OUTDOORS



Storm King presides over meadows and fields. Rising in elevation only a bit above 11,000 feet, it is easily dismissed for mountains and peaks that attain 13,000 and 14,000 feet above sea level. Yet there is much more to be found in places like this than a triumphant hike over the land or an impressive selfie pic. (Courtesy photo/Jon Horn)

The Chaos Of Storm King



Outdoors
By Paul Zaenger

There is a splendid isolation to be found when sitting among the trees on the ridge that we know as Storm King mountain. To be clear, there are at least four peaks that bear the name Storm King in our area: near La Garita, Colorado, in the Grenadier Range near Molas Divide, and the famous Storm King Mountain near Glenwood Springs that saw the South Canyon Fire in 1994.

The local Storm King rises to some 11,400 feet elevation along the Cimarron Ridge just east of Montrose and presides over Montrose's Buckhorn Lakes Park.

There is no trail to the top. It's a tough, bushwhacking scramble. But I found beauty - shady groves of trees, a marmot chirping, buzzing bugs and flowery meadows. The U.S. Geological Survey doesn't classify it as a mountain as it is only a bump along the ridge that ties into Castle Rock and Courthouse Mountain. And all of this flies in the face of the great chaos of geologic processes that brought it about.

The source of the tectonic turmoil isn't far — the San Juan Mountains. You might know that those peaks are "all that remains" of 15 to 18 volcanoes, most of them erupting during a 7 million-year period of time back in the Oligocene Epoch. Three of them are today called "Super Volcanoes," with larger impacts on North America than the explosion that resulted in the Yellowstone Caldera 600,000 years ago.

The eruptions of those three came late in the time period, mostly between 28 and 26 million years ago. Geologists call them the Uncompahgre, San Juan, and La Garita calderas. They were so large that after the magma chamber exploded out of the mountain, the center collapsed, leaving an impression similar to that of a huge black kettle, once boiling with a witch presiding. The best visible example in the U.S. today is Crater Lake in Oregon.

Try this at home. Put your thumb over a bottle of pop. Shake it with all of your might. Let your thumb off the top and . . . you know what happens. Most of the pop will empty completely from the bottle. School experiments often use a bottle of Coke and a Mentos mint. It's impressive

When Mt. St. Helens erupted in 1980, smoke, gasses, ash, and rocks of all sorts exploded high into the air. The lithic confusion blew across Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and other locations. The geologic bedlam affected millions of people.

Twenty-eight million years ago the Ute Creek Caldera exploded ash and debris over current-day Colorado. When cooled, the resulting layer of rock (Ute Ridge Tuff) rose to a thickness of 650 feet in places. While desperate at the time, Mount St. Helens dropped only two inches of ash 50 miles away.

Hot on the heels of the Ute Creek Caldera were the super volcanoes. The principal volcano was the La Garita Caldera. It is the largest (extinct) volcano to be found on earth today — measuring 22 by 62 miles. Geologists believe the ash zone stretched from Edmonton, Alberta well into Mexico, and hundreds of miles into the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Its effect was three times that of the Yellowstone eruption. Nearly every living thing on earth was impacted.

It's quiet on top of Storm King now. Yet, to be on this promontory is to hear the high-pitched clink of the rocks when walking on them; it's to know the rocks' hardness and its brittle temperament; to know that the rock has a rasping, chalky feel, but that the disarray of its birth is long gone.

The nearly 4,000 feet of ash from the super volca-

noes that once was here has eroded away. Sitting at the precipice offers the chance to comprehend this moment in time. Big country stretches outward for nearly 100 miles; the sky seems to be immense. Cool breezes in the shade of Douglas fir trees are accented by the clicking of a grasshopper that pops off of a bush, and the happy refrain of a mountain chickadee.

It's a sure bet that in this minute of sitting, turmoil in our human world is rising. There is a time for uproar, but as it lingers, it breeds pessimism and despair. There must be dozens of outcrops like this just within the view from this lonely knob on a ridge above the valley.

Sweet, sweet solitude is a soothing antidote for mayhem.

The fragrance of spruce trees waft by. A western tanager sings out. Clouds are building on the horizon. It must be time to go, but Storm King provides us with a perspective on chaos that is desperately needed right now.

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.

The mountain always wins

A few lessons on lightning



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My grandfather drew the short straw, meaning he was the one who had to drive the three of us teenagers into the mountains to our drop-off point. He was somewhat less than jovial about having to miss half a day at work, and at the pull out he did at least slow down the truck enough for us to get our camping equipment out.

Our plan was a frontal assault on the back side of Beartooth Mountain, climbing to near the tree line, where we would make camp. There was an alpine lake up there rumored to be full of hungry cutthroat trout and that was all the incentive we 13-year-old kids needed.

As we were piling into our sleeping bags, we noticed a series of large thunderheads off in the distance, giving a fairly impressive light show. I said, "It looks like those storms will pass way to the west of us." This statement later proved that I had no future as a fortune teller.

When you see a lightning bolt at night, from the distance, it appears to just disappear into the ground, and the darkness returns. That is not the way it is when you are inside the thunderstorm.

First, there is a terrible explosion, something like a 155 mm artillery shell landing on the ground you occupy. This is followed by the entire countryside lighting up like a fireworks display gone awry. Pools of fire are splashing around in every direction. And then, it is dark and ominously quiet again. The only sound you hear is that of three teenage boys beating hell for leather down the mountain.

In 2020, lightning killed 17 people, and that number was low compared to the averages. In 2021 the number was 11. Perhaps people are finally taking lightning safety seriously. Property damage is another story.

In 2019, insurance companies paid out \$920 million in claims, but in 2020, that number jumped to 2.1 billion, largely because of an unprecedented number of lightning strikes over northern California.

Firefighters respond to an average of 22,600 fires per year that were started by lightning, most of these involving structures. Lightning only causes about 10 percent of the wildfires across our great nation. The vast majority are caused by people, careless people.

See MOUNTAIN page A11



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Going alone is a great way to enjoy the woods, but you better be well prepared, lest you wind up paying the full price plus tax. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

Going alone at it in the wilderness

There is a special spiritual awakening that one achieves when being alone in the great outdoors. It does not matter what your passion might be; hiking, fishing, hunting, camping, ATVing, all have a special rush when you tackle it by yourself.

I head into the outback alone for numerous reasons. Sometimes, a partner cancels at the last minute, while other activities are just more enjoyable by yourself. In the old days, it was because I was ditching school.

Take hiking, for instance. When hiking alone, you set the pace, stop when you want and view everything at your own pace. Short detours off the trail to investigate something can be accomplished without prior approval or notification to your partners. Going alone creates a great time to meditate, if you get into that sort of thing.

My wife says I have to go alone because nobody can stand to go with me. I pointed out that often times I have a hunting guide along on my trips. She retorted, "For a hundred bucks a day, guides can put up with anyone."

I realized there is no talking to her when she is in one of those moods, so I retreated to the woods for a long hike, by myself.

The buddy system, at the very least, is the safest way to recreate outdoors. When there are other participants, someone is available to, deliver first aid, summon help, discuss alternate routes, help maintain your course, help be alert for danger, and talk you out of doing something stupid.

The last one is something I need on a regular basis. For some reason, I live under the illusion that I am still in my 20s. My body keeps trying to tell me otherwise, but I never seem to get the message as I continue to commit mind boggling acts of idiocy.

Each year search and rescue people have missions to save people who have chosen to go it alone in the outdoors. These people were hunting, hiking, and riding an ATV or snow-mobiling. Some of these people suffered injuries while others just got lost. While there are dangers with anything we do outdoors, that danger increases when we are alone.

I do want to point out that one of the major attractions of an outdoor lifestyle is the ever-present element of danger. The presence of danger causes an adrenaline rush



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

that many of us seek. Just remember, sometimes the mountain wins, and the odds are not stacked in your favor, and you wind up in an aromatic pine box.

Injuries are the biggest problem. No matter how careful you are, an injury is a real possibility when doing anything outdoors. By yourself, you are more apt to attempt a trail that is to lose, jump a creek; try a hill you normally would not. All of these things can lead to an injury.

If you go it alone, you better have a plan to get help. You should also have some necessary first aid equipment to care for yourself until help arrives. I would recommend a class in advanced wilderness first aid for everyone.

Weather is always a concern, but more so when you are alone. You must have with you the extra clothes, supplies and skills to ride out any adverse weather conditions that may pop up. Thunderstorms and cold fronts seem to come out of nowhere in the mountains. While alone, be extra vigilant.

Animal attacks are rare but the chance increases when you are alone. Animals will avoid groups of people far more than a lone hiker. Personally, I am more afraid of an attack from a two-legged animal, especially if you are a female hiking alone. Seems that population is encroaching into our wilderness areas more and more, bringing with it the ever-present bad guys. In today's world, things like that are real possibilities.

When you run into someone on the trail, leave him or her with the impression that you are not alone. Let them think you have a partner who should be along any minute. Be polite to people you meet on the trail but don't be overly outgoing.

Another problem alone outdoor folk face is getting lost. You have no one with you to double-check your map reading or navigation skills. Here is a time when a GPS and the skills to use it really come in handy.

As I have always said, never rely completely on the GPS. Use the old-fashioned skills at the same time. A compass and landmarks will always get you home, if you keep track of them. The secret to not getting lost is to stay found.

Carry a cell phone with you when you go. Even if you are in an area of no service, a text message may still go out. If you need help, remember the saying, "Call when you can and text when you can't call." I carry a backup power supply with me and keep the phone off when not needed to conserve power.

Fish, hunt, ATV or hike only in areas that you are very familiar with, when heading out alone. Know all of the trails, water sources, and bailout points. Always stay on the trail and don't go cross-country. Make a detailed plan before you go and stick to that plan.

I like to go through a series of "what if" scenarios in my mind before a trip. Mentally going through an adversity, such as a sudden storm, helps me to prepare and be certain I have the necessary supplies with me to survive. Remember, you can't properly prepare unless you have given some thought about all the things that can go wrong.

Whenever you are in the backcountry, be sure you have someone back home who knows your plans and itinerary, including all the information about your vehicle and parking area. This is the person who will call for help in the event you are overdue. Any change you make in your plans should be immediately relayed to this contact person. This is even more important when you decide to hit it alone.

An important consideration when doing the solo thing is that you are never really alone. Somewhere behind you, just down the trail a way, is someone who came along on the trip. Murphy is back there, even if you don't see him, and he just can't wait to wreak havoc on your parade.

In the meantime, I am going to enjoy my hike alone. Maybe the wife will be in a better mood when I get back.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for several newspapers and has been a feature writer for numerous sporting magazines. A world-class saltwater angler and an avid hunter promoting ethical and fair chase hunting and fishing, he travels the world in search of adventure. Feel free to contact him on his personal email for questions, comments or story ideas: elkhunter77@ icloud.com

MOUNTAIN

FROM PAGE A10

The Colorado Mountains are known for thunderstorms in the warm summer months, usually in the afternoons. Lightning strikes occur more often at higher altitudes because the air and climate are drier. People outdoors should maintain an increased awareness for storms that produce lightning. According to the National Weather Service there are, on average, 20 million lightning strikes annually in the United States.

In 2016, one of the deadliest, if not most bizarre, lightning strikes took place in a private hunting area of the Hardangervidda mountain plateau in central-southern Norway. The area is a frigid landscape of streams, rocks, glaciers and alpine tundra, and also home to one of the largest reindeer herds in Europe.

The scene looked like something out of a zombie apocalypse movie, showing a treeless arctic landscape dotted with hundreds of reindeer corpses. According to the Norwegian Environmental Agency, 323 reindeer were killed by a single lightning strike, making it the deadliest massacre caused by lightning on record.

Because animals tend to bunch up together when bad weather is around, lightning strikes on animals is not entirely unusual. In 2016, 21 cows in South Dakota were killed when lightning struck the metal bale feeder where they were eating from.

In 1932, a flock of 52 wild geese in Canada were killed by a single strike. Scientist believe

the geese were done in by currents that run through the ground and not a direct strike. The locals reportedly gathered up the struck geese for a "wild goose dinner." I assume the geese were at least partially cooked.

Lightning can strike more than 10 miles away from the center of a thunderstorm, well beyond the audible range of thunder. Most bolts occur along the edges of the storm. Even though the storm is past your location, you are still in danger of a lightning strike.

In the event a storm catches you, here are a few things you can do to protect yourself:

- Avoid shelters with exposed openings such as picnic pavilions and camping shelters. Lightning can channel through the openings.
- Do not have close contact with the other members of your group. Spread out at least 50 feet apart to minimize the chance of everyone in the group being struck.
- Get away from water. Stay away from low spots that might accumulate rain runoff.
- Avoid a lone tree, or a small group of trees in the open at all costs. Also, stay away from any object that is higher than the surrounding terrain. A group of small trees among taller trees, or a thick forest, is a much better choice.
- Drop and move away from all metal objects such as trekking poles and pack frames. Stay far away from ATV's when in a storm.

Learn the lightning safety position as a last resort. Crouch down on the balls of your feet

while keeping them as close together as possible. Don't allow any other part of your body to touch the ground and keep your ears covered. By keeping the surface area of your body in contact with the ground to a minimum, the threat of electricity travelling across the ground and reaching you is greatly reduced. This position should only be used as a last resort. It's probably a good idea at this point to try and remember the words to the Hail Mary too.

The next morning on that fateful camping trip found us boys sorting through the wreckage of what was our happy campsite the evening before. We gathered up our wet sleeping bags, clothes, tent and soggy food, and began our descent down to the rendezvous point with my grandfather.

We were cold, wet, hungry and tired, but a little bit smarter and with a great deal of respect for lightning and the mountain. Whenever you challenge the mountain, in monte semper vincit, the mountain always wins.

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



I took this photo of a lightning strike while I was on safari in Argentina. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

News tip or story idea?

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