

Surprise — mountain goats are ‘honorary’ natives



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay



A shot of a billy resting, way above the tree line. (Photo courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

Back in the early 70s, it seemed everyone was driving around with a sticker on their car proclaiming themselves to be “native.” Other folks had the same sticker, modeled after the license plate with the mountains, proclaiming themselves to be a “transplant.” Then, there was me, who fashioned a sticker that simply stated “who cares.”

We write a story about an animal in Colorado each month. I try to keep it about species that are native to our state, with a few exceptions. One critter, which you might never have guessed is not a native to our state, is the mountain goat.

The mountain goat (*Oreamnos americanus*), is truly an American animal. They are closely related to the chamois that live high in the Alps, and distantly related to several of the antelope species of Africa. Surprisingly, they have practically no relationship, other than appearance, to domestic goats.

In 1947, the now Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), began introducing mountain goats to our state, and continued to introduce them in small groups until 1972. The original transplanted group contained almost 60 of them, brought here from Montana.

Biologists generally agree that the mountain goat never occurred in Colorado naturally. There are some reports from early travelers about goat sightings, but none of them could be verified. A bone from an extinct species of mountain goat was found in a fossil deposit, estimated to be 800,000 years old, in Porcupine Cave, near South Park.

Goats live in the alpine and subalpine environment, at altitudes often above 13,000 feet. They are the largest animals living at that altitude. The high elevation protects them from predators. During the harshest of winters, goats may migrate down to lower elevations, but generally like to stay above the treeline.

Mountain goats are natural climbers, often preferring vertical climbing. Most mammals, including yours truly, are not capable of the steepness of the climb a goat

can make. When a goat finds itself trapped on a ledge, they can actually use their powerful legs and shoulders to pull themselves upward to an even higher ledge.

The hooves of a mountain goat are equipped with a spongy pad on the bottom that allows them to grip the slippery rock surfaces. They have flexible toes that spread out, enabling them to gain traction on uneven terrain.

As adept as goats are to their high altitude terrain, goats die each year from starvation, falls, rack slides and avalanches, with rock slides probably being the number one cause, accounting for nearly 90 percent of accidental deaths.

Goats have a good ability to find food under deep snow. They feed on a broad range of plant life, lichens, shrubs and small conifers, as well as high altitude grasses. Because of their fantastic tolerance of the rough terrain, they are able to cover larger ranges of ground to find food.

At maturity, a male mountain goat, called a “billy,” will stand about 3 feet tall and tip the scales at nearly 300 pounds. The female goat, called a nanny, will weigh somewhere between 90 and 150 pounds. They are known for their long, thick coats of white hair with a thick wooly undercoat.

The horns on mountain goats are shiny-black, and angle backwards from the head. Both billies and nannies have horns, but the billy’s is usually heavier. By their second year of life, you can count growth rings in their horns to determine age, similar to tree rings. Most goats can live from nine to 12 years in the wild.

November to mid-December marks the breeding season for mountain goats. The billies will wander from one group of nannies to the next, searching for breeding opportunities.

The baby goats, called “kids,” will be born by the beginning of June. These kids will be walking on the steep slopes, next to their mothers, by the second day in the world.

The billies remain solitary throughout the spring and summers, but the kids, yearlings and

nannies will generally band together.

The best times to view goats is either early morning or late in the afternoon and early evening, especially during the warmer months. During the colder months, the weather can be so brutal that you can’t get up there to view goats. Goats are generally at rest throughout the daytime hours.

Always look up slope when you want to view goats. You never want to get uphill of a goat since climbing uphill is their defense. Steep and rugged slopes and rocky cliffs are the best for mountain goat viewing.

A good pair of binoculars or a spotting scope can really help your viewing of mountain goats. At distance, they appear to be just patches of snow; in fact, some of them are just patches of snow. I once stared at a patch of snow for 15 minutes, waiting for it to move.

If you hike the high country, keep your distance from the goats. People who get too close can cause the animals distress. Like any wild animal, their behavior can be unpredictable.

In the event a goat approaches you, back away slowly and never turn your back on them. Remember that butting is a natural behavior to a goat and you do not want to find yourself on the business end of a head-butt.

In 1993, the Colorado Wildlife Commission proclaimed the mountain goat as a native species. Starting out with just a handful, the goats have a population numbering into the thousands and are doing very well. I guess we can call them an “honorary native.”

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The former home and parsonage of Mark and Bertha Warner sits at 130 North Park Avenue. The home, with its interesting exterior details is now the law office of James Plumhoff. The former Presbyterian Church building now holds a Lutheran congregation. (Photo courtesy of National Park Service)

Refuge during a time of pandemic



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

An old Ford pickup rattles and chugs its way down Park Avenue in morning’s first light. The muffler seems to hang by a thread as the truck’s clatter breaks the tranquility. She must have left home early.

Traffic is light, and quiet is restored after the truck lurches through the light at Main Street heading south. Across North Park, near Second Street, is the former home and parsonage of Reverend Mark Warner. The house holds particular meaning to Black Canyon National Park, but like many older homes in town, it reflects an age and level of thinking that informs our own times. And it reveals a purpose that is helpful for us today.

Mark Warner was born and raised in southwest Ohio in the late 1800s. After community schooling, he attended Muskingum College; then Xenia Theological Seminary, near Dayton. Graduating in early May, 1918, he came to Montrose to found the local United Presbyterian Church.

His first sermon was July 11. He conducted a couple of weddings. He visited a few sights with a classmate traveling through. By summer’s end, the first death of the erupting flu pandemic occurred in Montrose.

They called it the Spanish flu and it altered young Warner’s world. He attended to a wide variety of people as he came to know many folks in town. He must have been swamped.

Western Colorado residents understood a few basic premises of their flu epidemic. It was transmitted by people, there wouldn’t be an inoculation, quarantines (social distancing) worked, and if you got the flu, it was deadly.

Social distancing was clearly different then. Many people in town had no phone; KUBC radio (first in town) wouldn’t broad-

cast for another 30 years. There were no movies or television; no connectivity as we know it today. They had each other.

The spirited Warner reached out to all people. He became very involved in church leadership. He became master of the Montrose Boy Scouts. He partnered with other groups and churches to mark the signing of the Treaty of Versailles ending the Great War. And he became “very active in all movements pertaining to the welfare of the community.”

Warner gained from these real-life moments in community building. These lessons led him and his wife Bertha to strengthen their world during a much more difficult time that followed 10 years later: the Great Depression and the Second World War.

The home was refuge and springboard during their pandemic; both seemed to be vital. It’s a little house; no open floor plan. The small rooms are combined with various nooks; space was used to maximum benefit.

Warner knew how to reach out to people, but also when to retreat into quarantine. It seems that he gained an inner compassion during the troubles of the disease. He learned a balance; that staying in might keep the disease from spreading, but going out might mean ministering to the dead and dying.

His writings and actions throughout his life speak to this kindheartedness, fostered and tested at this time. The community

wouldn’t thrive unless everyone in the community had a place to be. His home was a place to renew and restore his belief even as he ventured out into the threat of illness.

Warner was also very active with the National Guard. I wonder about his balance when he handled the funeral of John Forsbeck. Private Forsbeck fought in World War I and had just returned to the states when he contracted the virus. The pneumonia that followed took his life while he was in Camp Lee, Virginia; far from home and alone.

The soldier’s remains were brought to Montrose, and Warner conducted the military service out at Cedar Cemetery. It must have felt especially cold that Christmas Eve day, 1918.

What about our balance in life during this pandemic? Would Warner find us with empathy towards our community?

Early mornings are quiet when standing on the corner of Second Street and North Park Avenue. You can probably keep social distancing without too much trouble before sunrise. Warner met many people for the first time in the first six months he lived in town. His love of people is a love that we could embrace.

The home is still full of purpose; a reminder of refuge and community. Maybe our actions should also move with a broader mindset for our greater community and country. That would make future people proud when this pandemic is in the history books.

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.



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