

At the minimum



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I have a hunting buddy who carries the survival pack to the extreme. Whenever you head out for an outing with him, you don't need to bring anything, as he has duplicates of everything. For our purposes here, we'll call him Randy.

When not on a hunting trip, Randy wears those special pants with all the pockets. These are the same pants we had as kids where you carried all your toys, baseball equipment, camping gear, and food in the pockets, only his are the adult version.

Randy carries flashlights, chargers, cell phone, sandwich, first aid kit, checkbook, wallet, change of clothes, extra jacket, ten-speed bike... need I go on? If Randy ever fell down, it would take a cherry picker and three strong men to get him back on his feet. His pants arrive at the scene 15 minutes after he does.

If you carry the pack to this extreme, there is a high probability the pack will stay back at the truck, while you trudge into the woods. When the bad day arrives, your pack is back where it will stay safe and dry but be of no help to you whatsoever. Perhaps



You don't have to bring 80 pounds of survival gear to get by. Carry enough that you will bring it, not leave it at the truck. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

if we just think about the minimum to bring along, the pack will go with you and not feel left out.

Before you leave on the trip, have a responsible contact person back home. This person should have names, descriptions, vehicle, and personal information of everyone on the hunt.

Make certain this contact person knows your itinerary and where your camp is. Notify them of any changes and have set check in times. Instruct them to call 911 dispatch if you are overdue. Information they provide to search and rescue folks will save countless hours searching for you. It is much easier to find someone when you have an exact starting point, and general direction of travel you took.

Choose someone who will be available 24/7 for the entire duration of your hunt to receive updates from you. Schedule a call-

in time with this person for routine check-ins. For the several hunts I take each year, my wife is my call-in partner. She knows my trip itinerary for every step of the trip.

While in the field, be aware of your surroundings, rock outcroppings, cliffs, river or creek drainages, lakes, and occasionally turn around and look behind you so you will remember what it looks like when you're coming back. Don't hesitate to put a temporary marker at intersections. Things can look different on your return, especially if you return in the dark. Study maps of the area and get familiar with the layout, before you put boots on the ground.

Everyone uses a GPS, and the GPS feature on their phone, but don't rely on it. You could lose it, break it, or batteries fail. Have a backup plan, like a good old-fashioned compass and map. Use it to

orient yourself throughout the day. Most times, a compass is all I use. I can't see game when I am staring into a GPS screen.

Plan for the worst weather. Assume it will be cold and snowy. That means bring extra clothes, for warmth during a temperature drop, and dry clothes, for when yours get wet. Yes, clothes are bulky and a pain to drag around but bring them anyway. Hypothermia is a horrible way to die. Stay away from the cottons because they are useless when wet. Wool and Gore-Tex type clothes are your friend.

When that weather change hits, bringing snow, your visible landmarks instantly disappear, and the world looks different. This is why you have been using the compass, along with the GPS all day. The secret to not getting lost is to stay found. Know where you are not matter the weath-

er or if you get caught out after dark.

I can't mention the importance of flashlights and headlamps enough. Carry both, and many spare batteries. You don't need a flashlight that is brighter than the sun. Anything around a hundred lumens will light your way just fine and use less battery power. The headlamp is nice because it lights your way and keeps your hands free. Many lights have multiple power modes, and the low power can last many hours while super bright is there if you need it.

When the time comes that you realize all your landmarks are hidden because of the falling snow, and you haven't the slightest idea where you are, your exact location is 100 miles northwest of nowhere, you realize Mr. Murphy has paid you a visit: you are lost, maybe injured, and in serious trouble.

The very first thing to do is just STOP. There is no sense continuing if you have no idea where you are going. Just stop; sit down and think for a few minutes. Instinct seems to tell people to run around and try to find where they are, but don't. Sit down.

If you are able, and see a high point close by, that might get you a reference, go for it. Otherwise, find a spot visible to searchers, safe from the elements, and get comfortable. Most people are found within 24 hours of becoming lost. Better to sit tight, make yourself as comfortable, and wait it out.

Whether it's matches,

a lighter, or other device, carry a fire starter that's weatherproof, and have a backup. Know where to get dry firewood and how to start a fire in all weather conditions. When was the last time you build a campfire in the woods without a quart of lighter fluid? Practice the fire building skills long before an emergency arises.

I always carry plenty of snacks, drinks, and at least an MRE in the pack. A long night in the woods is easier to take on a full stomach. Food and water are something I never heard anyone lost complain they had carried too much of. Leave the fancy survival tools at home and bring food.

I am sitting by the evening campfire making mental notes for this column. As I look up, I see Randy walking into camp in his underwear, so his pants should be along soon. I'm glad of that because he has our dinner in one of his pockets.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for The Nautical Mile, and several other 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 For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

Boat ramps opening across Southwest Region; CPW advises public of varying conditions

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

State parks across the Southwest Region of Colorado Parks and Wildlife are ready to welcome motorized boaters back to reservoirs in 2026.

At many of the region's parks, drought conditions and a historically low snowpack mean the boating season will be better early in the spring and summer. Those wanting to maximize the season shouldn't wait until the Fourth of July to get the boat out this year.

Water levels often determine boat ramp opening and closing dates for state parks. At parks such as Crawford, Mancos and Paonia, spring runoff can greatly determine the length of boat ramp openings.

"We may be lucky to have access for trailered watercraft to our boat ramps by the Fourth of July this year due to extremely low water levels," said Kelli Hansen Lum, Senior Ranger of Crawford and Paonia State Parks. "We anticipate the continued ability to offer hand-launched and human-powered boating opportunities once we lose access to the boat ramps. However, we would like to stress the importance of safe boating practices, like wearing a properly fitted personal floatation device while on the water, especially due to staff limitations for responding to

water-based emergencies once boat ramp access is not an option."

While water levels may rapidly decrease at some of the Southwest Region's parks, Sweitzer Lake remains full year-round, while Navajo and Ridgway provide much larger reservoirs with more open water to enjoy for boating despite lower levels.

"We should be full all summer long, and the largemouth bass fishing should be great this summer," said Sweitzer Lake Park Manager Scott Rist. Navajo State Park became the first in the Southwest Region to open its boat ramp in 2026. The boat ramp opened March 13 and is open on weekends only, Friday through Sunday, through April 12. Beginning April 14, the ramp will be open daily from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

"Our water level will be low this year on the Colorado side," said Navajo State Park Manager Jon Meats. "We did benefit from heavy fall rain in 2025, so our visitors on the Colorado side of the reservoir will still enjoy a quality experience when setting out on the water. But that fall flooding also introduced more debris, so we need all boaters to be aware and exercise extra caution as water levels fluctuate."

Ridgway State Park's



The boat ramp and marina at Navajo State Park on the Colorado side of the reservoir. (Dustin Doskocil/CPW photo)

boat ramp opened April 1, providing an early start to the season for water enthusiasts.

"The reservoir is expected to fill by early July, but we are expecting to drop quickly after July 4th due to downstream water demands," said Ridgway Park Manager John Freeborn. "Ridgway remains boatable and with an open boat ramp even during low water, but boaters should use caution and watch for hazards."

CPW reminds the public that Paonia State Park's boat ramp will be closed on Tuesdays for wakeless days. Hand-launched boats will still be permitted.

Cold Water Danger

While spring temperatures recently soared as high as 80 degrees at some Southwest Region parks, CPW reminds the public that water temperatures remain as cold as 40 degrees and can present immediate danger, especially to those not wearing

a proper personal floatation device. Wearing a life jacket will keep your head above water and support your body should your swimming ability fail or you become unconscious.

"It can be deceiving when we start getting warm-weather days and it's nice outside, but everyone recreating on the water should be aware the water is still really cold and remains cold until at least mid-summer here in Colorado," said Rist. "Having the proper gear and a life jacket on is imperative for anyone recreating on the water."

Windy conditions can exacerbate danger on the water for paddlers. Getting blown off course can happen quickly, and returning to shore can be difficult going into a headwind or when facing waves. That can lead to paddlers expending a lot of energy to navigate and maintain balance.

When a paddler loses balance and goes into the

water, it can also be easy to become separated from a kayak or paddleboard.

"There are several cell phone apps that will tell you hourly wind predictions," Rist said. "Knowing when conditions are going to change can be the difference between life and death. The user has a responsibility to know before you go."

All boats are required to have one Coast Guard-approved life jacket for each person on board. All persons under the age of 13 years old must have them on at all times when on a watercraft. Life jackets can save lives when they fit properly and are worn when recreating on the water. Boaters are also encouraged to take a boating safety course with CPW to learn navigation safety and what to do in case of an accident.

ANS Inspections

Before launching in Colorado waters, boaters will need to ensure their boat is registered, purchase an aquatic nuisance species (ANS) stamp and follow all ANS inspection requirements.

"We always want to remind everyone to make sure their boats are clean, drained and dry," said Ridgway State Park Senior Ranger Derek MacLachlan.

Visitors are encouraged to check each state park's page on the CPW website for the latest updates on

ramp hours and conditions throughout the season.

Only hand-launched or human powered vessels are allowed outside of ANS inspection hours.

Southwest Region State Park Boat Ramp Opening Dates and Hours:

Crawford: Monday, April 6, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. through May 22. Hours will extend to 8 a.m. through 8 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays after May 22.

Mancos: TBD after May 1

Navajo: Friday, March 13, 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday only. Starting April 10, the boat ramp will be open daily from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Hours will extend to 8 p.m. starting May 8 and to 9 p.m. beginning May 20.

Paonia: Friday, May 22, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily except Tuesdays

Ridgway: Wednesday, April 1, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. through May 1. Hours will extend to 7 a.m. through 7 p.m. May 1 to Memorial Day. Hours will additionally extend from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Sweitzer Lake: Wednesday, April 15, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. through May 15. Hours will extend to 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily until September.