

Meet the mighty burro



These two wild burros were an interesting sight. Burros have roamed free in areas of the West for centuries. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

After almost 60 years of clomping around in the woods, on four continents, there is not much I have not run across.

I have seen strange creatures, encountered even stranger people, and had enough close calls to worry my creditors. From fast boats, rescue diving, blizzards to hurricanes, I have been beat up a few times.

As I age, I no longer take the chances I did when I was younger, well, most of the time, possibly because I can't get out of the way anymore. It is time for me to think about the consequences of a bad, or careless decision as I don't heal as fast as I used to.

I realize that my attorney has a lavish lifestyle to support, my accountant has a large family to feed, and could not survive without my monthly stipends, not to mention my bank would suffer a financial double hernia without their charges and penalties in overdraft fees, where would these fine people wind up?

Because I move slower and more cautiously, I spend more time noticing things in the woods, and even learn a few things from time-to-time. Who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?

Moving slower allows

me to observe my surroundings and experience things I normally would have just passed by. The latest example occurred on a recent trip to our neighboring state, Arizona.

My longtime hunting buddy, Dan Humphrey, and I went to Seligman, Arizona for a few days of hunting the javelina. We stayed in one of those historic motels on Route 66, ate good food in the local restaurants, and spent the daylight hours in the desert searching for our quarry.

As we worked our way through the sparse desert, an area of taller brush lay ahead. When we neared the brush, I noticed a half dozen burros casually feeding on the sparse vegetation. Not seeing a ranch house or fence in any direction, I assumed the group had made a jailbreak and were fugitives from some faraway ranch.

I had no idea they were feral burros. In fact, I did not know there was such a thing as feral burros.

We all know about feral cats, feral hogs, and I have even come across feral dogs. The 33,000 remaining wild horses in the American West are considered feral. I had no idea there were feral burros in Arizona, let alone Colorado, but there are.

The first horses evolved in North America some 55 million years ago as they crossed the Bering Strait when the sea level was down and there was a land bridge. The early horse-like critter did not look much like a horse of today and was much smaller.

All the horses in North America were extinct some 13,000 years ago, but the species survived in Asia and Africa. The genus Equus, which includes

modern horses, zebras, and wild asses, evolved some 5.6 million years ago in Africa.

The first burros to reach North America came with Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1495, landing in Hispaniola. Later, burros were taken to Mexico, and eventually crossed the Rio Grande River, sometime around 1600. From there, burros moved north and west, first with missionaries and later with miners prospecting for gold and silver.

Burros were primarily in the Southwest as pack animals for prospectors. They carried supplies, ore, water and machinery to mining camps and became indispensable to miners and workers.

At the end of the mining boom, many of them were turned loose or escaped. Because of their innate ability to survive under the harshest of conditions, wild herds eventually formed and flourished.

Wild burros have long ears, a short mane and come in a variety of colors, from black to brown, gray, roan, a pinkish color and a blue. Most common color you may run across is gray with a white muzzle and white underbelly.

The adult burro may stand 45 inches tall and tip the scales at nearly 500 pounds. Male burros are known as jacks and females are called jennies.

Wild burros have a lower protein requirement than wild horses and a very tough digestive system that can break down desert vegetation and extract moisture efficiently. Burros eat a wider variety of plants than horses and can go for long periods of time without drinking.

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Spring hikes to get your kids outside

By Abram Herman
FOYAN

Every day the weather seems to be gradually getting a little warmer (in between those spontaneous Colorado snowstorms, at least), and that can only mean one thing — spring is near!

The transition from winter to summer activities will be here before you know it, and it's time to start planning some excursions with your little ones as the trails dry and the warm sun comes out.

The benefits of getting outside are numerous, from mental health, to physical health, to just having fun together as a family. Here are a few quick and easy hiking trails that you can enjoy with your whole crew:

The Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park offers 5 easy to moderate hikes along the South Rim that vary in length from 2/3 mile to 2 miles round trip. Because it is a national park, there is an entrance fee required.

Start with Warner Point Nature Trail, a 1.5-mile out-and-back trail starting at the parking area at the end of the South Rim road. Generally considered an easy route with only a 406-foot elevation gain, it takes an average of 52 min to complete this out and back trail. The trail should be snow free by April or early May. You will need to leave pups at home — dogs aren't allowed on this trail.

The Rim Rock Nature Trail is another 1.5-mile out-and-back trail with 187-foot elevation gain. Generally considered a moderately challenging route, it takes an average of 37 min to complete. This trail should be snow

free by early April. Dogs are allowed but must be on a leash. Both of these trails are very popular for birding, hiking, and walking, so you will likely encounter other people while exploring.

Ridgway State Park, 21 miles southeast of Montrose, offers over 14 miles of marked, well-maintained trails inviting for the novice to expert trail users. Because it is a state park, there is an entrance fee required.

Wide concrete trails provide easy hiking, and biking while gravel trails meander through a variety of natural settings, from open grasslands, through pinyon/juniper forests and along the rivers. Fabulous mountain views will delight trail users at many points along the way.

Explore the Wapiti Trail, a 1.1-mile out-and-back trail near the Visitor Center. Generally considered an easy route with a 147-foot elevation gain at 7,000 feet, which is park elevation. The trail takes an average of 28 min to complete. The best times to visit this trail are April through May. Dogs are welcome, but must be on a leash.

The Oak Leaf Trail is another short 1.1-mile loop trail along the Uncompahgre River. It starts near the Pa-Co-Chu-Puk Campground. Expect beautiful views of the surrounding Sneffels and Cimarron ranges of the San Juan Mountains! Generally considered an easy route, it takes an average of 24 minutes to complete.

The trail is open year-round and is beautiful to visit anytime. Dogs are welcome, but must be on a leash. If you are enjoying these easy hikes and want to explore more, stop off at the visitor center for a hiking brochure along with information on the

park's natural history.

The Dominguez Canyon trails can offer a real wilderness experience. About 44 miles north of Montrose, the trails here offer a long, flat hike that will take you as far as you'd like to go.

The entire Big Dominguez and Little Dominguez Canyon Loop stretches for an astonishing 39 miles, but the vast majority of hikers just travel in as far as they want to go for the day, and then head back out.

Little Dominguez Canyon has some very cool historical features, if you're willing to do about 7 miles of hiking in total.

Around 3.5 miles in, a homestead from 1911 has been preserved by the BLM and offers a fascinating look at life over 110 years ago. The house is remarkably well preserved, and the skeletons of old farming equipment are still dotted around the property. It's really something worth seeing!

The whole of Little Dominguez Canyon is beautiful, with astounding rock formations throughout, and it's not at all uncommon to see desert bighorn sheep roaming along the hillsides.

Venturing a little further afield and potentially a little drier for early spring hikes, the **Lunch Loops** are always a crowd favorite. Less than 10 minutes from downtown Grand Junction, the most accessible trail is of course the paved one — the Monument Trail runs alongside Monument Road all the way from the intersection with Broadway up to the Lunch Loops parking lot, and in 2024 it will be extended all the way up to South Camp Road.

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Spring is the perfect time for canyon hiking. There are plenty of canyons to explore in our local National Conservation Areas, the Colorado National Monument and Bureau of Land Management Public Lands. (Courtesy photo/Christine Freed)

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March can be a challenging time in the garden



Gardening from A to Z
By Linda Corwine McIntosh

The sporadic snow storms may be slowing down our gardening plans but I think everyone is elated about the moisture. One of these days it’s all of a sudden going to start warming up and we’re going to hit the ground running.

Have you noticed the green grass and weeds growing along the south sides of buildings or in sunny protected areas? The moisture has made the weeds and weedy grasses as happy as it has made most of us.

If the weeds are already green and growing it might be a good idea to identify what kind of weeds they are. There’s a good chance the early arrivals that you may be seeing are “winter annual” weeds, meaning they germinated last fall and have anxiously been waiting all winter for warm weather so they can begin growing. A pre-emergent herbicide applied this coming fall could help prevent these species of weeds from becoming a problem again next spring.

You can apply pre-emergent herbicides now to prevent “summer

annual” weeds. These are the annual weeds that will pop up during the summer months. I especially like pre-emergent herbicides because they’ll keep seeds from germinating but won’t harm your existing perennials, shrubs, or trees.

Products such as Preen or Dimension herbicides can help you control a variety of grasses and broad-leaf weeds. Pre-emergent herbicides need soil moisture to activate them and get them working, so I always try to apply it on non-irrigated areas like a gravel driveway or an area next to the road, before rain or snow is expected. That way it gets the needed moisture and I don’t have to water it in. The label will tell you what weeds it will control and how it should be applied.

Once the snow has melted and you’re able to prune without setting your ladder in a snowbank, there’s no reason to wait to prune your trees. Removing dead, crossed or diseased branches is a good place to start when pruning. The idea when pruning fruit trees is to open up the tree to sunlight.

If you’re not sure about pruning your fruit tree, it would be better not to prune too much rather than taking too much off. Removing more than about one third of the branches will cause the tree to produce “sucker” wood or “water shoots.”

Branches that grow straight up off of a main branch have a weak attachment, and will never produce fruit. Those branches will end up

needing to be removed, so you’ve basically just created more work for yourself and didn’t do much to benefit the tree.

Oh, and don’t bother with pruning seals. That’s old school and has been proven to cause more harm than good. A properly made cut will heal all by itself.

It’s really hard to explain how to prune a fruit tree in an article but there’s some great information online. You might want to start by searching “pruning fruit trees” at extension.colostate.edu. When you search for any gardening advice on the web, including “edu” in your search will direct you to education backed sites, such as CSU’s Fact Sheets or Plant Talk.

I’ve seen some really bad information being given out on the internet, so knowing the advice that you’re getting is science backed and research-based is always a good thing.

It’s almost time to apply dormant oil. In case you’re not familiar with dormant oil, or horticultural oils (often called superior oils) they’re a great way to control a variety of plant pests. They’re referred to as “dormant oils” because they are typically applied early in the season to trees, shrubs, or roses while they’re still dormant.

Always be sure to check the label before using it and make sure the oil is safe for the plants you want to apply it to. There are a few plants that are sensitive to the oils and it can “burn” the plant tissue



If you’re not sure about pruning your fruit tree, it would be better not to prune too much rather than taking too much off. Removing more than about one third of the branches will cause the tree to produce “sucker” wood or “water shoots.” (Linda Corwine McIntosh/Special to the MDP)

after it’s been applied, but the label will tell you if your tree or plant is one of those.

Oils work by smothering over-wintering eggs and insects that may be on your plants. They don’t really harm beneficial insects because most beneficial insects are not over-wintering on the trees and shrubs that you’ll be spraying.

If you had a problem with aphids or scale last summer, I definitely recommend spraying with dormant oil! It’s a great way to control them. If you’re planning to apply dormant oil to your fruit trees this spring, you might want to prune them before applying it.

I usually apply dormant oil early to mid-March. The idea is to apply it before the tree breaks dormancy and leaves begin to form. However, applying it too soon in the season can cause the buds to heat up, which can make them more susceptible to frost damage, so I’m thinking it would be nice if we start seeing warmer temperatures and rain instead of snow. But even in that case, you don’t want to apply oil right before rain is expected.

Spring is always a good time to check your trees for any broken branches. When I’m driving through town I see so many large trees with dead branches caught in the canopy of the tree. And yes, that does freak me out! I know a good wind or the force of gravity is going to cause the branch to come crashing to the ground. It’s just a matter of time. So keep looking up and check your trees! Any damage that the tree may

be experiencing will be a lot easier to see before the tree is covered with leaves.

One last quick reminder: mid- to late March is usually time to plant cool season crops like peas, broccoli, lettuce, and spinach. You may be anxious to get out in the landscape and get going, but if your soil is still wet, delay working in it or planting until the soil will crumble a bit in your hands when picked up. If it forms a mud ball, wait a few more days. Our soils usually dry out relatively quickly.

I know March weather can be a challenge for gardeners. But, I’m sure we’re all thankful for the moisture. And we always manage to work around it.

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

BURRO

FROM PAGE A11

Burros are very intelligent animals. Although they can run almost as quickly as a horse, they tend to assess a dangerous situation before fleeing. Burros defend themselves with powerful kicks from their front and hind legs and will stand their ground against any attackers. Never approach a wild burro, because they do bite.

The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act was passed, unanimously, through Congress, and signed into law by President Nixon on Dec. 15, 1971. The law protects wild horses and burros while designating territories on both Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management- administered lands.

Today, fewer than 9,000 burros remain. Like their cousins the wild horses, burros in the West have been rounded up en masse to make room for other commercial interests. Sad reality.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife asks everyone not to feed, touch or approach the burros. They may approach you, mostly out of curiosity, but do not be fooled. These animals are wild and will bite or stomp you into something unrecognizable.

There are some people who just do not take warning or read signs about getting close to wildlife.

The people I am referring to are the

ones who want to get a picture taken while cuddling a bear cub or try to feed marshmallows to the bison. These are the same people whose genetic traits the Yellowstone Park and Glacier Park bears have tried to eliminate through most active natural selection, with some admirable success.

If you want to see wild burros, Colorado’s Eleven Mile State Park is a good place to start. The BLM also lists herds in Utah’s San Rafael Swell to Eagle Canyon, having a management size of 100,000 acres, that supports 50 to 70 burros. The BLM further lists additional herds on the Colorado Plateau along Muddy Creek and in the Canyonlands.

I can’t believe that I have never run into a wild burro before, but I don’t spend a lot of time in the dry, arid desert areas either. The fishing in the desert is not so good.

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 970-986-1071 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

HIKES

FROM PAGE A11

If you’d rather get off the pavement and onto dirt trails instead, there are numerous possibilities at the Lunch Loops.

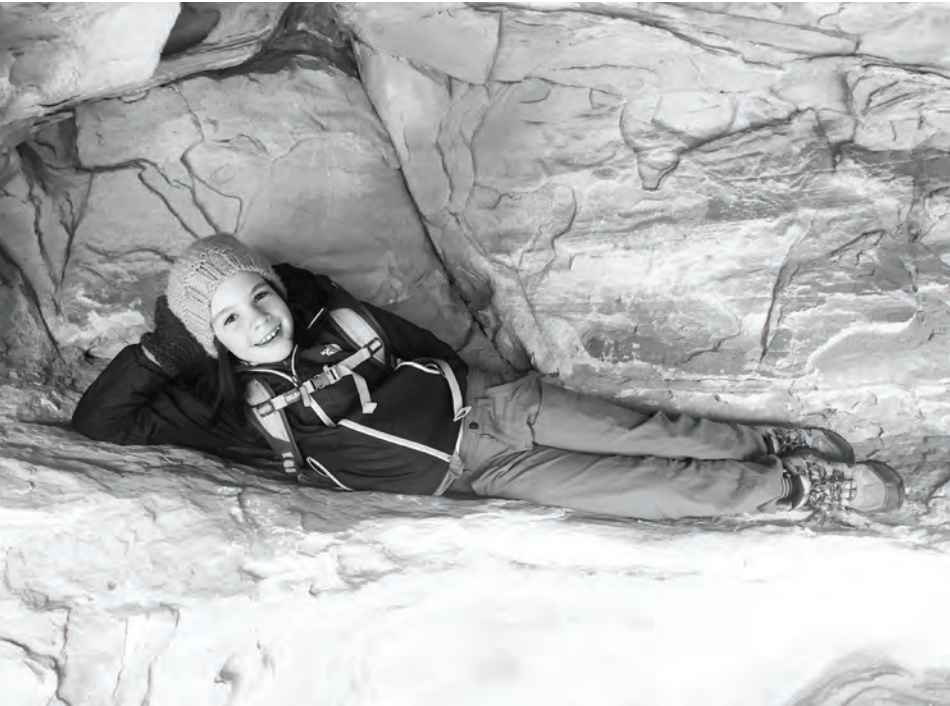
For the very easiest hikes stick close to the parking lot on trails like Short and Cranky or the Kids Meal Loop. For a more strenuous hike head up Tabeguache for an out and back, or take Hop Skip and Jump to Big Sister for a short loop, with a few steeper parts, but rewarding views.

Wherever you hike at Lunch Loops just be sure to keep an eye out for mountain bikers and dogs, as there are always a fair number of both on these well-loved local trails.

Heading up toward the **Colorado National Monument**, a very popular option for a short hike is the Devils Kitchen Trail. Note that there is an entrance fee required, since this is within the Colorado National Monument.

The trail is just under 2 miles, and it’s an out and back; there is some mild elevation gain, but it is very approachable for most casual hikers. If you make it up the full length of the trail, you will be rewarded with beautiful views and some really cool rock formations!

If you’re looking for a hike with a big payoff for your mileage, the **Mica Mines Trail** should rank high on your list of must-dos. Another out and back trail, this starts at the Bangs Canyon Trailhead up Little Park Road, and takes you about 1.3 miles in (one way) to a very cool historic mica and quartz mine. The glittering, shimmering mica in the rock amphitheater formed



Kids love to scramble around the warm rocks looking for cracks and crannies to explore. This one looks like a perfect fit! (Courtesy photo/Christine Freed)

by the long-closed mining operation is sure to be a huge hit with the kids!

The trail is pretty flat the whole way, so it’s a very easy hike for anyone to enjoy. By the time you’ve reached the mine and made it back to the car, you’ll have hiked about 2.6 miles on flat terrain, which should be approachable for most families.

The mine was operated up until the 1950s, and the mica that they were mining at the time was used for manufacturing paints and electrical insulation, so you can build a little history lesson into your excursion!

One of the coolest hikes in the Grand Junction area is the Monument Canyon Trail, with the added benefit of getting to experience the Colorado National Monument without having to pay the entry fee (remember to leave the dogs at home since they aren’t allowed in the Monument). The parking lot for accessing this trail can be found by searching for Monument Canyon Trailhead, as it enters the Colorado National Monument interior, rather than taking you along the upper rim of the Monument.

This one can be a bit of a step up in difficulty, being quite a bit longer than the other options, but you can always turn around part way if you don’t want to hike the whole loop. If you do make it all the way, though, the payoff is huge.

Aside from a high likelihood of getting to see some desert bighorn sheep, this trail leads you right up to the incredible **Independence Monument** rock formation, which towers 450 feet above the desert floor. This formation was first climbed all the way back in 1911 by John Otto, founder of the Colorado National Monument, and shortly thereafter by Beatrice Farnham, to whom Otto was briefly married.

If you look for a large, slightly sloping flat rock a few hundred yards north-east of the rock tower, you can still faintly see a giant inscription of the first

line of the Declaration of Independence, which was carved into the rock by Farnham.

From the very easiest of hikes, to something a little more adventurous, but still approachable, this should give you a good start as you begin planning for some warm spring days hiking and enjoying nature with your family.

Start with something easy and work your way up to the longer hikes, and before you know it you and your kids will be skipping up the most beautiful and rewarding trails on the Western Slope. Get out there and explore, spring is almost here!

Abram Herman is a board member of the Friends of Youth and Nature, a nonprofit that promotes opportunities for youth and families to get outside, experience outdoor activities, and explore nature. Follow our outdoor news blog and receive monthly tips on connecting your children to nature. Learn more, visit www.friendsofyouthandnature.org