

# Witness trees have seen it all



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I am infatuated with old trees, but not to the point of talking to them. Clint Eastwood once sang the song "I Talk to the Trees," in the movie "Paint Your Wagon." I have never reached that point, although I have often felt like I was talking to a tree when trying to convince my wife that I need a new piece of outdoor gear.

There are trees that have been around so long that I really wish they could talk. Those trees are called witness trees. Witness trees are those flora of historic landscapes that remain in place decades, or even centuries, after noteworthy events unfolded there. Often the trees were young when the event took place, and have now grown to be massive, silent sentinels of history.

Often times, a witness tree may stand in a place where we have no idea what it has seen. Trees that exist around known battlefields, ghost towns, and other historic places, are perfect examples. Sometimes you stumble across a tree that has stood for centuries and have to wonder just what it has seen. I ran into such a tree in Africa, called a baobab tree.

The baobab tree I saw was estimated to be 1600 years old. It had a hollow center in which 4 adults could be seated comfortably, just to give you an idea of the circumference of the tree. Evidence of people living in the tree looked to be centuries old. There were numerous scars from people, elephants, and lightning, yet the mighty tree still stands.

Baobabs have a love-hate relationship with elephants. In times of water shortage, baobabs become popular with elephants as they rip large pieces from the trunks of the trees to get nutri-



I don't really wish to talk to this 1600 year old Baobab tree, but I sure wish it could talk to me. (Courtesy photo/ Mark Rackay)

ents and stored water in the tree. Sometimes the tree is damaged so severely that it dies, and other times the damage heals, leaving scars.

On the other hand, elephants are necessary to the replanting process of baobab trees. The baobab fruit forms in the way of a pod, about the size of a softball, and it is full of seeds. The elephant eats the entire pod and move the seeds through their digestive tract. In the end, the seeds are deposited in a large pile of dung, ideal condition for replanting the seeds and nurturing the young new tree.

You don't have to go all the way to the Dark Continent to

find old witness trees. In eastern California, a Great Basin bristlecone pine, *Pinus longaeva*, in case you were wondering, known as Methuselah, has long been considered Earth's oldest living thing. According to tree-ring data, Methuselah is 4,854 years old. That means the tree was here when the Egyptians built the pyramids at Giza.

California has quite a market on old witness trees. The giant Sequoia trees located on the slopes of the Sierra Nevadas, California, have many that are over a thousand years old. One named The President, is believed to be the oldest Giant Sequoia that is still alive and standing tall at around

3,200 years old.

Another type of tree that stands tall with age is the mighty oak. I spent many years around huge oak trees, many dating back 2 or 3 hundred years. Once again, off to California, where the Pechanga great oak, a coastal live oak located on a reserve near Temecula, California. This tree is said to be the world's oldest living oak and could well have been around for more than 2,000 years.

Colorado has its share of old trees to talk about. One is on a lonely ridge in the Pike's Peak region, in a location kept secret in order to protect the frail tree. It grows in a place where there is no soil, and the temperatures fall be-

low freezing all but 45 days a year. It is a Rocky Mountain bristlecone pine and has been growing for about 2,050 years.

Decades ago, a local person drilled a core sample from the tree, revealing the rings. Since then, scientists have studied the tree for insight into everything from ancient explosions to global climate changes. For all this, the tree doesn't look like much. It is 15 feet tall, has 1 living branch, and there remains only 7 inches of bark on the 9-foot diameter trunk, yet it lives on.

A clonal tree is a complex interconnected by a single network of roots underground. The trunks are genetically identical. A perfect example would be the aspen groves all over our Colorado mountain areas. A clonal tree can reach an unbelievable old age.

A clonal colony can survive for much longer than an individual tree. A colony of 48,000 quaking aspen trees, nicknamed Pando, stands in Fishlake National Forest of Utah. Pando covers 106 acres and is considered one of the oldest and largest organisms in the world. Recent estimates set the colony's age at several thousand, up to 14,000 years, although tree ring samples date individual stems at rarely more than 130 years.

I stumbled across a witness tree once while visiting Lake City, Colorado. It was an Engelmann spruce, estimated at over 230 years old, that stood by a long-abandoned building that once served as a Gold Assay office. Imagine the events that tree has witnessed.

As I hike my way around the wilderness areas of the world, I look at and enjoy the old trees, but I never stop and talk to them, although I often wish they could talk to me.

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. Personal email is [elkhunter77@icloud.com](mailto:elkhunter77@icloud.com) For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org)

## RAIN

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Northwestern Colorado dipped further into drought over the summer, from unusually dry conditions in May into moderate to extreme conditions by July 15. Extreme drought conditions have held firm in parts of Mesa, Montrose and Delta counties, the location of several wildfires, since early May.

In extreme drought conditions, farmers and ranchers can experience major crop or pasture losses, and other water users might see widespread shortages or

restrictions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. The national drought map pulls information from local experts, impact reports and conditions observations to assess drought conditions.

No part of the state was in the worst drought category, exceptional drought, as of mid-July.

The state still has quite a bit of summer left to try to get more rainfall, Phillips said.

"I see some hope here in the next week," he said. "If we keep getting those (storms), maybe we can salvage this monsoon season."

## Colorado

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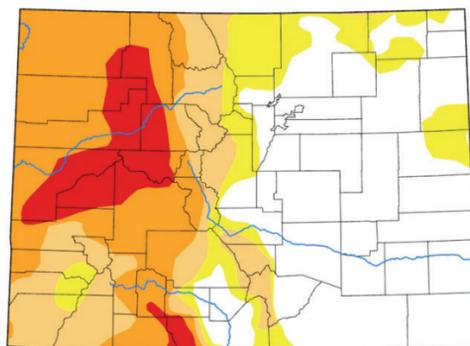
Map released: Thurs. July 17, 2025  
Data valid: July 15, 2025 at 8 a.m. EDT

### Intensity

- None
- D0 (Abnormally Dry)
- D1 (Moderate Drought)
- D2 (Severe Drought)
- D3 (Extreme Drought)
- D4 (Exceptional Drought)
- No Data

### Authors

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More than 44% of Colorado was experiencing some level of drought as of July 15 according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. (Image provided by U.S. Drought Monitor)

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