



This shows just how small a tick is, and near invisible, when he decides you are his next meal. (Courtesy photo/ Wikimediacommons)

## Watch out for the tricky tick

Not all of the blood-sucking parasites reside in Washington, D.C. We have a fair amount of them in Colorado. For our purposes here, because I have a strict policy of not writing about politics, we will discuss ticks.

My first experience with ticks dates back to my single-digit years. An old woodsman friend of the family by the name of Hammer, told me about a small lake, chock full of hungry brook trout. He described to me a poorly marked trail, through some very thick underbrush, a couple miles hike up a ridge outside of town.

Hammer always seemed to get a great deal of enjoyment at my expense. He would send my gullible young body off on wild goose chases, in the hopes of finding fish and game. This escapade was no different.

Saturday morning found me hiking the trail with the highest of hopes. To say the brush was thick was an understatement. It was like saying George Foreman was a sissy. Visibility was measured in inches rather than yards.

After a long and horrendous day of jungle-carving my way, I found the lake. It was one of those shallow mountain lakes that winterkills every three or four years, so any resident fish would be small and underweight. I figured Hammer had either never been to the lake or had sent me on another one of his practical jokes, or both. I vowed revenge on the old woodsman who had a good laugh at my expense. First, I needed lots of medical attention for the assortment of cuts and scratches, and something was crawling all over me.

When I started to strip down, I discovered a full covey of ticks making a nest on various parts of my young body. My grandmother came to the rescue with kitchen matches and tweezers to remove the bloodsuckers from my legs, head, arms and neck. As my



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

grandmother removed the vicious creatures, coated me in a layer of iodine, while I silently plotted the Hammer's untimely demise.

In the last 15 years, tick-borne disease reports have more than doubled in the United States, and it continues to get worse. Ticks are the No. 1 cause of vector-borne disease (a disease that is passed from one living creature to another) in this country, and Colorado is also seeing an increase of cases.

If that is not enough to concern you, know that the general symptoms of most of the tick-borne diseases are similar to the flu and the dreaded COVID-19, that we are all tired of. This makes it very difficult to know just what is making you feel sick, and a tick disease is usually the last thing you think of when you are sick.

Ticks are arachnids, being of the same family of other beloved creatures as spiders and scorpions. They have annoyed other critters on this planet for more than 100 million years. Scientists have found fossil ticks dating back that long.

The tick is a very patient creature, perching himself on a piece of brush or tall blade of grass. There, the tick will spread out its front legs and wait for something warm-blooded to happen by. This waiting is called questing. The tick will wait for long periods of time for its victim to pad past.

A mosquito will bite you for a quick drink of blood and head down the road. With

a tick, it is a different story. Younger ticks, in the nymph stage, will bite you and stay attached for around three days, while an adult female will hold on for up to 10 days.

The tick will bury its curved teeth into your skin and secrete a glue-like substance through its saliva, to help keep him attached to your skin. It takes about 48 hours for the tick to begin to transmit any infection, so it is important to find them on your body and get them removed as soon as possible. The tick that homesteads on you for a week is the one you need to really worry about.

There are a dozen or better diseases spread by ticks, but most of them do not reach Colorado. Don't celebrate yet, because Lyme disease, which is one of the most prevalent back East, has been slowly working its way across the country. I suspect we will have it here in the future. Colorado has to deal with Rocky Mountain spotted fever and tularemia.

Spotted fever can cause fever, vomiting, and neurological problems, along with rashes on the arms and ankles. It needs to be caught early and can be life-threatening. The recovery is long and tedious. I had a friend stricken with this and it was months before she was over it.

Tularemia is also known as rabbit fever and infects around 200 people a year, but that number has been growing as well. Symptoms can include a fever, reddening and swelling of the face and around the eyes and possible death. The recovery period is long and requires a variety of antibiotics.

Another malady to watch out for from ticks is Alpha gal, an illness that makes you allergic to red meat. Alpha gal is very debilitating and can be very difficult to diagnose. This disease was first discovered in 2009 and has become more and more prevalent as time goes by.

All of this boils down to getting the ticks off your body

before they begin to homestead and feed on your juices. This means coating yourself with insect repellent rich in DEET, paying attention to ankles, sleeves, cuffs, neck, and any other area a tick might enter your clothing to get to your skin.

After every trip, strip down and do a thorough inspection of every square inch of your body and remove any of the interlopers. Grasp them with tweezers and pull them straight out. Wash the area completely and add a coat with a disinfectant and a slab of Neosporin. Catch those critters right away and remove them.

I ran into Hammer a few days later in town. When he stared at my quivering carcass, still covered in iodine and Band-aids, he asked about the fishing, obviously stifling a laugh. I casually replied, "I brought home five, smallest one being 2 pounds. I'm heading back up next Saturday."

The next evening, Hammer stopped by our house, definitely looking poorly. He explained to my grandfather how I had lied to him about the fishing and sent him on a wild goose chase through the thickest jungle this side of the dark continent and demanded what punishment he was going to instill upon the kid.

My grandfather replied, "Nuthin' Hammer. Remember ... you started it."

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## Birding the Grand Mesa



### Outdoors

By Bill Harris

In my previous article I highlighted the wonderful mountain bike trails on the Grand Mesa. But there is more to the Grand Mesa than its singletack. No, it is not the many lakes that offer great fishing opportunities or the great camping areas. It is the birds.

Several times each year I visit the Grand Mesa in search of the dozens of bird species that can be found flitting about in the spruce forests, aspen groves, rolling meadows and on lakes that give the Mesa its unique vibe.

In late June I led a field trip on the Grand Mesa sponsored by the Black Canyon Audubon Society. But before we headed for the mesa, we stopped off at Fruitgrowers Reservoir. Birders had been reporting a cattle egret at the reservoir for several days.

This species is rarely seen in Western Colorado, so the group decided to stop by the reservoir to see if it was still around. As our caravan of vehicles parked along the causeway along North Road, we spotted the egret along the northwest shore of the lake. We spotted 19 other bird species before leaving.

On our way up Highway 65 we stopped at the Scotland Trailhead just before Ward Lake. Across the road from the trailhead is a wetlands with willow thickets and an abandoned beaver pond. Right out of the vehicles Steve and Jon spotted a red-naped woodpecker.

We could hear birds singing in the willow thickets, then patiently waited until they revealed themselves. Soon white-crowned, Lincoln's, fox and song sparrows came out of the thickets. We also spotted Wilson's, yellow and orange-crowned warblers.

A strategy I have found successful is using the Merlin app on my smartphone to identify bird songs. This method alerts me to what birds are singing and helps with learning the various bird songs. On occasion I play the bird song to lure the bird closer. Identifying birds by song and call is my weakest birding skill.

Our next stop was the Mesa Top Trailhead. A long hike through the nearby meadows and trees brought us in contact with a good variety of birds. In particular I was looking for an American three-toed woodpecker. Past visits to the trailhead had produced sightings of this neat woodpecker.

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