

A winter tale of two trails

The two coldest months of the year are in the rear view mirror. The days are getting noticeably longer, and the daytime temperatures are creeping upward. The rather gloomy, dreary winter had me longing for a calm, sunny day so I can get out on my mountain bike.

Super Bowl Sunday was a classic bluebird Colorado day. Kathy and I dusted off the bikes, lubed up the chains, then headed for the bike trails that wind through town. The new sections of trail that connect the Montrose Rec. Center with the River Trail and the extension of the River Trail out to the Colorado Outdoors property were the focus of our ride.

All sorts of citizens were traveling the city trails that day. Young couples, senior citizens, families, most walking, others riding bikes. Dozens of people walking their dogs. At least a dozen anglers were getting their fishing line wet. Fast-forward to Valentine's Day – it was another mild, sunny day. Kathy and I wasted no time loading



Outdoors

By Bill Harris

our bikes into the truck and driving to Grand Junction. We parked at the Botanical Gardens in Las Colonias Park along the Colorado River.

The River Front Trail was our destination. The River Front Trail extends almost unbroken from Clifton to 4 miles west of Fruita near the trailhead for Kokopelli's Trail. It's quite the project, twenty-five years in the making and still going strong. The goal is to connect the town of Palisade with the existing trail system.

We initially headed upriver to check out the new amphitheater. We have tickets for the Boz Scaggs concert in June and wanted to check out the new venue's layout. The river trail was filled with people cycling, walking, some with their kids, others with their dogs.

Once our curiosity was satisfied, we turned around and headed downriver. The mellow river bottom terrain and smooth riding surface made pedaling almost effortless. Soon we passed through the historic neighbor-



Late winter offers plenty of "bluebird days" for bikers and trail users. (Submitted photo/Bill Harris)

hood of Riverside. Significant trail improvements had been made since the last time we rode that section of the trail.

After passing under Grand Avenue, we accessed the bridge that crosses the Colorado River. Our goal was the new Monument Corridor Trail. The trail follows the bridge next to vehicle traffic, but a sturdy concrete barrier separates the two. This mile and a half spur connects the Lunch Loop Trailhead with the River Front system. Many years ago, while attending Mesa College I rode my 10-speed bike up the narrow Monument Road many

times. This time I didn't have to worry about the vehicle traffic.

Once past the Redlands Canal the trail climbs steadily making us work a little harder. Ahead of us we could see Three Sisters Open Space on the left managed by the Mesa Land Trust. Three Sisters has some fine singletrack built by the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association that expands the popular Lunch Loop trail system.

Even on a weekday the trailhead was a busy place, again lots of people enjoying the outdoors. After a brief break to check out the new trailhead facilities we coasted back to the River Front Trail. We

turned downriver to ride the Blue Heron trail section before doubling back to our vehicle.

The trail systems we rode are part of the many amenities both cities offer to its citizens and visitors alike. They are an integral part of our western Colorado outdoor experience and the quality of life we enjoy. In one form or another I pay for these improvements, but I'm willing to pay the price to have them available.

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

Barometers and being prepared for wild weather

The term barometer or barometric pressure is not something you hear as often as we once did. I checked the weather apps on my phone and none of the three I use indicates the current pressure anymore.

The barometer was one of the most, if not the most, important tools used in forecasting the weather. Just about everyone had one. My grandfather checked the barometer in our house on a daily basis, seldom listening to television weather forecasts.

The area I lived in for a while, the Florida Keys, was plagued with hurricanes. Old timers relied on their barometer to warn them of an upcoming storm, and many of these people still do. I can't say I blame them when you consider the inaccuracy of the weather service and their "cone of uncertainty."

In 1935, over the Labor Day weekend, the most intense Atlantic hurricane in history made landfall in Islamorada of the Florida Keys. The storm was a Category 5 that killed nearly 1,000 people, and leveled Maticumbe Key as it hit with Gusts of 200 mph pushing 20 feet of storm surge.

Weather forecasting was poor in those days. The forecast relied heavily on reports from ships at sea. Locals relied on their barometer for notice of an upcoming storm. One local, Ivar Olson, noticed the pressure dropping



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

rapidly in his barometer.

Olson's barometer dropped so low, so quickly, that he was convinced it was broken. Then the storm hit. As the eye wall passed overhead, Olson's barometer read 26.35 inches, the

lowest pressure ever recorded in the world. His barometer was later shipped to the Weather Bureau in Washington D.C. where it was tested for accuracy. His barometer was found to be accurate and very reliable, so the record stands.

Evangelista Torricelli invented the barometer in 1643. He filled a long tube with mercury, closed the end, and placed it in an open cistern that also contained mercury. When the tube was opened, mercury flowed out of the tube and filled the cistern, but stopped about a quarter of the way down.

Torricelli was convinced something was pushing down on the mercury, making it stop. That something was atmospheric pressure because the atmosphere itself actually had weight. The first barometer was born but unfortunately, it wasn't until the mid 1800s that English sea captain Admiral Fitzroy conducted experiments at sea and came up with the first predictive significance of rising and falling barometric pressures.

Barometric pressure, which is also called atmospheric pressure, is simply the weight of the air at

ground level. Air pressure is lower as you gain elevation because there is less air on top of you.

The earth is covered with areas of high and low pressure as you can see on any weather map. An area of high pressure pushes air down. As the air descends, it warms, which inhibits cloud and storm formation, making stable high-pressure readings a sign of good weather.

Rising air that hits an area of low pressure, will rise, cool and condense, and form precipitation. This is why low pressure is associated with stormy weather and cold fronts. When the barometer is falling, it indicates that a low-pressure system is moving in.

The greater the difference between the high-pressure and the low-pressure, the more volatility there is in the atmosphere, and the stronger the storm. The smaller the difference, the less likely you are to see any stormy weather.

Mercury barometers have pretty much disappeared because of the dangers associated with mercury. The aneroid barometer is a non-liquid device that was invented in 1844. They utilize an aneroid cell made from an alloy of beryllium and copper. Changes in air pressure cause the box to expand or contract, which drives a mechanical lever that indicates the pressure on a dial.

Most barometers today are electronic. If you have a Smartphone, it probably already has a built-in barometer. Phone manufacturers use barometers to improve GPS elevation results, because they can be adversely affected by barometric pressure.



This old barometer served my grandparents well for many decades. (Mark Rackay/ Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

The box stores all sell some type of amateur weather station. These centers come with a digital barometer in them that can give you a fairly accurate reading. Just knowing the number is not enough for you to be an amateur meteorologist.

Readings will generally fall between 28 and 31 inches. The number is reported to the hundredth decimal. What is important is to know which direction the pressure is going. It is the change in pressure that forecasts the weather. Static numbers with no indication of rising or falling generally are not useful for predictions.

To get an accurate prediction, you need to look at the barometer every few hours and see how the number is changing. These changes will seem miniscule, moving very little in either direction.

On a digital barometer, you will have indications of rising and falling, and sometimes a graph. This graph is called a barograph and it shows the trend of the rises and falls. I can never remember the previous readings, so for me, the barograph is the best.

We live in an atmospherically volatile location here in Montrose. The mountains rapidly affect our weather systems. Sometimes storms form too quickly to be picked up on our home barometer, unless you spend your entire time watching it.


Keep in mind that barometers will only help forecast the weather for 24 to 48 hours out. Some pressure systems (highs and lows) last for many weeks and it can be a while before you notice any substantial change in your readings.

The barometer, along with wind strength and direction, can help give you an idea about upcoming weather changes. We live in an area where the weather changes constantly and that means we must always be prepared for the worse when we venture outdoors.

During my years of exile in hurricane country I went through several hurricanes. Some of those storms brought atmospheric numbers in the 27-inch area. Fortunately I never saw one dip anywhere near as low as the Labor Day storm, and hope I never do.

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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