

When you notice the sky looking like this, you might want to check the forecast and reconsider your travel plans. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

Check the forecast before you go

During my years in the Florida Keys, we lived by the weather forecast. This was before cell phones had an app for weather and severe weather alerts, all the things that take away the element of surprise of bad weather.

We ran fishing charters, both flats fishing and offshore with sport fishing boats. Every morning before heading out with our parties, we listened to the weather forecast on the VHF radio on the boat. We paid strict attention to the tides, sea forecast for wind speed and direction, and the resultant wave height. Loaded with that information, we took to the high seas in pursuit of game fish.

One particular trip, we had a party out 27 miles from shore. Our crew was chasing blue marlin and having a grand time in the light 2-foot chop of the seas. Over the VHF radio came a Securite warning. Securite is a radio call that issues a navigational warning for various issues, including weather that may present a life-threatening emergency. It is the kind of thing you don't want to hear on a pleasant offshore fishing trip.

This particular warning was for a severe thunderstorm producing blinding rain and winds in excess of 70 mph. The seas were forecast to transcend from a fine and pleasant 2-foot chop to a fresh to frightening 12-to-15-foot nightmare. 15 feet is a lot of wave height for someone in a 25-foot boat. Our vessel was 45 feet in length, but that is still a lot of waves.

We made our way back to the docks safely, having aged a few years from the worry of white knuckling it home for the last 4 hours. The charter fleet lost 2 boats in that storm. Fortunately, the Coast Guard saved all the people, but a half million dollars of fishing boats and equipment became a new artificial reef.

Since returning to my Colorado home, I admit that I have become somewhat complacent about the weather. Around town, we usually don't have any kind of weather emergency that could prevent you from arriving at your desired destination. If, however, your travels will take you into the nearby mountain regions and passes, you



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

might want to give a little look before you leap.

Last year, I spent the first week of December in Eastern Kansas hunting whitetail deer. The weather there was unseasonably warm and pleasant. It was just the kind of weather to make you complacent about forecasts and travel. When the hunt was over, I piled into my truck at dark-thirty, pointed it on the highway to Colorado, and let him rip.

Everything went pretty well and uneventful for the normally 12-hour drive until I noticed snow falling near Canon City. By the time I reached Salida, it was piling up pretty good. I have no idea what possessed me to think that things might get a bit better as I trudged on, but it was not a good management decision as I spent the next 5 hours on the uphill side of 21 miles of hell, known as Monarch Pass.

There is really no excuse to be taken by surprise with the technology we have at our fingertips. Sure, there is the freak storm that catches everyone with his or her proverbial pants down, but generally we have a heads up for what to expect.

I am not a fan of the television weather forecasts on the news. They spend too much time on the entertainment factor, and not enough on the accuracy of their forecasts. The same could be said about the majority of the weather apps you can install on your phone.

I use at least 2 weather apps on my phone, and before taking a trip, I compare them both. I prefer the NOAA app, which is the basic forecast from the National Weather Service. The other app is called Weather Forecast 2020.

I have found both of these apps to be far more accurate than AccuWeather, Weather Channel or Weatherbug. They also don't have all those annoying advertisements that aggravate you so bad you

forget why you looked at your phone.

The other nice feature about these apps is that you can plug in other locations, other than home. If you are planning a trip that will take you into the mountains, you can check conditions and the forecast of various towns along the way. You might find out that Montrose is expected to have a passing rain shower, but Salida is expecting a foot of snow. Forewarned is forearmed.

Another fantastic website to have in your phone or home computer is the official Colorado State web portal, called COtrip. (www.cotrip.org) On this site you will find route information, construction sites, travel alerts and other announcements that may affect your trip.

The best feature I have found is the Interactive Map that features cameras showing a live view from hundreds of locations around the state. You can actually bring up a camera on a mountain pass you have to cross, and actually see what the road and weather conditions are, in real-time.

When making a trip across our State during the winter months, I actually check the roads ahead of me using these cameras. This gives me the chance to take an alternate route, pull over and wait it out, or trudge onward.

Having all this technology makes it a lot safer to venture out on the roads, especially during the winter months. It also takes away that surprised feeling you get in your gut as you start up a pass in a blinding snow, when 2 miles ago the sun was out. If you know of any other apps that may help outdoor folks in their winter travels, I would love to hear from you. I just need to remember to not get complacent and check the cameras and forecast.

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A warm day in winter

Winter. Some like it, some don't. My attitude has always been that, while not my favorite season, it is nonetheless a great season. I like the changing seasons of Colorado. Otherwise I suppose I would live elsewhere.

What makes it an enjoyable time of year? Aside from the usual year-round priorities for our time such as family or work or school, winter does forcibly slow us down. The cold and snow of winter doesn't mean no activity, it just means different activity. Yes, there is bingo, but I'm thinking more in the outdoor realm. Plenty of outdoor choices to be had – skiing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, sledding. And yes, fishing.

Fishing is typically thought of as a warm weather activity, and it is, but in the Colorado winter you just switch the when and where and still go fishing. I've written about ice fishing – I do that regularly. But what about the rivers of winter?

Big fish. Low, clear water. Did I say big fish? I'm talking tailwaters.

Winter is an outstanding time of the year for fishing in Colorado. The river of opportunity is skinny, but the results can be fat – fat as in trophy trout measured in pounds instead of inches!

True, I can't go a summer without hiking into the Colorado Rocky Mountain backcountry to a small creek in hopes of enticing small cutthroat trout to a softly laid dry fly. But for consistent chances for large fish, the best place to go hunting is a tailwater river. And Colorado has them.

Tailwaters, although they may be in out-of-the-way places, have easy access simply because there is always a road to the dam. Easy access also means that you should not expect solitude, maybe even take-a-number fishing.

So what's the attraction? Open water and potentially large fish.

Tailwaters are conducive to rapid and constant growth of trout. With a rich supply of food coming fresh from the reservoir above, fish feed year-round. Constant water temperatures from reservoir releases are cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. Reservoirs settle out upstream solids to clarify the water. It all adds up to a prime river environment.

Tailwaters require a change in tactics to fool wary fish. Be sneaky.



Outdoors

By Joel L. Evans

Remember the rules for crossing a street? Watch, look and listen. At first, don't even cast. Instead, observe. Using polarized sunglasses, peer into the holes to locate fish. Since we are talking bigger than average trout, you will often be able to spot them before they spot you.

Knowing where they are before you cast gives you a big advantage. Often you may be focusing on a single fish, so adjust your angle of approach, study the subtle flows of the current, and pre-plan where you can land the fish – all before you make your cast.

By no means a complete tailwater list, these tailwaters consistently rate among the best.

Frying Pan River — Every time a top ten list of the best trout streams in America is compiled, the Frying Pan always makes the list. Nearby Aspen gets a lot of attention for skiing, but just a short distance away, up the Frying Pan Valley from Basalt, finesse is the name of the game.

Only patient fishermen need apply for a workout here. Typical days mean repeated casts, changing flies, and checking knots and tippets. But attention to detail will be rewarded with browns that commonly go over 18 inches and weigh 3 to 5 pounds with the potential for rainbows over 10 pounds.

Gunnison River – In summer, the entire Gunnison River from north of Gunnison town, thru the nearby dams, and on and out to the lower river near Delta, is prime water. But in winter, most of this is inaccessible. Yet there remains the lower most section of river from below Crystal Dam, the last dam in the steep canyon section.

The lower Gunnison is commonly drive-to accessed at the public area near Austin, at the confluence of the main stem of the Gunnison coming from Crystal Dam and the free-flowing North Fork of the Gunnison. Here one can walk upstream from the confluence or float downstream to a public takeout.

Although this area is several miles downstream of the dam, due to

the confining upstream canyon walls, the river maintains a tailwater like fishery, typically with low winter flows and concentrated fish pockets.

Taylor River — Of these tailwaters, the Taylor probably sees the least amount of pressure. Not because the fish are less in numbers or size, but rather because there is no major population center nearby, the road to the reservoir isn't on the way to anywhere else, public property below the dam is a relatively short, and its reputationally very cold.

Mysis Bridge crosses the river about one-quarter mile below the dam. The best water will be found in the one hundred yards both above and below the bridge. Avalanche Hole, so named because it sits in a bend of the river downstream of the bridge beneath an avalanche chute of the rock canyon wall, harbors plenty of large fish. You really can't sneak up on or hide from the pod of trout hanging out in this pool. They will know you are there. Just wade slowly into the edges and make repeated casts.

Uncompahgre – The river immediately below Ridgway Reservoir at Pa-Co-Chu-Puk has matured into a tailwater to be among the best anywhere. With the construction of Ridgway Dam and the state park, a tailwater was born that has been good, and at times great.

Man-made structures, primarily strategically placed large rocks and root wads, create large and slow deep pools as well as small and narrow plunge pools that protect fish, meaning a place to grow and hard to catch. Some very large, mature fish are harbored in this theme park style of fishing.

Tailwater flies all have two things in common – small and simple. In winter, size 20 and smaller midges and mayfly nymphs fished on 5X and smaller tippets are necessary. Your best bet for a realistic drift is to use a single fly. Go armed with patterns for mysis shrimp, miracle nymph, sparkle wing emerger, sparkle wing dry, red midge, and yes, a contrarian woolly bugger. Be sneaky and persistent!

Hum! Big fish. Low, clear water. Did I say big fish? Yes, the snow is flying, but it only means a different season is at hand.

Joel L. Evans is an avid fisherman, outdoor writer and photographer, who has explored Western Colorado for decades.



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