

Prairie madness



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My wife and I used to keep the TV on while we grabbed a bite of supper. Let me explain the used to comment. Mostly the TV served to let us catch up on the news of the day and see what the best guess is for the next day's weather.

The pharmaceutical companies seize this wonderful hour of the day to spew forth the latest and greatest drugs available for those who wish to live better through chemicals. Most of these are for an ailment I never heard of before. The company will also go way out of their way to describe how much better your life will be if you start taking these pills.

The problem begins when they start to explain the side effects of the drug. Yes, the drug will eliminate your eyelid cramping, but the possible side effects include nausea, indigestion, vomiting, cramps, diarrhea, and constipation. Just what I want to think about while I am eating. At least my eyelid cramps went away.

There are all kinds of ailments I have never heard of before, and one I studied about recently is called prairie madness or sometimes, prairie fever. This sickness affected settlers



This long abandoned homestead might have seen residents suffering from a dose of prairie madness. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

of the Great Plains and the Canadian prairies during the 19th century.

Settlers who came from more urban and settled areas in the east faced the possibility of mental breakdown caused by the harsh living conditions, and the extreme isolation of living on the prairie.

Symptoms of the ailment included depression, withdrawal, complete character changes in habits and behavior. In the more extreme cases, violence, and suicide. It could best be described as an insanity.

The problem was recognized to a certain extent. Journalist Eugene Smalley wrote in The Atlantic in 1893, "An alarming amount of insanity occurs in the new prairie States among farmers and their wives." Smalley went on to write, "the silence of death rests on the vast landscape."

The prairie was an empty vastness, miles and miles

of desolation that carried many risks that an early settler was probably not prepared for. Risk factors of the prairie environment included the isolation, a lack of transportation, harsh weather, lack of any civilized services such as doctors, and the never-ending wind. If that was not enough, throw in grasshoppers, plagues, prairie fires and drought. That is enough to make anyone want to jump on the last train west.

Alex D. Velez, a paleoanthropologist with the State University of New York at Oswego, studies the evolution of human hearing. He became interested in the idea that sound may have been a major cause of this sickness.

Velez published a paper in Historical Archaeology suggesting the eerie soundscape, howling winds and silence, could have indeed contributed to mental

illness in settlers. It is not much of a leap considering modern research has shown that what we hear can exacerbate not only sleep, stress, and mental health problems, but even cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

In the study, Velez found that a normal soundscape, such as one from a city, was very diverse, spreading more across the range of human hearing and forming something like white noise. But on the prairie, there was little to none of that background din. What sounds there were coincided with the particularly sensitive part of the human hearing range that the brain notices more readily.

In short, Velez described it as, "The way I can describe it is, it's very quiet until, suddenly, the noise that you do hear, you can't hear anything but that."

An early settler in Manitoba, Nellie McClung,

wrote about her story in a poem called The Neutral Fuse. In the poem she wrote about the droning soundtrack of the plains, "I hate the wind with its evil spite, and it hates me with a hate as deep, and hisses and jeers when I try to sleep."

Imagine how an early settler, who was used to the sounds of the hustle and bustle of a city, might come to find that every cricket chirp that breaks the prairie silence, or the drip of rain off the roof, to be dreadfully distinct and aggravating, even consuming, like someone clicking a pen in a quiet library.

Scientists today wonder if the changing soundscapes of the pandemic, due to lockdowns, quarantines, working from home, all contributed to the rise in mental health problems of people. After all, if the sounds of silence on the prairie led to anxiety and

depression for some, being out of your normal space, stuck at home and isolated, could cause you to curse the silence.

New research from Boston University School of Public Health reveals that the elevated rate of depression during the pandemic has tripled, affecting one in every three Americans. There was a record increase in the homicide rates and a continued spike in the number of drug overdose related deaths in the country, but interestingly, suicides rates have fallen some.

For the short term, silence is a good thing. We all seek it when we take to the great outdoors for our escape from all the irritants of the city. The getaway recharges our batteries so we can return to our normal life.

I could use a little of that silence when I eat my supper. I now turn off the TV. Although, those commercials with the descriptions of those horrific side effects could be the basis of a new type of diet for weight loss. I know they sure made me lose my appetite.

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Playground park for trout



Outdoors

By Joel L. Evans

I keep wondering if I'm in Disneyland. There would be no surprise if suddenly Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck popped out from behind a tree along the riverbank. But no, this isn't California – it's Colorado. And no, the river I'm fishing isn't inside a famous theme park, but in some ways it reminds me of just that!

Surveying my mountain valley surroundings, I notice the contrived atmosphere. In the midst of naturally beautiful mountains and trees, the river course looks perfect – maybe it is perfect. Born out of the man-made changes that have harnessed this river by construction of a dam, the ensuing tailwater fishery has evolved into a Disney-like destination to fish for trout.

The Uncompahgre River births as trickles of snowmelt high in the 14,000 foot peaks of the San Juan Mountains near Ridgway. Multiple tributary creeks add water volume that mature a creek to a stream then a stream to a river.



The Uncompahgre River below Ridgway Reservoir was rebuilt about 20 years ago in a partnership with multiple government agencies and nonprofits. Pa-co-chu-puk is a favorite of locals and tourists alike for trout fishing. (Joel Evans/Special to the MDP)

Pausing briefly to collect in Ridgway Reservoir, this river is reborn cold and clear below Ridgway Dam. There, like a theme park, we built the perfect playground for fish and fishermen.

Located a short 16 miles south of Montrose on US Highway 550, the Uncompahgre River tailwater is accessible within Ridgway State Park. The park offers river fishing in the tailwater as well as lake fishing on the reservoir. Recreational possibilities include full facility RV camping or primitive tent camping, summer boating on Ridgway Reservoir, a marina and boat dock, windsurfing, swimming,

wildlife watching, bike trails, and picnicking.

All the while shadowed by the unmatched southern vista of the snow-capped San Juan Mountains.

Extensive stream improvement work was professionally designed for the public water section beginning below the dam and on downstream to its confluence with Cow Creek, about one mile below the dam. Large rocks, strategically located, along with buried logs, stumps, and root wads cause the river to alternate between healthy pools and riffles, creating deep cover for trout, feeding lies, and highly oxygenated water.

It's fish habitat heaven.

Incidentally, did you know that the name of this section of the Park, called Pac-Co-Chu-Puk, is the Ute Indian name for Cow Creek? That name was chosen in a local contest, submitted by the grade-schoolers of Pomona Elementary School in Montrose.

Add to that the controlled flows due to the impoundment above, easy access, ample parking within the park, a beautiful mountain setting, and you have a fisherman's dream water park.

To maintain this quality fishery, fishing regulations are catch and release, using flies and lures only.

For most of the season, spin or fly fishing is equally effective. Move from deep hole to deep hole formed by the rock structures, home to brown, rainbow, and cutthroat trout.

Occasionally the locals get all shaky in the knees when the Colorado Parks and Wildlife makes a "special" stocking. When the division has large, mature, hatchery brood fish that they need to retire from the propagation business, they release them into the river below the dam.

Lightweight spinners or lures are productive in the shallower runs and riffles, but heavy hardware may be necessary in the

deeper pools. Some of these pools are both deep and short because they are a man-made design. If your offering is to get to the bottom where the fish usually are, then some weight is mandatory. Try a weighted spinner or a long bladed spinner to get and stay deep.

Fly fishermen will have the best luck with small nymphs drifted in the water column or near the bottom. Variations of weight are many — either a weighted fly, a sink tip fly line, a weighted leader and a strike indicator. Cast into the broken water above the rocks where the flow moves over the top of the rocks. Then let your fly sink down and swirl among the trout's hiding place.

Ridgway Reservoir catches are good due to the stocking of catchable trout and kokanee salmon. Although little spoken of, the river inlet on the southern end of the reservoir is a sleeper destination. Fish either the mainstem of the Uncompahgre itself or Dallas Creek, a small tributary in the same vicinity.

Contact the Colorado Parks and Wildlife in Montrose or Ridgway State Park for more information about fishing and other services at the park. An entrance fee is charged or a state parks pass is required to visit the park. But don't be surprised if you see Mickey or Donald hanging out in the river with a fishing rod!