



SPORTS:
PIRATE BOYS
WIN MATCH

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Pickup

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\$1.50

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New tech aids posse as
operational costs rise

Annual funding drive underway

By KATHARHYN HEIDELBERG
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When a 70-year-old woman who became lost while walking near Dave Wood Road in frigid weather last year, a combination of self-preservation, ready volunteers and newer technology helped facilitate her safe recovery. The Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse used its new SARTopo mapping program to locate the woman, who, after becoming disoriented, found an empty cabin and, with only weak cell phone service, managed to text 911.

"With our new mapping program, our people were able to lift up and show where Verizon had service," posse spokesman and director Mark Rackay said. "Where that service got real spotty, there was one cabin that stood out. We found her within a matter of hours."

These kinds of technological advances are helping the posse save lives, even as the all-volunteer organization grapples with rising costs.

"It really accelerates the posse's ability to respond to call-outs and get to people quickly," said incoming posse president Dan Hiebert. "It helped us focus on achieving results quickly."

SARTopo also aided other searches, including locating a couple last summer, who had become lost after leaving their stuck vehicle. They'd traveled 17 miles before finding a hill where they could get cell service. The posse used SARTopo to ping their location.

The tool was used again Christmas Eve, when a paraglider with two on board had to make an emergency landing on



Mark Rackay and other posse members hard at work in 2022. The Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse is looking to the community to help raise funds for operational costs. The annual fundraiser is now underway; the posse reaches out by letter. (Courtesy photo/MCSO Posse)

Cottonwood Mesa.

SARTopo, like other equipment and gear, comes at a cost. Although the 45-member posse is comprised of volunteers on both sides of the county who have their own equipment and vehicles, it takes many thousands of dollars each year to operate the posse for the community's benefit. The posse is now conducting its annual donation drive.

"Like everything else,

this (SARTopo) program costs money," Rackay said. "That's one of the things we want, is to expand our technology. Technology is changing and we need to grow with it. That's certainly what we've been doing with this."

Rackay estimated expenses in 2022 at about \$45,000 per year. By contrast, the posse saves the county as much as a quarter-million dollars, he said, estimating the amount

it would take the county to pay for search and rescue, fire, security and traffic control services that posse members routinely provide.

"Like with every other individual, costs go up. Everything is very expensive. The supply chain is a problem. Inflation hits us the same as it does everyone else. That's par for the course," Rackay said.

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Avian flu
detected in
Confluence Park

STAFF REPORT

Highly pathogenic avian influenza has been confirmed among wild geese at Delta's Confluence Park.

The City of Delta is alerting the public because some strains can infect people, although this is rare.

As basics, people need to avoid handling sick or dead birds and also should keep their distance from wildlife.

Confluence Park remains open for recreational use and is considered safe. Parks staff in delta are closely monitoring the situation.

Avian flu (H5N1) began showing up in wild bird populations across the state last year and also tore through some domestic flocks, including at Foster Farms, Montrose County. Foster Farms had to euthanize about 60,000 birds and engage in biohazard mitigation before repopulating the flock.

One person, an inmate at the Delta prison who had worked at Foster Farms, was positive for influenza AH5, although the state could not determine whether he was actually infected.

Last summer, too, a portion of Montrose County was placed under state quarantine because of the Foster Farms outbreak; this prohibited moving birds, eggs, hatching eggs, manure, feed, bodies, feathers and poultry equipment off-property. The outbreak also halted the poultry competitions for the Montrose County Fair and poultry shows at the state fair in 2022.

Avian flu has continued to strike Colorado flocks, with The Colorado Sun reporting almost 6.4 million poultry have

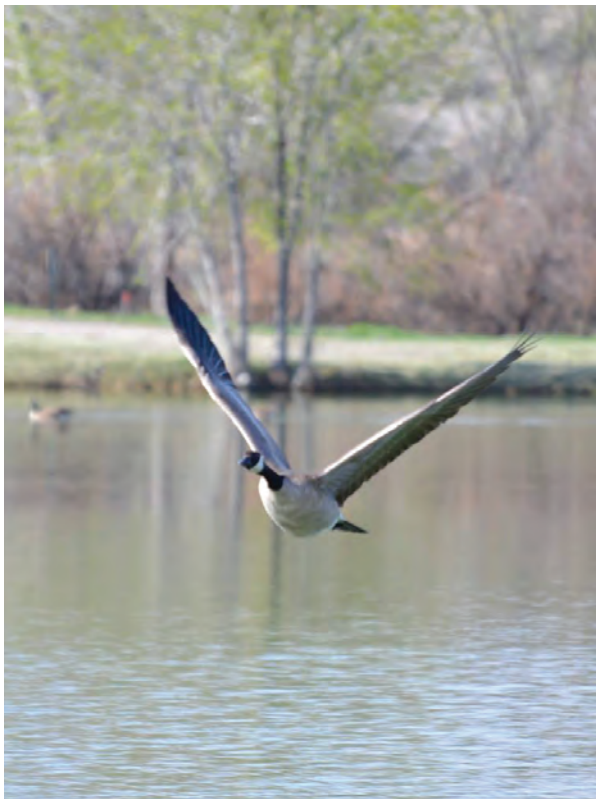
died (either of the flu or because the flocks were culled in response), in addition to wild birds. The loss of that many poultry is also hammering market egg production, The Sun reports.

Late last November, Colorado Parks and Wildlife began receiving more reports of ill and dead snow geese in northeastern Colorado, associated with large-scale highly pathogenic avian influenza mortality. Staff documented in excess of 1,000 dead birds on waterways in Morgan and Logan counties. Then large-scale deaths were seen in Kiowa, Bent, Otero and Prowers counties.

CPW says that nationally, outbreaks in wild and domestic flocks nationwide are approaching record numbers and that the flu has been found in all four North American migration flyways. Officials expect the avian flu to persist through spring migrations.

People should take certain basic precautions, such as not handling or eating wildlife found sick or dead; not eating, drinking or touching their mouths while cleaning or handling game; wearing rubber or latex gloves when handling or cleaning game; washing hands thoroughly and disinfecting knives, equipment and surfaces that come into contact with game; keeping wild bird carcasses away from domestic poultry; and cooking all game thoroughly to an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

The Colorado Department of Agriculture (ag.colorado.gov/hpai) and Colorado Parks and Wildlife (cpw.state.co.us/) have detailed information about avian flu in the state.



Avian flu has been found among wild geese at Confluence Park, the City of Delta announced Jan. 13. (Randy Sunderland/DCI file photo)

County elected officials sworn in for new terms



Montrose County Sheriff Gene Lillard greets Montrose County Manager Jon Waschbusch on Tuesday, Jan. 11, when he and other county elected officials were sworn into office. Lillard is now in his second term as sheriff. Also taking oaths of office were Commissioner Sue Hansen, Clerk & Recorder Tressa Guynes, Assessor Brad Hughes, Deputy Assessor Christa Johnson, Coroner Rick Fellabaum, Deputy Coroners Laura Lenihan, Peggy Smith, and Ray Evans. Per statute, Treasurer Rosemary Murphy and Treasurer staff LaShawna Krause and Calley Valenzuela were sworn in prior to 2023, on Dec. 29, 2022. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County)

POSSE

FROM PAGE A1

Posse volunteers are on call 24/7, he later said, and that kind of availability would cost the county a small fortune in overtime for paid staff beyond sworn deputies.

“But it isn’t the money as much as it is that you’ve got someone up there in trouble,” Rackay said, referring to the cabin rescue. “With a phone call and a page-out, we put 12 people together with equipment to go find her. The sheriff’s office just doesn’t have those resources to do that without the posse. It’s not a money thing.”

Hiebert said he’s grateful for community support. “It helps us pay for miscellaneous expenses, make purchased throughout the year and keep our equipment (maintained),” he said.

Hiebert also referred to successful missions like the walker’s rescue, saying it showed outstanding work and coordination between those in the field and those at incident command, who flagged the cabin through SARTopo.

“For me, it’s just been an honor to serve the community through the posse. I’ve been very impressed with the organization and its willingness to come out at a moment’s notice, whatever the mission is,” he said.

Not all missions end happily — despite a



Posse members work to find a disoriented walker who had to enter a cabin to avoid freezing last year. They found her with the help of an advanced mapping system, SARTopo. (Courtesy photo/MCSO Posse)

continuous 72-hour effort between three teams, the posse could not save a missing hunter who had apparently walked away from his vehicle last year, became lost, and succumbed to the elements. “Unfortunately, that was a bad ending,” Rackay said.

The volunteers on this search logged several of

the 4,800 estimated hours posse members on the West End and East End of the county contributed in 2022.

The posse does more than search and rescue operations. Posse members continue pitching in on fires like the Simms Mesa Fire that burned near the Ouray County line after a

Forest Service controlled burn sparked up again in high winds. Members controlled roadways into a threatened subdivision and also went house to house to make sure everyone was out.

They also responded to the devastating fire at Hartman Bros. welding supply shop last April, in

which an employee was badly injured. Four others sustained minor injuries.

This mission was in response to the Montrose Police Department’s request for assistance in traffic control and getting people out of the downtown area where the shop was burning.

“The posse flew into

action on that,” Rackay said. Nineteen members responded, many coming straight off security work being done in response to the avian flu outbreak in the county at the time.

This past year, the MCSO honored Rackay and five others with merit awards for the amount of hours they contributed: Jack Lee and Tom Loczy from the West End, with Paul Gottlieb, Jerry Sieverson and Paul Martin from the East End. More honors are likely forthcoming at the posse’s annual banquet Saturday evening, Jan. 14.

Although the posse needs funding, it is doing well at attracting sufficient members — Rackay said there is a waiting list, due in part to the organization’s public visibility.

“They’re seeing us out there. I think it’s because the posse has become a fairly elite group and people are proud of their posse and what they do here,” Rackay said.

“... I’m proud of these people. They put everything in to get it done.”

Donations may be sent to: Montrose County Sheriff’s Office Posse Inc., P.O. Box 717, Montrose, CO 81402.

For information about the posse, call 970-252-4033 and leave a message, or email info@mcspi.org.

Katharhynn Heidelberg is the Montrose Daily Press assistant editor and senior writer. Follow her on Twitter, @kathMDP.

Christmas Tree Pickup

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