

Hotchkiss on the fly – a winter’s birding tale

I don’t ride my mountain bike much during the winter months, so I have alternate ways to stay fit and get outdoors. I go to Anytime Fitness more often than I do during the other three seasons. I enjoy cross-country skiing and Kathy and I like to hike with our dog in tow.



Outdoors

By Bill Harris

My favorite winter outdoor activity is birding. I bird year-round, but it is a bit more challenging during the winter. The numbers of bird species that are found in Western Colorado during the winter are fewer compared to the other seasons. But there are a plethora of places in western Colorado that harbor wintering birds. Open water and wooded, brushy areas along the major rivers are excellent places to see birds. Variable weather conditions can make observing birds a real challenge.

A highlight of winter birding is the Christmas Bird Counts. The Black Canyon Audubon Society hosts the Montrose, Delta and Hotchkiss Christmas counts each year. The counts take place sometime around the holidays.

My favorite Christmas Bird Count is the one in Hotchkiss; it takes place just after New Year’s Day. This year Alan Reed, Susan Chandler-Reed and Jon Horn joined me for the count. I had contacted the count’s organizer, Adam Petry, ahead of time and requested Rogers Mesa as our assigned area. When we arrived there so many volunteers, we split Rogers Mesa into two sections. Our group took north of highway 92.

With a smaller area to canvas we changed our birding strategy. Instead of driving as many miles as possible to cover a larger area we decided to slow our pace and investigate the nooks and crannies. We had birded Rogers Mesa before so had some ideas on where to look.

One of our first stops was along Leroux Creek. I pulled over near the creek and we piled out of my truck ready to tally the hordes of birds we knew were waiting to be counted. To our chagrin, not a bird was in sight. It was a clear, cold morning and the sun was just beginning to peek over the West Elk Mountains. Hoar frost clung to all the trees and bushes, glistening like a million diamonds. No living creature was crazy enough, except us, to be stirring so early on a frigid morning.

With our enthusiasm tempered, we continued to slowly cruise the back roads of Rogers Mesa. As the



Rare winter sighting of a ferruginous hawk. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/Bill Harris)

sun warmed the mesa, we began to see birds. The usual suspects — house finches, juncos, starlings and ravens came into view. It got a bit more interesting when we encountered a flock of red-winged blackbirds around a bird feeder.

Jon spotted a pair of Lewis’s woodpeckers in a nearby cottonwood tree. This species of woodpecker is slightly smaller than a northern flicker. It sports a red face, gray collar, pink belly and dark green wings. Rarely seen most of the year, they are common on Rogers Mesa during the winter. Soon after, Susan spotted a northern harrier as it pounced on its prey.

By late morning our foursome had covered our assigned territory. We decided to wrap up the morning by returning to Leroux Creek, figuring we couldn’t do any worse than we had earlier in the day. Much to our

pleasure, we observed two ruby-crowned kinglets, a dipper, a pair of mallards and black-capped chickadees. Alan’s keen eye located a brown creeper working its way up the trunk of a tree.

Our strategy to slow our pace really paid off — we observed 34 species of birds including a record 27 Lewis’s woodpeckers. We finished off our adventure with a luncheon hosted by Andrea Robinsong. The luncheon has become a tradition at the Hotchkiss count, serving green chile, elk stew, hot-spiced cider and lots of savory and sweet treats.

Good birding, good companionship and good food — a stellar day outdoors.

Bill Harris has traveled the back country of the Colorado Plateau since 1976 and is author of “Bicycling the Uncompahgre Plateau.”

Layer Up

Learning how to dress for the Colorado winter outdoors

As kids, when we would head out into the cold, the term “layer up” meant put on everything you own and hope it is warm enough. Most of my winter clothes were handed down war surplus stuff that brought new meaning to the term “used.”

Army winter parkas, arctic mittens with fur around the wrists and pack boots were the dress of the day. Since most of the stuff was too large, you did not move around much, lest you fall and can’t get up. My grandmother gave me one of those Life Alert buttons in case I fell down.

The real outdoor people had the warm clothes of the day. Pendleton wool shirts and wool pants, heavy parkas stuffed full with goose down and wool gloves or mittens. On their feet was a pair of Sorel Pack boots. I could only dream of such warm clothes.

Fortunately for outdoor folks, clothing



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

has come a long way since then. Outerwear now is made from better materials, offering protection in better fitting, lighter and less movement restricting materials. If you are still using that 25-year old bulky jacket, you might want to look at the new clothing lines.

When we talk about layering, we are referring to the ability to regulate your comfort outdoors by slipping on and off layers of clothing as your activity level or the weather changes. As a kid, I probably wore six or seven layers of clothes. With today’s clothing lines, three are just right.

The first layer is the base layer. This is basically your underwear and is next to your skin. The key to the base layer is moisture wicking material. The underwear layers job is to move perspiration away from your skin, called wicking, and keep your skin dry. When you are wet, chill follows bringing along hypothermia.



A good selection of layers includes a Polartec base layer (left) a Hollowfill mid layer, and a waterproof, windproof outer layer. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/Mark Rackay)

There are any number of material choices for the base layer. Choices include polyesters and nylon to wool and silk. Choose the right weight based on the temperatures you expect to be in, light, medium or heavy weight.

When it is really cold, I prefer the merino wool option. Wool has been a long-time favorite because it loses no insulation ability when wet. I am also a fan of the military Polar-Tec brands of long

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What’s wrong with my houseplant?

Believe it or not, I think plants really do communicate with us. It’s just a matter of learning their language and what they’re trying to tell us. Here are a few things some of your plants may be trying to communicate to you.

The most common houseplant problems come from watering issues. Small, limp leaves or leaf drop is usually a result of the plant trying to tell you that the soil has been either too wet or too dry for a prolonged period of time. You don’t really want to water by a set schedule, but checking the soil moisture on a regular basis, say once a week is a good idea. A



Gardening A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

soil moisture meter can be used, or you could poke your finger into the soil a little ways to check the moisture. Don’t just touch the top of the soil. That can be deceiving. I’ll bet you’ll notice your plants don’t require as much water during the winter months.

Too much water forces oxygen out of the soil, literally smothering the roots and causing them to rot. Over-watered plants will become limp, yellow, and usually have soft, mushy stems. If rot has set in, an unpleasant odor may be present.

Brown tips and edges of the leaves turning brown can result from a few different things. Dry soil, low temperatures, hot air, or too much fertilizer can all leave your plant with brown tips. Check these conditions if your plant is complaining.

Most plants, similar to people, are comfortable with daytime temperatures of between 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit and nighttime temps above 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Be sure to keep your plants

away from both cold drafts and sources of heat, like radiators, ovens, fireplaces, and electronic devices. Long-leaved plants such as spider plants (Chlorophytum), corn plants (Dracaena) and palms are sensitive to dehydration, hence the brown tips. Letting the water drain through the pot will help flush this through the soil helping the condition. Collecting and using rainwater in the summer to water your houseplants will almost make your plants smile with happiness.

When you water your interior plants you should thoroughly soak the soil. This is why drain holes in the bottom of the pot are important. However, don’t let the excess water stand in the saucer as this can lead to root rot and will cause an ugly brown, crusty, salt build up on the soil and in the saucer. Excess water should be poured out of the saucer, or it could be sucked out with a turkey baster. The soil should not be watered again until it becomes dry to the touch, which reminds me, always water with tepid water. Cold

or icy water can harm your plant.

It’s hard to keep up with watering a plant that has become too large for the pot. There will be little room for water if the roots are in tight quarters. You should also watch for the soil pulling away from the sides of the pot, which causes the water to run straight down the sides without being of much benefit to the plant.

It’s a good idea to repot the plant every few years, using fresh potting soil. You may need to increase the size of the pot or divide the plant. This will depend on the species of your plant. It’s better for most plants to do this after they resume more active growth in the spring. I like to take my plants outside to repot them, which makes the clean up a lot easier. I also dump the old soil into the compost pile or into my garden.

I consider winter an off-season for most of my houseplants so I let them rest and don’t fertilize them unless they are

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