



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 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 cut-throat 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.

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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, bush-whacking 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.

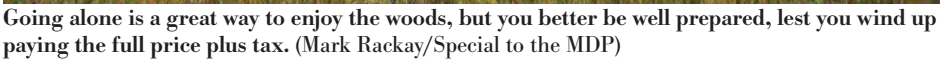
Sweet, sweet solitude is a soothing antidote for mayhem.

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.

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