



Dark night skies are a hallmark in much of western Colorado and it's possible to see the multitude of stars, including the Milky Way, collected above. More information on the Geminid meteor shower can be found at the American Meteor Society (<https://amsmeteors.org/>). The Black Canyon Astronomical Society has material relevant to dark skies in western Colorado, and a calendar of events at <https://www.blackcanyonastronomy.com/>. (Courtesy photo)

Shooting stars bring hope to Earth



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

Elon Musk, through his SpaceX Corporation, has a dream of being among the first colonists to walk on the surface of Mars. Skeptics dispute his five-year timeline to realize this hope, but next week's night sky holds a wonder and energy which can remind us that hope abounds at this time of year.

Mars rises in the northeast sky right after sundown. Its orangey tint makes it easy to spot even during twilight. The constellation Gemini rises shortly after Mars in the same part of the sky, and it will arc upwards as night advances. The meteor shower radiates from the constellation as streaks of light transform the night sky.

The annual return of the Geminid meteors started in early December, but the peak time to watch is the night of December 13-14. There are many meteor showers through the year, but observers believe this event to be the most reliable chance to witness them, fondly called shooting stars.

Most meteor showers come about when Earth, in its orbit, passes through the debris from a passing comet. The Geminid shower comes about as Earth interacts with the rubble of an asteroid, possibly a former comet, called 3200 Phaeton. Greater amounts of pieces of this cosmic chunk have broken off over the decades and Earth orbits

through the cloud of its remains every December.

The size of the fragments – called meteoroids – varies a great deal. In fact, there is an incredible amount of space wreckage that our atmosphere protects us from when you consider that millions of pieces burn up in the skies above us every day. Most of this material is very tiny, so it's invisible to us down on the planetary surface.

The pieces which enter the atmosphere that we see as meteors are typically larger than 0.1 inches. But other numbers are astonishing. They will dazzle as bright light in the mesosphere, altitudes above 50 miles. Their speeds will be extreme – greater than 45,000 miles per hour. They flame out at altitudes above 160,000 feet, and we are treated to meteor flares that usually last about one second.

My first encounters with the night sky occurred when I was little, on sleepovers at my grandparents' farm in northwest Ohio back in the 1960s. The farm was some 15 miles east of the city of Toledo – nights were quiet and few lights intruded on the wonder of the Milky Way. It was easy to just look up to the heavens and dream; to hope.

What is hope, exactly? I went to an old dictionary published many decades back when life hung by slender threads – much more so than today.

Hope is that belief that something we might wish to have is also attainable. That our future is promising, and that we can be optimistic, is grounded in the strength of that hope.

The brilliance of the night sky as captured by the stars in the Milky Way, too numerous to count and witnessed from an Ohio farm long ago, is to say that our dynamic night

sky can fuel our hopes.

The aurora borealis, lunar eclipses, even the twinkling of stars on a starkly dark night, is to know that we on Earth live in an ever-changing and vibrant section of a solar system that resides in a galaxy filled with objects that can fire our imaginations.

The speed of those meteors as they plow into the atmosphere will cause each chunk to heat up to something like 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The flash is generated as each fragment compresses the air in front. Hope is set ablaze by the cosmic fireworks.

Meteor showers are named for the constellation in which the meteors arise. In this case the constellation Gemini. If the skies are clear, or mostly clear, go out after 7:00 pm. The constellation will be high in the eastern sky.

The best times for viewing are in the early morning when the streaks of light are estimated to occur at a rate up to 120 per hour. The moon will be past full in its phase towards new, but it will be joining us for this event. Its light may make some of the meteors difficult to see. Admire or revile him, Mr. Musk does have aspirations. Here's the thing about hope; we can choose to believe in the promise of the future without knowing it will happen exactly as we dream it to be. Take in the night sky next week and live abundantly in this wonder-filled season.

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.

Traveling? Post-COVID, prepare to pack differently



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My wife and I lost or postponed a half dozen trips because of COVID. I am sure many of you had similar experiences. In our case, several of these trips came together in 2022, kind of all at once.

If you have not flown since before COVID but are planning travel around the upcoming holidays or for a vacation, better buckle up, because things are different with the airlines now, and you probably aren't going to like it.

Airlines have gone through their own special agony during this pandemic. Remember that the airlines are staffed by people, the same people who get vaccinated or chose not to get vaccinated, get sick or exposed to people who are sick and must isolate, and in the meantime, staff the flights with happy and smiling faces for customers.

The airlines lost tons of money because of travel restrictions and shutdowns. These losses had to be made up for with government subsidies and, you guessed it, less customer services and flights. Smaller planes, packed with more people, and less flights are what you can expect. In the last 10 flights I have been on, all of them were sold out, packed to the rafters with people.

As we approach yet another

holiday season, many will be taking to flight for family visits and getaways. Well over 100 million people will take to the friendly, or not-so-friendly anymore, skies. Last holiday season, airlines went through a series of cancellations. Southwest Airlines canceled thousands of flights, leaving crew members and travelers stranded across the country.

Spirit Airlines and American Airlines had their share of canceled flights too. One week found almost 10,000 canceled flights due to weather conditions and staffing issues. Remember that every time a crew member is exposed, they must quarantine, same as us. This left airlines with unbelievable staffing issues.

The real fun begins when you are standing in an airport, thinking all is right with the world, and see the big CANCELED word light up on the board for your flight. You then find yourself standing in a line that starts somewhere in Terra Haute, and you are at the end of it, trying to rebook a flight to get you home.

My old friend through many years of close association, Murphy, of Murphy's Law fame, just loves airlines, especially around the holidays when they are the busiest. He will wreak his special breed of havoc canceling flights, creating blizzards, and causing mechanical issues on aircraft, just to watch weary travelers suffer. Go into this expecting some delays and cancellations, and be prepared for it, and it might not be so miserable.

We always carry a backpack when we travel. It is small enough to fit under the seat in front of me, so I never worry about having

to check it or squeeze it into an overhead compartment. I carry the things I don't want to risk losing in baggage, like expensive binoculars, rangefinders and cameras. This leaves plenty of room for some extra things, just in case. Start with a change of clothes.

We had a flight booked from Buenos Aires, overnight to Dallas. A short layover in Dallas, and a flight back home to Montrose. All together it was about 18 hours of travel time. Perfect. I planned on settling in on the overnight flight, eating a nice meal, and washing it down with a couple glasses of man's best friend before catching some shuteye. Wrong.

The socialist government thought it best to shut down the main highway that goes to the airport. This caused great delays in our arrival. When we got to the airport, we discovered you must first get a COVID test and wait for the negative results, before proceeding to the check-in counters.

We arrived at the counter a full hour before the flight took off, only to find out that COVID restrictions require them to not let anyone through after 90 minutes. Long and short, we were standing in a huge line of humanity trying to rebook something else to get home.

Assume that you will be held somewhere, and carry with you a small kit, to include a toothbrush, deodorant, and a few of those individually packed body wipes. A quick clean-up will make you feel much better, and ready to face the delays with at least a semi-smile. Imagine 24 to 48 hours with no clean-up and in the same clothes?

See PREPARE page A11



If you are going to travel during the holiday season, be prepared for some changes on the airlines, and pack accordingly. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

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PREPARE

FROM PAGE A10

You will also want to have with you any important medications that you need to take daily. Never leave these in your checked bags. I also carry an extra set of my prescription glasses. I would not want to try and navigate an airport without my spectacles.

While you are at it, if the face mask rules are still in effect, carry a few extras with you. Imagine wearing the same face-mask for two days and you will get the point.

Another thing to consider is a portable charger for your phone. Some airplanes have plug-ins where you can charge in flight, and some don't. I was on two flights where the plug-in for my seat did not work. Murphy must have had the seat on the flight before me. And while we are talking about electronics, consider a set of Bluetooth noise-canceling headphones.

These headphones can really save the day as you sit in a crowded cattle car with wings, allowing you to listen to music or watch a movie, and canceling the background noise that can get so out of hand on a flight.

Airport food leaves a lot to be desired, so we carry our own snacks and food with us. Pack them in a separate Ziploc bag so the TSA is happy, and you will not go hungry. Same thing for water. We carry our own water bottles and fill them at the gate before boarding the flight. Remember, you can't carry a water bottle through security unless it is empty.

We did finally get home from Buenos Aires, but it was a dumpster fire. We flew to New York and Phoenix before getting home some 41 hours later. The flight included long layovers in these two cities, and needless to say, I was not a particularly happy camper. At least we had some extra things packed so we could tolerate the interruptions.

Prepare for the worst, and expect delays and cancellations, because you are probably going to have some.

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

Holiday plants for years of joy

I love going into the stores and being greeted by the bright, vast, welcoming assortment of holiday plants. I just want to scoop them up and fill my cart. But then reality sets in and I know I need to be smart about it too. I want any plant that I buy to have a good life and live well past the holidays.

If this sounds at all like you, here are some things to consider when buying those plants.

The longevity and happiness of your plant begins well before you ever bring it home. For example, there are plants that prefer cool, indirect sun locations and others that will tolerate warm, sunny, dry conditions. Knowing the plant's needs and choosing one that is suited for its new environment can be important.

Choosing healthy plants and keeping them warm and protected during their journey from the store to their new home can also be a matter of life or death to the plants. You may have to ask your bagger to put the plant in a paper bag to protect it from the elements. You might even need to consider the order of your shopping stops to avoid leaving the plant sitting in a cold car for an extended period.

If you're buying a poinsettia, choose one with bright yellow centers that haven't shed their pollen. Pass up plants that are light green colored or have yellow or dead leaves.

"Points" can be a little fussy when it comes to watering, so remove the foil or poke a hole in the foil sleeve to allow any excess water to drain because they don't like to stand in water.

Water it when the soil feels dry to the touch. The plant will appreciate a bright location but doesn't



Gardening from A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

want to be set in hot, direct sunlight. The new hybrid poinsettias can keep blooming well into spring if you treat them right.

I like the idea of buying a little tree that you can use for a Christmas tree and then planting it outside to be enjoyed for years to come.

But I can't help wondering how many of these cute little trees will be around this time next year? Even though I can't bear the thought, I'm sure some people buy them with the idea of tossing them into the trash along with the wrapping paper once Christmas is over. But I also wonder how many people buy them with the intent of having a great tree that will always remind them of this Christmas.

Regardless of the reason for buying a double duty tree, there are a couple of things to consider. I have concerns when it comes to Norfolk Island pine trees. These little plants are considered a houseplant and can eventually grow taller than your ceiling. But I guess you can deal with that when the time comes.

The main thing is, don't put it outside after Christmas if you want it to live. Putting it outside after the holidays will be a definite death sentence. Also, they're not a plant that can tolerate a lot of direct

sunlight and they don't like to get too dry.

Sometimes when I see people buying cute little spruce trees I want to stop them and say, "Think about this!" Now it's not that I have a problem with spruce, it's just the fact that the trees can only stay in the warm indoors for about three to five days. That's all the longer it takes for the tree to be tricked into thinking spring has arrived and it starts to break dormancy. At this point the buds will start to swell and the tree will have lost its winter protection and it will freeze if you place it outdoors!

However, if your tree has broken dormancy you could put it in the garage for the remainder of the winter. If possible, place it next to a sunny window, turn it occasionally, and water it when the soil feels dry to the touch. If that doesn't work for you, maybe you could just treat the little tree like another houseplant until spring arrives.

And remember, that cute little tabletop spruce just may grow up to become a 100-foot-tall tree.

Give some serious thought to where you want the tree to grow before you plant it. Look up to see if overhead power lines will become an issue for your larger tree. Will the branches hang over the sidewalk? Will the tree become so large that it blocks the entrance to the house? Will the tree block your view when backing out of your driveway, or will it block a view to the mountains?

These are all good questions that should be asked before you plant the little guy.

Spruce need room to grow! I know, you're probably thinking it's going



When treated right, your Christmas plant can say "Merry Christmas!" well after the decorations are put away. (Linda Corwine McIntosh/Special to the MDP)

to be years before that tree will be big enough to become a bother, but you may be surprised by how fast they will grow. In fact, a smaller tree will actually establish quicker and grow faster than a larger tree does. So if you're going to plant one, plant the little guy for future generations to enjoy. Now that's a great Christmas present!

Another plant that I'm seeing in the stores is rosemary. These are hard to resist. Especially when they're shaped like little Christmas trees or topiary trees.

A little Christmas tree that you can use to enhance your cooking. What could be better? I think keeping in mind that most rosemary is native to the Mediterranean coastal regions can be helpful.

Providing a cool, sunny location in your home that somewhat mimics their homeland is ideal.

Rosemary isn't shy about letting you know when it's unhappy. If you begin to see brown leaf tips, it's trying to tell you to water it more or it may die.

When spring arrives, and the danger of frost has passed, the plant can be placed outside for summer enjoyment. Just remember to bring it indoors again before winter arrives.

I've discovered so many great holiday plants that buying just one can be the most difficult part. I have no doubt that you'll be able to find one that's exactly what you're looking for. And treated right, it will tell you "Merry Christmas!" for several years to come.

Linda Corwine McIntosh is an ISA certified, licensed pesticide applicator and advanced master gardener.

Editor's note: Cat-keepers, bear in mind that poinsettia plants are toxic to cats.

Be cautious around deer during peak of mating season

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

Throughout Colorado, deer are in the peak of mating season. Colorado Parks and Wildlife wants to remind the public to take extra precautions to avoid conflicts.

Mating season for deer is known as the "rut." During this time, bucks are territorial and loaded with testosterone. They may attack people that appear to be competitive rivals.

Deer may also see dogs as threats. In past years, bucks have gored people and dogs. If you see deer in your neighborhood, keep your distance. Never attempt to get close to deer, never feed them and never try to pet them.

CPW recommends:

- Keep dogs on a leash.
- On walks, with or without your dog, stay as far away from deer as



Two whitetail bucks fight for mating rights.(Wayne D. Lewis/CPW)

possible.

- Don't allow dogs to roam free.

- Check your yard before letting your dog outside.

- Never let your dog chase deer or other wildlife.

- Never leave food outside that could attract wildlife.

- Tell children not to approach deer or any

other wildlife
 Bucks in the rut may also spar with and become tangled in swing sets, volleyball nets, bicycles, vegetable-wire cages, hoses and more.

Along with tangle hazards in yards, holiday lights become a constant hazard to bucks this time of year.

Make sure holiday decorations and lights are

attached firmly to structures and strung at least 8 feet off the ground. Do not drape lights loose on top of shrubbery or wrap lights around the trunks of trees, which bucks rub their antlers on to sharpen them during the mating season.

Every year, wildlife officers respond to calls of deer stuck in netting and holiday decorations; these

can prevent deer from being able to eat or to breathe, or stress them so much that they die.

Always call CPW for free entangled deer, in Montrose at 970-252-6000.

Do not try to free them by yourself, because deer are wild animals who will likely react defensively and there is risk of severe injury from their antlers or hooves.

Drivers are also reminded to slow down and be on the lookout for deer on highways. Not only are bucks in pursuit of a mate, but animals are also migrating to winter range and will be more present crossing roadways both on highways and arterial roadways.

The rut for deer usually continues until late December. For more information on living with wildlife, go to: <https://cpw.state.co.us/learn/pages/living-with-wildlife.aspx>