



I caught and released this musky in Canada a dozen years ago. (Submitted photo/Mark Rackay)

Chasing the mighty musky

In the early 1950s, a select group of people brought musky fishing to the forefront of the fishing world. People like Jerry Tricomi, Tony Rizzo, and Bill Gleason, traveled the northern waters of the United States and Canada in pursuit of this great fish.

Then came Len and Betty Hartman, who spent all their free time chasing record book muskies. They were successful in setting 5 records and boating almost 4,000 fish during their career. The couple wrote books, magazine articles, and were guests on outdoor television shows. Together they put the musky center stage and inspired many other people to chase them. My father was one of the inspired people.

My dad did not hunt but he sure did fish. He spent every free moment, every day of vacation, and a few days when he called in “sick,”



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

out chasing the elusive musky. Dawn to dusk, rain or shine, cold or hot, the man stayed on the boat. Starting in the mid 1960s, he had a small boy by his side. We traveled to Northern Wisconsin, Minnesota and Ontario, all in pursuit of this fish. At the time, I hated it. Let me explain.

Esox masquinongy of the Esocidae family, is affectionately known as the muskellunge, or musky for short. The musky is a very popular gamefish, and many anglers dedicate themselves to fishing for them exclusively. The musky is very elusive, with an unpredictable

behavior, and one of the most difficult fish in the world to catch.

It is estimated that it takes 100 hours of fishing, on average, for an angler to catch a legal-size musky. That equates to 10,000 casts using artificial baits like large plugs and bucktail spinners. The lures are considerably larger than the ones we might use for trout, and the rods are studier, equipped with reels loaded with 20-pound test line, and upwards.

Stand in a boat, tie a cinder block to a rope and hang it from your neck, and toss the brick around all day, and you will get the idea what it is like to fish for these creatures. A 14-hour day on the water is considered successful if you see one behind your bait, called a follow. Now you understand why, as a youngster, it was more exciting to go up town and watch haircuts.

Many people have fished for them for years, and never caught one. However, the sight of even a 10-pounder will set your knees to knocking. Powerful jaws stacked with hundreds of needle-like teeth will cut through the heaviest line in a single chomp. They are strong, strike with incredible violence, and very acrobatic as they blow out of the water, and the sight is addictive to people who pursue them.

Colorado stocks a number of reservoirs on the eastern slope with tiger muskies. Evergreen, Antero, Pinewood, Big Creek, and Gross are all reservoirs with a catchable population of these great fish. The Wray Fish Hatchery is responsible for raising Colorado’s tiger musky before they are stocked. These hybrid fish come to Colorado through a trade program with Nebraska.

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The value of cottonwood trees



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

Sunlight silently inches down a canyon wall to shower its warmth on a clump of cottonwood trees stretched along a gushing Dominguez Creek. Only a few trees have brought out their leaves – it’s mid-April. They flutter in a breeze though they are tiny.

A snack always tastes better on the trail; I’m propped up against the impenetrable bark of one of the trees. The cliffs, colored a dark cherry, rise starkly against the tree’s greenery and indigo sky. Here the robust trees, whipped by wind and scorched by the summer sun truly match the character of the craggy canyon walls.

Cottonwood trees have not endeared themselves to us Americans. They grow streamside throughout the west. One species is dominant in western Colorado: The Eastern Cottonwood, Populus deltoides. These trees are common around our towns, rivers, creeks. . . everywhere.

Botanists disagree on the naming of two subspecies – the Fremont and the Rio Grande Cottonwood. Both can be found in canyon bottoms and waterholes from the Grand Valley down to Four Corners. Telltale signs between the species come in their flowers.

The creek meanders; I follow. To touch the deep grooves of the bark of a stately cottonwood is to touch the skin of a plant that persists against a 25-year drought with furnace-like heat in the summer or icebox cold in winter. It’s the touch of time.

Arborists usually find cottonwoods to be unsuitable for landscaping. Limbs are readily dropped, they are prone to disease, it’s a poor fuel for wood stoves, and they spread a ton of pollen in allergy season.

And then there is the “cotton.” Sometime in June (in our neck of the woods), the dry sunshine will cause the cases of seed pods will burst open. The cotton is designed to catch the breeze, and on a good gust the tiny seeds are spread downwind. The seeds are viable for only a few days, once released. And they need to land on damp sand along a creek, or among streamside gravel.

The seeds can germinate quickly. And they are hardy, being able to withstand near-freezing weather. One study out of Nevada showed that a 70% germination rate is possible even with very cold temperatures. Frigid air can settle into canyon bottoms after a passing cold front causing this to happen.

Springtime weather in the West is unpredictable. The cottonwood has adapted a singular strategy to send the next generation out into the world

But after you’ve cleaned the cotton out of your window screens, and brushed it off of your swamp cooler pads, swept it out of your garage for the fourth time in early summer, you might have a higher level of disgust for the tree and agree with the arborists. Many of us have firsthand experience doing this work.

I ramble further up Dominguez Creek. Melting snow off of the Uncompahgre Plateau has swollen the stream. Most hikers make a beeline trek for the famous waterfall a few miles from the trailhead. But there are other falls and pools that provide space for the trees. Time seems to stand still.

How should we take the measure of the cottonwood tree in its value for today, I wonder? They are large trees, 75 to 100 feet high with spreading branches casting a wide pool of shade on houses where residents seek to have them nearby. Big birds need big trees for roosting and to host their nests. Hawks, eagles, herons, ravens and others make great use of the expansive canopy.

Reserved for spiritual importance, the Utes (and many tribes) have a sacred relationship with the trees. Explorers and pioneers took notes from indigenous medicine to find cures for various ailments. In the days of horse travel, the “sweet” cottonwood (Fremont) provided the best forage as its inner layer has a flavor enticing to equines.

The first settlers to our valley would have been greeted by cottonwoods along the river; their first warming campfires would have been cottonwood branches. Spanish explorers named it alamo, they would have noticed that a cottonwood sapling could grow some 12 feet in a year.

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BLM lifts closures in wildlife habitat

SPECIAL TO THE MONTROSE DAILY PRESS

The Bureau of Land Management Southwest District lifted annual seasonal closures of certain public lands in the Tres Rios and Uncompahgre Field Offices on April 30. Annual closures are necessary to protect critical wildlife habitat, minimize stress to wintering mule deer, elk and nesting raptors while

also preventing road damage. Within the Uncompahgre Field Office, lifted closures include the Dry Creek Recreation Area, the Ridgeway Trails Recreation Area, the Gunnison Gorge National Recreation Area, the Jumbo Mountain Special Recreation Area, the Burn Canyon Area, and the Dominguez Escalante National Conservation Area.

“I would like to thank the public for their cooperation in protecting the critical habitat areas for the wildlife that makes Southwest Colorado such a special place,” said Elizabeth Dawson, acting district manager. “We appreciate the public’s understanding and continued support in complying with future seasonal closures on BLM managed public lands.”

Within the Tres Rios Field Office, annual closures will lift on Animas City Mountain, Grandview Ridge Recreation Management Zone in the Durango Special Recreation Management Area, the Aqueduct, Chutes and Ladders, the Summit areas within the Montezuma Triangle Recreation Management Zone portion of the Cortez Special Recreation Management Area.

The BLM coordinates with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and local agencies to identify key wildlife areas for protection while providing areas open for public recreation. Colorado Parks and Wildlife data on deer and elk movements throughout the years indicates that closing areas to human activity helps protect critical foraging habitat

and enables the animals to conserve energy for winter survival. Maps and a complete list of areas affected by these closures and areas open for use are available online at <https://tinyurl.com/blmrecmap> and the Southwest District office: 2465 S .Townsend Ave., Montrose. For additional information, call the Southwest District office at 970-240-5300.



Quagga mussels are a non-native mussel and considered a serious ANS threat for Colorado waters. Adult infestations harm aquatic ecosystems and fisheries by disrupting the food web and outcompeting native species. (Submitted/CPW)

CPW launches pilot program to check for invasive mussels

SPECIAL TO THE MONTROSE DAILY PRESS

With summer around the corner and boat ramps across Colorado opening for the season, CPW will begin a pilot aquatic nuisance species (ANS) check station program in the Northwest Region. The pilot program for the 2022 boating season will be focused at the Loma Port of Entry on I-70, west of Grand Junction. Any vehicle with a motorized or trailered watercraft entering the state will be required to stop for an inspection on the following dates: May 15, July 23 and Sept. 5. The purpose of this

check station is to stop any vessel with the potential to transport invasive plants and animals from entering the state’s waters in order to mitigate negative impacts to natural resources and outdoor recreation. Watercraft found to have mud, plants, water or mussels during inspection will be subject to decontamination. A decontamination station will be open for any vessel found with ANS. CPW encourages boaters to plan ahead and ensure their watercraft are clean, drained, and dry prior to arrival at the station to help expedite the inspection process

and minimize impacts to their travel. “While many waters in our neighboring states are infested with zebra or quagga mussels, Colorado’s are not,” said CPW Invasive Species Program Manager Robert Walters. “Inspecting watercraft at ports of entry will help ensure Colorado’s lakes and reservoirs remain free of these highly destructive aquatic nuisance species.” Aquatic Nuisance Species are non-native plants, animals, and pathogens that cause problems for natural resources and the human use of those resources, often resulting in social and economic harm.

In 2021, Colorado Legislature passed House Bill 21-1226 which authorized Colorado Parks and Wildlife to implement a pilot roadside watercraft inspection and decontamination program on select dates during the 2022 and 2023 boating seasons. Colorado Parks and Wildlife reminds boaters that boat inspections for aquatic nuisance species are mandatory in Colorado. Any motorboat and sailboat entering Colorado waters must have an ANS Stamp prior to launching. To learn more or purchase an ANS Stamp, visit cpw.state.co.us/aboutus/Pages/ISP-ANS.aspx

MUSKY

FROM PAGE A12

The tiger musky is a hybrid, being a cross between a northern pike and a muskellunge. It has irregular, dark colored vertical markings on a light background, with a long snout. They differ from a northern pike in the fact that, since they are a hybrid, they are sterile and cannot reproduce. In 2019, Colorado Parks and Wildlife stocked 15,000 tiger muskies into 29 different bodies of water. The fish are stocked into waters open to sport fishing to control the white and longnose sucker populations. Musky are not stocked into rivers or streams. All stockings are done in the late summer months. The Colorado musky grows quite quickly in our waters. Technicians at Gross Reservoir found a tiger musky that was stocked in 2018 at 7 inches in length, had reached 18 inches in just one year, so they do grow quickly.

The bag and possession limit for tiger musky in Colorado is one fish, and it must be 36 inches in length, or longer. A 36-inch will push the scales to close to 10 pounds. The state record for the biggest tiger musky caught in Colorado is 40 pounds, 2 ounces, caught by Jason Potter at Quincy Reservoir in Arapahoe County in 1994. The world record musky stands at just shy of 70 pounds for a fish caught in the St. Lawrence Seaway. Musky over 100 pounds have been caught in nets over the years. One fish weighing 103 pounds was netted in Lake Minocqua in Northern

Wisconsin. The fish was released alive back into the lake. There is not a great deal of anglers who come to Colorado to chase this magnificent fish, but they do have a following here. The old timers in the game spend their angling hours in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ontario. With very little angling pressure, Colorado can reward someone who puts their time in. I have never fished for musky in Colorado, but I may try it in the future. I hated fishing for musky as a kid because of the hours of sheer boredom in the bow of a boat. Hated I say, until I caught my first one in 1968. After that, I was addicted to musky fishing and went on to catch well over a hundred in a 20-year time span. I stopped fishing for musky when I discovered tarpon in the Florida Keys. One hookup with a tarpon and I had a new addiction. Now that I am back home in Colorado, I think I need to take a trip to the other side of the state and rekindle a relationship with an old friend, the tiger musky.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



A small grove of cottonwood trees makes stand against eroded cliffs at the mouth of Dominguez Canyon at the Gunnison River. The beauty of spring-green leaves contrasts with the cliffs of Wingate sandstone in the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. (Courtesy photo)

TREES

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A large tree seems to beckon me under its canopy for a break before returning to our frenzied world. The summer heat is near, but the canopy of this venerable sentinel of Dominguez Canyon will provide refuge for other species as it mediates the sun’s blaze and afternoon winds. A cottonwood seems to know how it serves. To

measure its worth, indeed, is to measure how far we humans have moved from understanding the value of trees. Paul Zaenger is a retired National Park Service supervisory park ranger from the National Park Service. Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area are among his park assignments. He can be reached at zae@bresnan.net.

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8am - 3pm

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