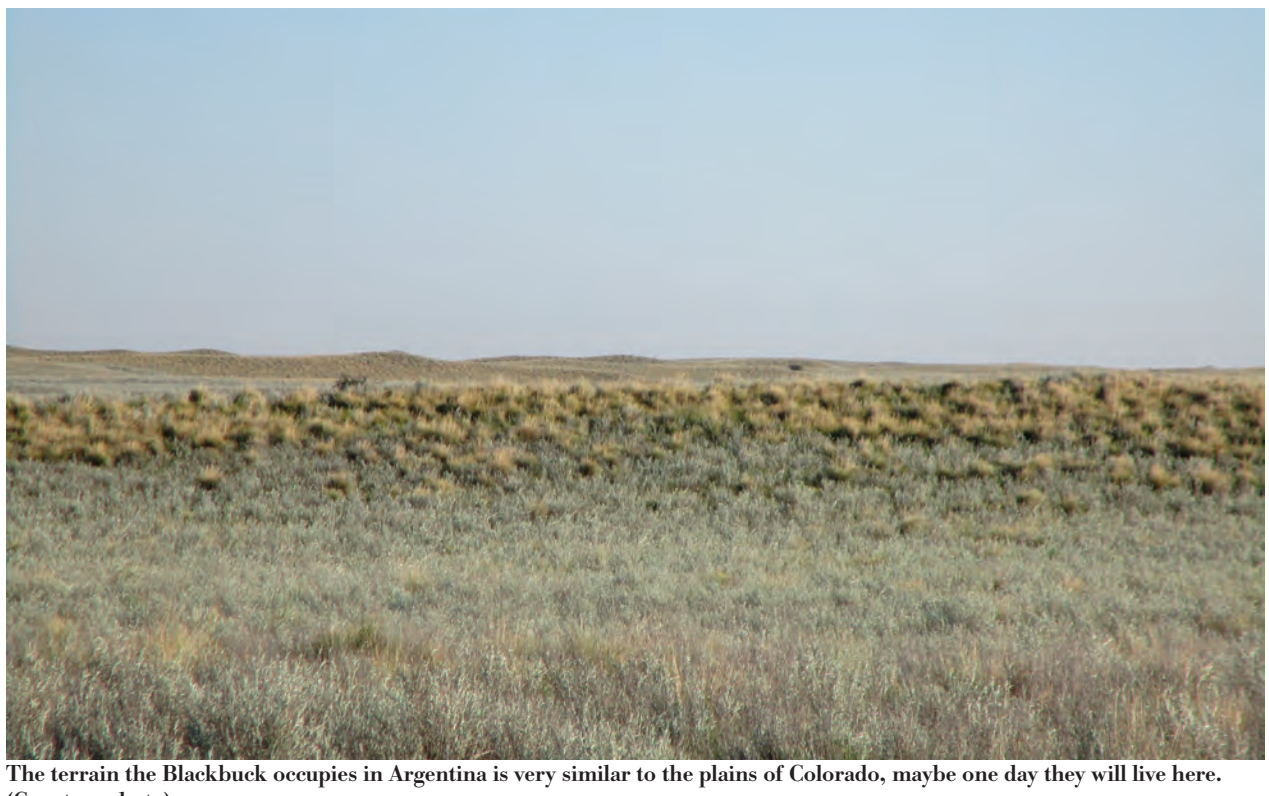
BLACKBUCK ANTELOPE

Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay



The terrain the Blackbuck occupies in Argentina is very similar to the plains of Colorado, maybe one day they will live here. (Courtesy photo)

One of the reasons I love to travel to exotic lands is to see animals that we do not have at home. Some of these animals we probably do not want here at home. I say that with the deadly seven of Africa in mind, not to mention all those poisonous snakes that live there.

Occasionally, an animal really stands out. In this case, that would be the blackbuck antelope, or Antilope cervicapra as he is known on the streets. Originally, he hailed from India, Nepal and Pakistan. I first ran into this fella on a trip to Argentina a few years ago.

The blackbuck was introduced to Argentina in the 1920's and has become one of Argentina's most successful imports. Argentina, turns out, is the perfect place for the blackbuck to thrive. The weather and moisture are to the blackbucks liking, and there are no natural predators there. Because of this, the wild herds now number well over 15,000, and probably much higher.

Closer to home, blackbuck was originally released in Texas on the Edwards Plateau in 1932. Another successful import, as they now number close to 20,000 in the wild, and with a much larger number living in high fence-controlled areas. Today, the blackbuck is the most popular exotic animal in Texas after the chital.

The blackbuck relies on its keen eyesight for protection. I have been busted by them from over 400 yards away when trying to sneak up on them. Once alarmed, they run, and brother, can they run. They are capable of speeds in excess of 50 mph.

They have a real spring in their step, and the first time I saw them run, I watched in awe. Blackbuck sort of sprint and jump at the same time, like the gazelle in Africa. I have seen them jump eight feet in the air and cover what seemed like 25 feet with the jump. Unless pushed, they will not jump a barbwire fence, choosing to crawl under it instead.

Males tip the scales anywhere from 50 to 125 pounds and stand just over three feet tall. Females are much smaller, weighing between 45 and 75 pounds. Both male and female have white patches around their eyes, on their inner legs, mouth, underside, and on the fantail.

Mature male blackbucks have a black and white coloration which is very different from the reddish yellow hue of immature males and females. This species is the only one to have the extreme contrast between males and females. It is easy to spot the mature bucks in a herd because the black color really stands out from the rest.

During the winter months, the color of the male blackbuck fades, turning into an almost brown by the time the summer heats arrive, after the molting period. As they approach the rut, the black color usually returns.

The most striking feature of the blackbuck is the long, spiraling horns of the adult male which have ridges from the base to almost the tips. They can grow as long as 20 to 24 inches. The largest horns on record were just over 28 inches. A trophy size male will have three curls, and four curls or more in the horn is the buck of a lifetime. Females only have horns on rare occasion, and they are usually very small. The blackbuck can reach 15 years of age in the wild.

These animals reproduce two young in a year and carry their babies for six months. Only the dominant male blackbucks reproduce in order to defend their territories which can be as small as 25 acres. The dominant male will mark his territory by depositing dung middens and black preorbital secretions on bushes and stems.

The blackbuck is a diurnal antelope, active mainly during the day, although activity slows down around noon and throughout the heat of the day. Herbivores, blackbuck will graze on low grasses, occasionally browsing as well. Blackbuck inhabits grassy plains and very thinly forested areas where perennial water sources are available for its daily need to drink. Herds will travel long distances to obtain water.

The country in Argentina, where I first saw the blackbuck, looked amazingly like the areas of our pronghorn country on the Eastern Plains, and in the area around Craig, Colorado. They even have a scrub brush there that looks and smells like our sagebrush.

The blackbuck does not handle cold weather very well. The area in Argentina where they are thriving, can get cold, with winter temperature drops into the 20's. I think the areas in Texas where the blackbuck is free ranging, sees snow several times a year. I don't think they are nearly as hardy as our pronghorn. The Colorado pronghorn survives winters with three feet of snow and negative temperatures.

Still, I would like to see the blackbuck introduced more freely in the United States. I am sure there are areas in New Mexico, and perhaps a few places in Colorado, where they could do very well. I think coyotes could be a problem, but coyotes are a problem to everything everywhere. Why anyone would want to add wolves to the mix is beyond me, but that argument is falling on deaf ears.

The blackbuck is one of my favorite animals of all time. Watching them run is a sight you will never forget. Maybe someday we can figure out a way to introduce them here.

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.

Blackbuck are a beautiful antelope, similar is size to the Colorado pronghorn. (Courtesy photo/Rob Zabroky)

For the sake of mountain biking

Outdoors

By Bill Harris

Kokopelli's Trail – where it all started.

Admittedly, I am a warm-weather cyclist. Anytime the thermometer dips below 50 degrees I prefer to walk or cross-country ski to get my outdoors fix.

I can trace my aversion to cold weather cycling to when I was a kid delivering morning newspapers from my Schwinn. No matter what the weather, people had to have their morning news, and it was my job to bring it to them. Those midwestern winter mornings were cold, so bundled up, off I would peddle into dawn.

I can also trace my love of fat tire biking to my youth. That old Schwinn got me where I wanted to go. Me and my pals would tear around the neighborhood and beyond. When I was old enough to drive, I put the bike aside, but I never forgot the joy I experienced while cranking off the miles on those city streets and country roads.

For many years I dabbled with what they called a 10-speed, but it was not until 1985 that I reconnected with cycling in a big way. The fat tire bike craze had just begun. Friends of mine at work asked me if I wanted to buy a mountain bike. They had been in contact with Chris Haas, owner of The Tuneup in Gunnison. If we ordered 5 mountain bikes, we could get a discount.

Two weeks later we were all owners of a 15-speed Rockhopper. Mine was red, rigid fork and frame – no suspension in those days. Chrome-moly frame, thumb shifters and cantilever brakes – ancient components by today's standards, but state-of-the-art in those days.

I immediately started riding my red beauty around town to get the feel of a knobby-tired bike. Soon I loaded it into the back of my truck and headed for the Uncompahgre Plateau. I wanted to see how the bike handled on the jeep trails. Riding that bike in the dirt was a revelation. The geometry of those early mountain bikes did not favor agile handling, still, I thought the bike was a beast.

In 1987 I started riding true single-track. Fred Matheny, Ralph Files, Mike Schendel, Carol Lee, and others joined me on the Spring Creek Trail. In those days the trail was a narrow pack trail used by ranchers to access their cattle.

My list of riding partners grew exponentially as many of my friends climbed on a mountain bike. We expanded our trail adventures to the Aspen, Buck, and West Fork trails, all motorcycle trails. Soon after, we were checking out the motorcycle trails around Dry Creek Canyon – Coyote Cutoff, Cushman Mesa, and Piney Creek.

In 1989 I read a newspaper article that would have a major impact on my life. The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel ran an article about the opening of the Kokopelli's Trail, a mountain bike trail connecting Moab with the Grand Valley. I responded to the enclosed phone number. The person on the other end was Timms Fowler, the leader of the citizen's group who developed Kokopelli's Trail.

That phone call set in motion a series of actions that led to the creation of the Tabeguache Trail, a 142-mile trail that connected Montrose and Grand Junction, and the founding of the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association (COPMOBA).

Fast forward to April 2023. Jim Maggio and I loaded our bikes into my truck and headed for Buzzard Gulch. It was the first time I had been on my bike since last November – remember, no cold weather riding for this boy. It was a grand spring day, and the trail was in great shape.

It was the weekend, so we encountered many trail users. Many of them were on foot, some with their dogs in tow. Everyone had a smile on their face, seemingly happy to get outdoors on a bluebird Colorado day.

Back in 1989 Buzzard Gulch, Cerro Summit Trails, RAT, Sidewinder, much of the Grand Valley's Lunch Loop and Kokopelli's systems didn't exist. The North Fruita Desert trails and the Flowing Park, Mesa Top, and County Line trails on the Grand Mesa were not even a pipe dream.

I sit back in amazement pondering how far the west-central Colorado mountain bike trail scene has progressed since 1985 — so many great riding choices. The energy, enthusiasm, and hard work put forth by literally hundreds of passionate mountain bikers made it happen — all focused on creating fun, sustainable trails.