

A billion years in an eye-blink

The large great blue heron inevitably spread its wide wings and lifted off of the gravel bar just off to our left.

The muffled splash from the oars of the woman propelling the large raft downstream had eventually prompted the heron to rise up into that relaxed, graceful flight for which that bird is known. Similarly, a large bald eagle had earlier perched on a low spot of our adjacent canyon wall, watching us float by beneath it.

We were ten students in the living laboratory classroom that is the Colorado River last weekend. At least, it is a living laboratory when a professional paleontologist and three professional river guides are in charge.

The Colorado Canyons Association (CCA) hosted this multi-day adventure class to both spread the knowledge about the McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area (NCA), and to simultaneously raise funds for the educational branch to teach regional fifth-, sixth- and seventh-graders.

Regarding those school kids, in 2019, almost 600 of them were able to spend a day or more on the river while learning STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) which meets state standards-based curriculum. The River Education program of CCA uses expert river educators with teaching experience and skills to lead such school kids' trips, from April through November.

By partnering with the Bureau of Land Management, the Nature Connection, and other organizations, they provide 40 separate day-long and overnight trips each year. Some of these occur on the Colorado River and some on the Gunnison River. Decision-making skills, team-building, self confidence and outdoor experience are gained in this way by a diverse group of students from all backgrounds.

The small class of adults which I participated in last weekend included some locals who had made this river trip independently in previous years, and others from out of state who were experiencing the canyon country and the river for the first time. Some of these signed up particularly because they had always been interested in geology, whether from their parents being amateur rock hounds or from having



Outdoors

By John T. Unger

developed an interest in it on their own.

Others signed up because they hoped to fill in their understanding of the rich history of dinosaurs as found in fossils in and around the NCA, the Fruita Paleontological Area, and the other world famous dinosaur dig sites here on the Western Slope.

For my part, I appreciate the outdoor recreational opportunities of hiking with friends for miles through the Gunnison Gorge in Springtime, running solo through those canyons of the Colorado River in early mornings in summer, or mountain biking in the shadow of such walls.

I have always been impressed by the many locals fly fishing the canyon rivers here who have gained extensive knowledge of the timing and cycles of trout and the insect hatches upon which they depend, year after year.

Admiring these dramatic canyons while kayaking through them has repeatedly made me want to know more about the massive, layered, contorted canyon walls which line both the Gunnison and the Colorado Rivers here in the western half of this state. I was fortunate to get to finally be in this multi-day class to hear the hard science which, a step at a time, is finding out more and more about the many ages of life as captured in the rock layers.

Plus, camping along the river and paddling through it is always an adventure and a pleasure.

Fascinating details are slowly but constantly emerging from these varicolored layers of sandstone, shale, and billion year old rock layers, such as those in the Gunnison Gorge, Flattop Mesa, and the bottom of the Black Canyon, respectively. I was impressed to learn about a massive, contoured layered wall of rock in McInnis NCA near the Fault Line camp. It is actually just one end of the enormous Uncompahgre uplift. It made visual sense finally, standing at the site, with my hands on the rock wall.

See YEARS page A14



A shot of a pair of grizzly bears. Notice the large hump above the shoulder. (Courtesy photo/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Grizzly bears once called Colorado home

Are there grizzly bears in Colorado? Yes, there are ... well, maybe ... no, definitely not ... probably not anymore ... I don't know. Always one to stir the proverbial pot of waste, I thought I would throw grizzly bears in the mix with the wolf controversy.

With all the talk about people wanting to reintroduce wolves into Colorado, which yours truly thinks is a really bad idea, I wanted to muddy the water a bit by talking about grizzly bears because they once thrived here in Colorado.

The scientific name for grizzly bear, in case you were wondering, is *Ursus arctos horribilis*. The last part of that, the derivative of horrible, pretty well sums up the old griz. He can reach 10 feet in length; weigh out at over 700 pounds, and is a definite man-eater with a poor attitude.

The big bears lived



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

in Colorado back when there were lots of areas for them to roam, and plenty of food sources. During the 1940s and early 1950s, their numbers began to fade. A government-funded program for hunters was introduced because they posed a massive threat to livestock. Sound familiar? By 1952, it was decided that the bears were all gone from Colorado.

Alas, but never say never. In 1979, a bow hunter by the name of Ed Wiseman ran into one of those nonexistent bears, near an alpine lake named Blue Lake. Wiseman had

a very bad day as the bear mauled him, leaving him seriously injured.

Apparently, it was not the day for Wiseman because he fought the bear off and was able to kill it by stabbing it with an arrow. Wiseman survived to tell the tale, but I am sure he had some tough recovery time.

The experts who investigated the case determined that the bear was old, weak and on his last leg, otherwise Wiseman would not have been able to kill it. Many people decided that the last grizzly in Colorado had been killed but others were not so quick to believe it. You see, this sow bear had recently nursed cubs, and that is enough for me to say, hmmm.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife Public Information Officer Joe Lewandowski says, "There are no grizzlies living in Colorado or the south San Juan Mountains. A reintro-

duction of the grizzly has never been discussed during the 15 years I have been with CPW and none are planned."

Definitely not here, but just in case, CPW has a "Grizzly Bear Sighting Form" on its website, so anyone spotting one can report it. It's likely that most of the grizzlies sighting reports are black bear sightings mistaken for the grizzly. Many black bears are a cinnamon color, similar to that of a grizzly, and to an untrained eye, could be mistaken.

Black bears are much smaller than grizzlies, seldom topping 400 pounds. Also, grizzlies have an unmistakable hump over their front shoulder. Colorado is home to a population of around 19,000 black bears, and that is more than all the grizzly bears in all the lower 48 states.

See BEARS page A14

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Nationally renowned paleontologist Robert J. Gay’s right foot is in the red of the 200 million year old Chinle formation, while his left foot is in the 1.5 billion year old Precambrian formation. He presented last weekend’s teaching lectures in the McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area, west of Fruita. (John T. Unger/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

YEARS

FROM PAGE A13

Ten miles and some hours of floating farther downriver, the other end of this section of that ancient uplift can be seen in the canyon walls which begin thinning and tapering as a boater approaches the Utah border. Rather than a mishmash of random colors and layers, some climates of long ago can begin fitting in as the

sources of the grinning, skeletal dinosaurs which populate our museums and our adventure movies about the Jurassic Period and others. Decades of research of bone structure has confirmed that both the Great Blue Heron we had seen, and the stately bald eagle above us on the canyon wall, are descendants of the dinosaurs whose bones are still being found and studied in

those NCAs just an hour or two drive from Main Street in Montrose. *John T. Unger is a Diplomat of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, with over twenty-five years of practice in Montrose. He is grateful to get to learn evermore about the canyons and mountain peaks surrounding our valleys and rivers. Ideas for future columns are welcomed at sportsdocunger.com.*

BEARS

FROM PAGE A13

Before you start thinking that we need to bring old horribilis back, you may want to research the Glacier National Park in Montana. Back in 1967, a group of young folks were enjoying a camping trip. A fairly cool evening made for good sleeping conditions. All the kids were sound asleep at midnight, when a scream from 19-year-old Julie Helgerson pierced the night silence. Helgerson was sleeping a short distance away from the rest of the group; bad idea. The dim light of the dying campfire was just enough to show the outline of the teenager firmly in the jaws of a tremendous grizzly bear. As she screamed and fought the bruin, the bear dropped her to severely bite a young man who had come to try and save her. After the bear shredded the young man’s back and legs, he turned his attention back to Julie. The bear bit her through the body and drug her for several hundred feet, where he suddenly dropped the dying girl, and padded off into the woods. By the time help arrived for Julie, she was a statistic. It was a really rough night for young people at Glacier National Park, because four hours later and some 20 miles away, another group of young campers were frightened awake by a grizzly bear that towered over them. All the campers fled the scene and climbed trees for safety. All but one that is. Another 19-year-old, (a bad night for 19-year olds) Michele Koons of San Diego, was experiencing the unspeakable terror of having the zipper being stuck on her sleeping bag. Talk about old Murphy of Murphy’s Law fame making a tragic appearance. Her friends listened to her screams as the bear viciously tore her apart. She screamed to her friends that she was dying. Unfortunately, she was right. I wish I could say that it was an extremely rare occurrence for a grizzly attack, but such is not the case. In Yellowstone National Park alone, there have been 44 documented grizzly attacks since 1979. While it is true that some of them were expected, such as the tourist who tried to cuddle up with a cub and feed him marshmallows; all in the interest of a picture? He

got his picture taken all right, but not until the cub’s mother sorted him out. I might point out that more people die in Yellowstone from drowning (121) or committing suicide (26) than ever get sent to paradise by a bear. Still, it happens. But back to Glacier National Park in Montana. Since 1967, the park has seen 100 grizzly bear attacks, with eight of them resulting in fatality. Must be something in the water. Grizzly bears thrive in other parts of North America. The bears are expanding their range in the U.S. Northern Rocky Mountains, spreading from the wilderness areas into the farmlands. There is also a huge legal fight going on concerning proposed hunting of the bears. New government data from grizzly population monitoring show the bears in the Yellowstone region of Montana, Wyoming and Idaho have expanded their range by 1500 square miles over the last two years. They now occupy 27,000 square miles, and that range has grown 34% over the last decade. Is the grizzly still in Colorado? Probably not, but the fascination with the big bear, surrounded by the lure of death and danger, will lurk in the hearts of outdoor people forever. Who knows, with his expanding territory, he may wander this way on his own someday. Do we want to reintroduce the grizzly back into Colorado? This outdoor man says no, it would be a bad idea, same as bringing back the wolves. Our elk and deer herds are having a rough enough time, not to mention our ranchers, and they don’t really need any more outside interference to complicate their lives. Besides, if you were to ask the grizzly if he wanted to come back, he would probably tell you no. We weren’t really all that nice to him before. *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@icloud.com.*

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