east around 8 p.m.), the brightest star. Polaris is ranked 46.

But the North Star is true to holding nearly still in the dark of night, because it is aligned to Earth's North Pole. This uprightness in the night sky, evident every cloudless night, is easy to overlook. Yet, like Polaris there are values in the holidays which we can also easily disregard. It seems that we need is a bit of direct honesty today.

Go out tonight to find it (the star) – I hope it's not cloudy. You could just use a compass to point your way north to find Polaris. But you should use your navigating skills. Look for the Big Dipper in the northern sky. The two stars which outline the outer part of the bowl point directly to Polaris. It's at the end of the handle of the Little Dipper. Linger out here for a little while.

As it turns out, as a star, Polaris has variability in its brilliance. It has a pulse, not that we could detect it with our own eyes. The strength of its light has been on the increase in recent years, but over the past few millennia, it has become fairly bright. It's 2.5 times greater than when the ancient Greeks gazed at the night sky.

If our sun did that, we would be cooked. But Polaris has been our navigational guide through most of those past two millennia. It's no secret that seafaring captains stayed on course by aligning their travels to this star. Exploration and travel by land was also aided by the genuine nature of the North Star, including runaway slaves who aligned their trek north by following the Drinking Gourd (Big Dipper) which secured their escape on this trajectory.

Curiously, through many night sky viewings that I've participated in with our friends at the Black Canyon Astronomical Society, at Black Canyon and around the



The night sky can be incredible in Colorado, as can the North Star, also known as Polaris. Next time you look at the sky, try to find it. (Courtesy photo/ Bryan Cashion)

Uncompahgre Valley, it's rare that people have asked to see the North Star.

It's solid, it's on point, it's magic. Little in our world can offer us such an intangible, untouchable aspect of life, while staying anchored in place. That unvarnished honesty, like social values we very much like to convey at the holidays, is elusive, but within our grasp.

Captured most in movies, ranging over time from It's a Wonderful Life (1946) to Netflix's Klaus (2019), holiday movies have continued to express these seemingly eternal values. From Klaus, "The greatest things you'll ever know are invisible." It almost seems like a conspiracy among holiday movie makers.

I go back outside to look at Polaris. Here we are; just star and me. It's holding constant. I'm spinning on Earth at some 1,000 miles an hour. The most constant things in our world are our values. I think further back; to 1897. The editor of the New York Sun wrote to a girl named Virginia when she asked if there really was a Santa Claus.

"Please tell me the truth," she wrote, "Is there a Santa Claus?" The editor, Francis Church famously replied, "Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. . . The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor (adults) can see."

The sincerity of a real child becomes as crystal clear as the winter sky. It clarifies our soul; it rings true with a nature that sets us apart from the self-centered nature that seems to dominate people today.

Yes, go out into the quiet night. Rediscover this modest star embedded in what seems like a third rate and forgotten constellation. Find excitement in a po-dunk star which holds some of the most real things for our world, and reminds us that truth and honesty are at the core of who we should aspire to be. Happy Holidays.

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.

Vehicle readiness for the winter season

As winter begins to close it's icy grip on us, it signals a time to make some preparations. Winter closing in reminds me to take a look at my pack and get rid of the warm weather things and add some cold weather items.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I check through my emergency rations and snacks. Time to throw out those melted candy bars, expired snack bars, and a few other items I am no longer able to identify. I once found a sandwich that had evolved into an intelligent life form. The "hybrid sandwich" was grazing on an outdated power bar. I threw the whole pack away on that one.

The seasonal change also dictates we should take a look at the family chariot and make sure it is ready for winter. Probably a good time to see what food the kids left in the back seat from those summer camping trips, lest you find a new life form.

Last year, a March winter storm, later morphed into a "bomb cyclone" tore into the State. A bomb cyclone happens when there is a rapid drop in barometric pressure, with a decrease of at least 24 millibars in a 24-hour period.

This storm brought winds gusting to 80 mph and brought several feet of snow. At least 184,000 people were without power. In Texas, the storm actually caused the derailment of a train.

The part of this storm that stands out in my mind, had to be the stranded motorists. This storm hit with very little warning as to it's growing ferocity, and it surprised many. At least 1100 motorist were left stranded.

Law enforcement officers had to abandon their own vehicles to seek shelter themselves instead of responding to the high volume of accidents. One accident, on I-25 near Wellington, involved over 100 vehicles.

In Weld County, North of Denver, a car struck State Patrol Corporal Daniel Groves. Corporal Groves was assisting a motorist whose vehicle had slid off Interstate 76. Corporal Groves later died from his injuries.

This storm was so intense, Gov. Polis declared an official emergency and deployed the National Guard for safety and rescue operations. More than 700 people spent the night in shelters in Douglas County. Many of them were rescued from stranded vehicles.

Never say never, because it can happen here. You may be driving somewhere in our fair State when a storm like this hits, and you would be smart to have your vehicle ready, just in case.

Start with the obvious things, like your car battery. I purchase new batteries for my truck every two years, regardless of

the length of the warranty. My truck gets used year round, many times for rescue operations. Batteries never die in town or in your garage, rather they fail when you park your truck up in the mountains, a 120 miles northwest of nowhere. All that warranty is good for up there is kindling for your survival fire. Buy new and get good quality batteries with lots of cold cranking amps.

Condition, inflation and type of tires should be obvious. I remember my Grandfather always having to put on his snow tires in the fall. He was usually one snowstorm late. Highway tread or standard radials are fine for around town, but not when you head into the backcountry. Start out with good snow tread tires and be sure they are properly inflated.

A good set of chains is a must, especially if you get off the beaten paths. Make sure the chains fit your tires. I carried a set around for two years that were too small for my tires. I got a larger set of tires and never thought to check the chains. Be sure yours are in good condition, have tighteners and spare links, and are the right size for your car.

Be sure to keep up on the regular maintenance of your vehicle. We don't do tune-ups with the frequency of cars from years gone by. This does not mean you should forget about checking plugs, fuel filters and wires.

Winter is a good time to put on some new wiper blades.

Driving on the top half of your fuel tank is something I learned during my hurricane evacuation days. The extra fuel can keep the car warm if you find yourself stranded in a blizzard. Cars don't run out of fuel in the driveway of the gas station, they choose the end of the road, 17 miles from cell service to use the last of the fuel from the tank.

If you are an outdoor person, like me, you will travel the road less travelled by. If you become stranded on that road, help may be days away.

We talk and write about it every year, and still, some folks chose to ignore the dangers and head to the hills anyway and unprepared. We are called upon to rescue them several times each winter.

Carry some extra heavy clothing and footwear for everyone with you. I keep a couple of those military wool blankets in the truck. A vehicle is not insulated very well and the temperature will drop very quickly inside if you are stranded.

Do not to stray away from your car. Your chances of walking out in a blizzard, and living to tell about it are very slim. It is better to bundle up and stay put until help arrives.

If you choose to run the engine for warmth, try keeping it 5 to 10 minutes per hour. Be certain that the exhaust area is clear so the deadly fumes do not come into the car. This is the main reason for driving on the top half of your fuel tank.

Place a small survival kit in the vehicle; a large tote will do, loaded with some of these items:

- Small first aid kit and necessary prescription drugs.
 - Flashlight with lots of extra batteries. Lithium batteries are best in cold weather.
 - A couple of those 8-hour survival candles. These give off a fair amount of heat in a closed area.
 - A bunch of non-perishable food and lots of drinking water. A full belly fights the cold better than an empty one, especially if you have kids who are always "starving" like mine.
 - If you have pets, pack food, water and things for them too.
- Bring your cell phone with you anytime

you head out in the winter. An extra battery pack is a good idea, so the phone has a good charge when you need it. If you find yourself stranded, and without cell service, try texting. Call when you can and text when you can't.

Last winter was a pretty rough one for the mountains, but not so much in Montrose. It only takes one storm, like the "bomb cyclone" to put us in the same predicament. Stay on top of your gear and readiness, and don't let Mother Nature do you in. Summer is just 6 months away.

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

For outdoors or survival related questions or comments, feel free to contact him directly at his email elkhunter77@bresnan.net.



PET OF THE WEEK

Cindy Lou

Cindy Lou is a 4 year old female Border collie/Lab. She has black and white markings. She would make the perfect family member, just in time for Christmas! You can visit Cindy Lou at the **Montrose Animal Shelter, 3383 N. Townsend Ave.**

The fee for a cat is \$30. Kittens younger than 1 year are \$50. Dogs are \$60, and puppies are \$75.

The shelter is open from **Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm**
Saturday & Sunday, 9am-3pm
All animals adopted from the Montrose Animal Shelter are spayed or neutered before going to their new homes and receive some vaccinations. For more information about Cindy Lou and other available pets, call 240-1487 or visit www.montrose.animalshelternet.com



Santa Pictures with Pets

Saturday December 14th | 10am-3pm
at Chow Down

Cost is \$20 - proceeds benefit MAPA

Chow Down Pet Supplies

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