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2026

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Open Season is built on the knowledge — and journalistic prowess — of contributor Mark Rackay. In addition to being an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure, 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 also serves as Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. To contact Rackay, email elkhunter77@icloud.com



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FOR THE LOVE OF PRONGHORN

Probably the animal I write most about is the pronghorn antelope. This critter holds a special place in my heart.

BY MARK RACKAY

My wife Carol, with her 2025 buck. Hard to believe we have hunted together for over 50 years. This buck makes her 18th lifetime pronghorn buck. (Photo/Mark Rackay)



I spent a number of my boyhood years with my adopted dad on a ranch 25 or so miles west of Laramie, Wyoming. We had many of these amazing creatures that lived year-round on the ranch. I saw them daily, going to school, returning home from my incarceration at school, while doing chores, and fishing on the creeks that flowed through the ranch. You might say we grew up together.

It was during a rough time for me in those years, and if not for that ranch, I am not sure I would have made it. The ranch covered 12,000 acres and had several good sized of pronghorn on it. My adopted dad taught me to hunt them, and we always had some in the freezer for food.

I moved to Denver, returning to the ranch most weekends. At a hockey game, I met a girl, and after a few dates, I invited her to spend the weekend at the ranch and meet my adopted Dad. I told her I had a tag for a pronghorn hunt, and she was excited to go. She did not hunt, but wanted to take part with the spotting, stalking, and just enjoy the ranch. It gave me an opportunity to dazzle her with my hunting skills, and it was a fantastic trip, and a good time was had by all, albeit too short.

Lewis and Clark were the first people to scientifically document the pronghorn antelope. When the European settlers first crossed the Great Plains, they began referring to them as antelope, probably because they are similar to the many species found in Africa and Europe.

The original statutes of Wyoming's hunting regulations call the pronghorn "antelope" and still do today. They used the term antelope, and it still stands today, albeit incorrect. My old Wyoming tags from the 70s have antelope on them.

The scientific name for pronghorn is *Antilocapra Americana*, in case you were wondering, and they are the only surviving members of the *Antilocapridae* family. Prong-

horn are the sole survivors, and they have no living relatives anywhere else on Earth. Science claims there were once 13 species of them before the European interlopers arrived, and you know what happened to them.

The ancestor species of pronghorn probably came from Asia and eventually stumbled into North America across the Bering Land Bridge. Deep in their past, they shared a common ancestry with giraffes, their only remaining cousins, and distant cousins at that.



In the fall, the pronghorn bucks will keep the does close by, as the rut is in full swing. Seeing groups of better than a dozen is a regular occurrence. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

Four subspecies of pronghorn exist, including the Sonoran pronghorn, the Mexican pronghorn, Oregon pronghorn, and the Baja California pronghorn. Like most of the animals in California, the Baja California pronghorn, found on the Baja peninsula isn't doing so well. The increase of human population, and urbanization of their natural habitat, is pushing them out. Sadly, only 150 remain.

They are sometimes called the pronghorn buck, pronghorn antelope or the American antelope. They got the name pronghorn be-

cause their horns point backwards, towards their rump, and then prong.

These guys have been nicknamed "speed goats" because of their incredible running speeds. Their average running speed is 40 mph, but can run at 60 mph for great distances, up to a mile and a half. That makes them the fastest mammal in North America. The only mammal in the world faster is the cheetah. Pronghorn developed speed as their ultimate defense mechanism long ago, because North America

once had a cheetah-like species of cat that hunted pronghorn.

They can run these speeds and distances because they have an incredibly effective respiratory transport system. They have enormous lungs and hearts, that are four times larger than those of a sheep.

The horns of the pronghorn help make it unique, as they are a cross between horns and antlers, bearing qualities of both. True antlers are made of bone and shed each year, while true horns are made of compressed keratin that grows from a

bony core and are never shed. The horns of the pronghorn are neither true horns nor true antlers. Instead, the sheath is made of keratin, but the horns shed yearly. They are the only animal in the world with forked horns that shed.

Pronghorns have very large eyes and incredible vision. They are capable of spotting a predator from very far away. Just ask anyone who has tried to sneak up on one. Their vision is comparable to a human looking through eight power binoculars.

Those eyes provide 300 degrees of vision. A pronghorn can see movement from up to four miles away. They always seem like they are on “alert” which is probably why their lifespan can reach past 10 years in the wild. Try sneaking up on a herd in the plains sometime, and they will have you pegged long before you see them.

Those oversized eyes of the pronghorn rarely close. While they do rest as a herd, it’s not often they actually close their eyes and actually sleep. Instead, they stay alert for predators, usually coyotes. When they do sleep, it will be for no more than 10 minutes at a time, while other herd members stand on guard duty.

In the early 1960’s, Colorado’s pronghorn population had dropped to less than 15,000. Today, thanks to the efforts of Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the dollars raised from hunters through the sale of hunting licenses, the population is nearing 80,000. The winters of late have taken a toll, especially in the Northwest quarter of the State.

Pronghorn hunting in Colorado is very popular, and many hunters wait years before accumulating enough points to draw a tag. All pronghorn hunting tags issued in Colorado are by the draw, as no over-the-counter tags are available.

I still see that girl from 50 years ago that accompanied me on the



Author with his 2025 pronghorn taken near Simon, Colorado. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

pronghorn trip to my adopted Dad’s ranch in Wyoming. She probably married me because she was so impressed with my hunting skills, but she is really the better pronghorn hunter, being a veteran of over 20 bucks. This year, my wife and I will take to the fields of the Eastern Plains in search of the mighty pronghorn antelope, as we have done many times in the past. My love and respect for the animal grows every time I see one, especially when I remember how I kind of grew up with them.

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

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ELK of COLORADO

BY MARK RACKAY

Elk are an animal hunters dream of. As a kid growing up in the mountains, the dream was to be old enough to hunt with the grownups, in an elk camp. Just seeing these majestic creatures is enough to get the old hunting blood boiling. Hearing one bugle makes the excitement erupt.

I was on a hunt in Canada, looking for a moose. In conversation with the guides in camp, they were all jealous that I lived in Colorado. They unanimously agreed that elk was their dream hunt. For them, the moose was old hat, something for them to fill the freezer with.

Rather than the usual column about elk, I decided to try and find out some things that most folks, including seasoned elk hunters, don't know.

What we refer to, as an elk is also known as a wapiti. The word comes from historical roots in Canada, long before European settlers arrived, and it simply means white rump. The Shawnee and Cree Indians used the name wapiti. The English used the term elk to describe the animal we know as a moose.

When the English arrived in Canada, and saw the size of a wapiti, being so much larger than European red deer, they used the term elk, assuming it was related to the moose. I have hunted red deer several times, and their similarity to elk is amazing, including their behavior during the rut.

At one time, there were six subspecies of elk in North America. These include the Rocky Mountain, which are the ones who live in Colo-

rado, having the largest antlers of all species, the Roosevelt, named after old Teddy, the Tule, who live in California, and the Manitoban of the Great Plains.

The other two species, the Merriam's of Mexico, and the Eastern from east of the Mississippi, are now extinct. It is a sad thing that so many of the species have become extinct before we ever had a chance to see them.

Elk have ivories, very hard teeth in their upper jaw, one on each side. These ivory teeth have been used in jewelry for centuries, but they did not always have them. Scientist believe that those ivories used to be tusks, used for fighting off predators and to engage rivals during the rut.

As the years passed, elk antlers evolved into large headgear we know of today, and the canine fangs receded into the head. Elk still maintains some ancient behavior associated with those fangs,

Billy Morgan of Florida fills the freezer with a nice old cow elk taken near Lone Cone. (Photo/Mark Rackay)



like curling their lip to sneer and reveal the teeth. Species similar to elk, like the Chinese water deer, still have sharp fangs.

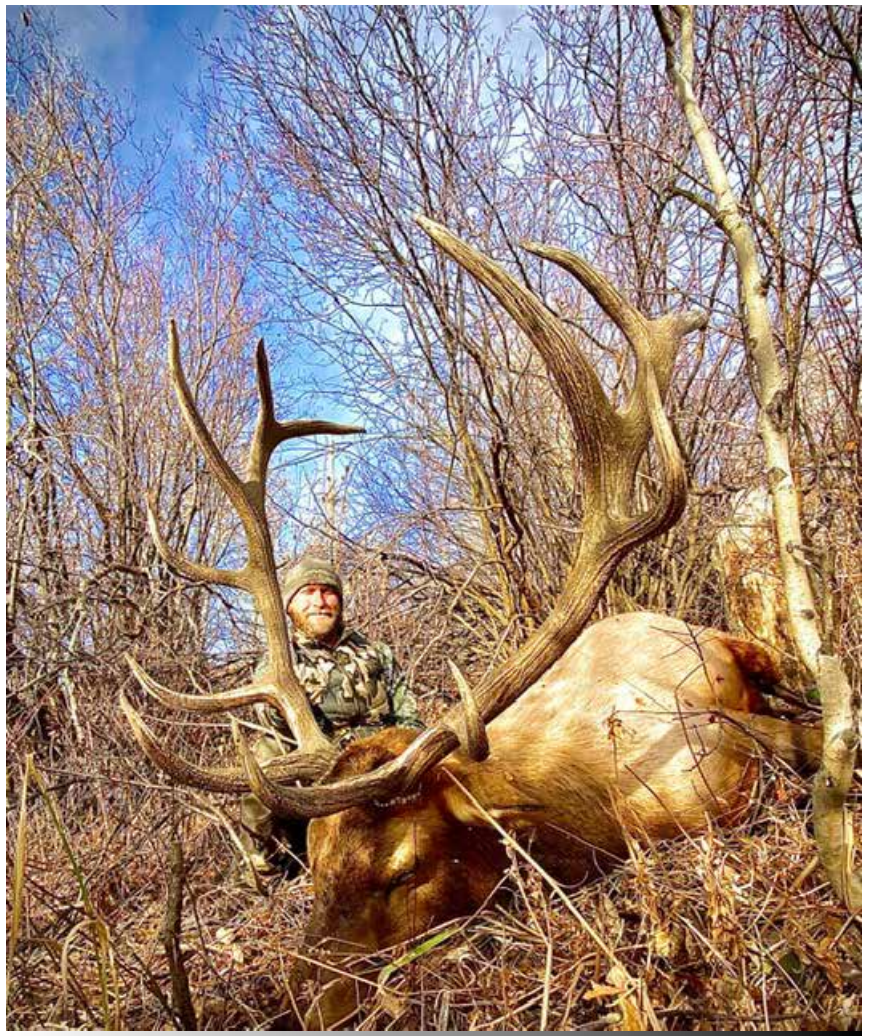
Elk antlers are almost like a solar panel, as they have been going green long before it became a fad. The more sunlight elk soak up in those antlers, the more testosterone they produce, which leads to some very impressive antler growth. A fully mature rack can weigh upwards of 40 pounds. Scientists study elk antlers, as they grow as much as an inch a day. Medical science hopes to use their incredible growth rate in the fight against cancer.

Don't believe that size doesn't matter. Researchers have observed impressive numbers when the cows are checking out the bulls. When a cow has a choice between a bull with eight antler points, and a bull with ten antler points, the cow consistently chooses the ten. Now you know at least the cows can count to ten.

Female deer are not the only female that can grow antlers. The same phenomenon happens with elk, although rarely. Hormonal imbalances cause female elk to develop antlers, although there is some doubt about their ability to reproduce.

Elk bugle, making the most iconic sound in the mountains. It's loud and can carry for miles. During the rut, that bull bugle is one of the greatest sounds in all of nature. The sound is too high to be produced by an elk's voice box. Research says that there are two forces at work when you hear that bugle. If you watch a bugling bull closely, you'll see that he is moving both his lips and his nostrils. In other words, he's roaring and whistling at the same time.

Besides the verbal communications, elk have other methods. It has recently been discovered that elk anklebones make a unique cracking and popping sound when they walk. Researchers believe elk use this sound to signal their pres-



Denny Saunders with a beautiful Colorado bull elk. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

ence to other elk, especially when sneaking up from behind.

Bull elk often use a very strange mating technique when they are trying to attract the cows. The bull digs a hole in the ground and spend some time filling the hole with his urine. Once the hole reaches the required depth of urine, the bull jumps in and takes a bath in it. The scent apparently is a favorite amongst the ladies, but men, I wouldn't try this at home if it is marital bliss you seek.

Speaking of scent, elk have an uncanny ability to pick up yours. With wind current travelling in their favor, elk have been known to detect your scent from well over 600 yards away. If they catch your scent, they will run, and run they do. At top speed, an elk can top 40 mph and can make a

vertical jump over eight feet. Not bad for an animal that tops 700 pounds if he is not counting his calories.

Speaking about calories, elk can be omnivorous, having an occasional taste for meat. Not saying that elk are going to turn into man-eaters, but they are opportunity feeders. If an elk stumbles upon a bird nest containing nestlings, he may snack on the contents for a quick protein boost.

The elk populations are doing well overall, with numbers around one million counting all four species, and 280,000 in Colorado. On average, 250,000 hunters take to the woods each year in our fair state, and around one hunter in six is successful. Long live wapiti, you will always make my hunting blood boil.

THE MULE DEER, AN ICONIC COLORADAN

BY MARK RACKAY





Mule deer buck on an early fall morning, between the hunting seasons, on the Uncompahgre Plateau. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

BY MARK RACKAY

I find the mule deer to be the iconic representative of Colorado and our hunting heritage. The elk are number one in many folk's book, but the mule deer is where I got my start so long ago. As early in life as I can remember, I always wanted to go hunting, and I slobbered over every issue of any hunting magazine available. The one species I dreamed most of was the mule deer and his majestic antlers.

As I put my hands on my first mule deer buck, I realized a dream come true. I always wanted to be a deer hunter, admiring the beauty of the animal, and fine taste of venison, and the ability to provide healthy meat for my family. In my 14th year of life, that dream became a reality. Even though it was more than 50 years ago, it seems like yesterday.

Most everyone already knows all the basics about deer, but there are some very interesting facts about

them that most do not know. For example, biologists estimate that a mule deer's sense of smell is 1,000 times stronger than a human. A deer can detect human odor up to a half mile away and can detect a water source that is two feet below the ground and use their hooves to dig it up.

All deer have an amazing set of eyes. Their field of view is 310 degrees, compared to a human that has 180 degrees. This wide field of view means they can see 86 percent of their surroundings at once. You are usually not going to be able to sneak up behind a deer.

Denny Saunders with a beautiful Colorado bull elk. (Photo/Mark Rackay)



Left: Double tine mule deer taken by author. (Courtesy photo)

They also have incredible night vision, being able to see 50 times better than human. It is believed a deer can see up to 100 yards under most nighttime conditions. For all their vision strengths, however, it sacrifices the ability to see colors in the red spectrum and fine details. The red disability is why blaze orange colors do not alert deer. When a deer sees a hunter wearing blaze orange and spooks, it is because of the hunter's movement, not the color.

Mule deer have an unusual form of bounding, called stotting. This is where all four legs leave the ground simultaneously and is unique to mule deer and was adapted to escape mountain lions. There is no other animal in North America that uses that form of bounding. Each bound or stott can be done quickly and cover a distance of up to 30 feet with each jump.

After the age of two, a mule deer will spend most of its time within a defined area, called home range. During their time in the home range, the deer will seldom travel more than a half mile, unless spooked or driven. Many deer do make seasonal movements between habitats, called migrations. Typically, the biannual movements are between high elevation summer range and lower elevation winter range.

Ancient ancestors of mule deer did not have antlers or horns. Instead, they had long, sharp, curved fangs, or tusks. These sharp teeth were used for protection, mating purposes, and possibly to even eat meat, although now they are herbivores now, browsing on plants mostly. The fangs eventually regressed for most of the deer species and some developed antlers instead. There are a few species of deer such as the Siberian musk deer and the Chinese water deer that still have fangs.

Mule deer antler growth exceeds two inches per week during the spring and summer, then slows



A very old Eastern Plains mule deer taken by author during the 2025 season. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

down by the middle of August. Antler size is largely determined by age, genetics, and available forage. A wet spring and an early monsoon season bring about the largest of antler growth.

If you are an antler lover, like yours truly, Ireland might be the place to visit. Ireland was once home to a deer species commonly known as the Irish elk, or *Megaloceros giganteus* as his street name. He stood 6 ½ feet tall and tipped the scales at over 1,500 pounds. His crowning feature, so to speak, were his antlers.

The antlers on the old Irish elk males would exceed 12 feet in width. By comparison, a Colorado Elks antlers might reach four feet across. We missed our chance to see this massive deer, as there are fossil remains dating as far back as 400,000 years ago, with the end of the species coming about 8,000 years ago. By the way, they shed those antlers every year like our mule deer do. Imagine how many inches those monsters grew in a week.

The mule deer is pretty common throughout the state. They can be found on the eastern plains, throughout the canyons, the wooded areas of our National Forests,

and even cohabitate right here in town with us, raiding vegetable and flower gardens at night.

While they seem to be everywhere, populations have been actually going down. Currently, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, (CPW) estimated that the state population of mule deer is around 408,000, which is well below the goal of 525,000 to 575,000 animals. Loss of habitat, an overpopulation of mountain lions, and Chronic Wasting Disease has been taking a toll.

In the mid 1800's, when gold prospectors were pouring into Colorado, commercial hunters killed large numbers of big game for meat. By the beginning of the 20th century, the large herds of deer and elk were gone. The population boom of the 20th century continued to hurt the troubled population of game. By 1900 there were only an estimated 6,000 mule deer left in Colorado. Thanks to hunter's dollars funding conservation efforts, we have a much more respectable and well managed herd.

This year, I will take to the Eastern Plains of Colorado, in search of a mule deer buck. The sight of those antlers will still light the fire within, even after 50 years.

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ALTITUDE SICKNESS — IT'S BEST TO AVOID IT

BY MARK RACKAY

Annually, a gaggle of my friends from South Florida gather here in Colorado for our annual elk hunt together. Most of these guys I have been friends with for decades. We have watched each other age, and some of us have had health issues over the years. For the most part, these guys take reasonably good care of themselves, all but one.

I made my usual airport pickup around One P.M. on the Friday before Third Season. There were the all the regulars, including my old buddy whom we shall call “Randy” here for our purposes. We immediately piled into the waiting trucks, all loaded down with hunters and gear and drove to the Hunting Lodge, well above Norwood. The lodge is located at an altitude of 8500 feet, which was quite a change for Randy, who just arrived from Florida. The place in the Florida Keys where he lives is about five feet above sea level, depending on the tides. But no matter as we were going to hunting, and all was right with the world, or so it seemed.

That night in camp, Randy had enjoyed more than a couple adult beverages, hit the rack after midnight, and awoke at 4 a.m. ready to hit the woods for his hunt. However, Randy was feeling poorly. He had an excruciating headache and was very nauseous. I assumed he was suffering from the payback from the debauchery of the night before.

The plan was for me to walk

Randy about a mile, mostly uphill, to the place where he would take a stand. It took no time at all to realize this was not going to happen. He became mentally confused and was very short of breath.

Realizing the only way, he was going to make it to the stand would be if I carried

him, we called for a strategic withdrawal and immediately headed back to camp where I loaded his carcass into my truck and headed straight for Montrose Memorial Hospital. Randy was suffering from Altitude sickness and was in imminent danger.

When you live in a place like Montrose, with all the mountains and natural beauty, you will quickly hear from friends and relatives you might have forgotten about, wanting to come for a visit. They seem to arrive in hordes wanting to go skiing, fishing, hunting, hiking and just about everything else we enjoy on a regular basis. After all, it is why we live here, isn't it? Many of these folks live at much lower altitudes and without a period of acclimation, they too could suffer with altitude sickness. This malady can bring on a myriad of symptoms, which can include headache, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, weakness, mental confusion, coughing, rapid pulse, coma and even death. If not



Elk live in the high country. Before you head up, give yourself some time to acclimate, especially if you live at a lower altitude. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

acted upon quickly the person can develop one of two forms of a much more serious altitude sickness.

The first being high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) characterized by breathlessness, fatigue, dry cough and blue lips and nails. The second form is called high altitude cerebral edema (HACE), which typically comes with a severe headache, loss of coordination, and confusion. Both of these onset very quickly and are potentially deadly.

The cure is usually quite simple, descend several thousand feet and quickly. From there it is a good idea to get them to a medical facility even though they might be feeling better upon the descent. Many times, these symptoms disappear quickly. Other useful steps include replacing fluids they might have lost, restrict salt intake and administer oxygen if available.

What is probably a much better idea is to try and take steps to avoid the illness in the first place.

The best thing is to try and give your body some time to acclimate. It would be a good idea to spend a day or two in Montrose. Take a few walks each day, nothing vigorous, drink plenty of water or sports drinks with electrolytes if you are perspiring. Avoiding alcohol and drinks with caffeine are essential.

After a day or two here in town it is a safer bet to move on up to that higher altitude. Again, once there, give the old body some time to acclimate. At least 24 hours without strenuous activity and the same rules of water and no booze should leave you in pretty good shape. All

of that being said, being aware of the symptoms of altitude sickness would still be in your best interest as it can be quite serious in a very short time.

Randy started feeling better on the way back to town. About the time we hit Ridgway, he was pretty much back to his usual self, talking about where we might stop for lunch. I insisted we stop in at the hospital and get him checked out. There was no reason to believe that the symptoms wouldn't suddenly reappear if we just turned around and headed back.

The doctor gave Randy a lecture about getting acclimated, staying away from alcohol, and had him stick around town for a day or two before heading back up to camp. In more recent years, Randy has dropped a bunch of weight, cut way back on those adult beverages, and started an exercise program. That is a good thing because I am getting too old to carry him around on the mountain.

Just look at the bright side, you will have your friends and relatives underfoot several days longer if they follow these suggestions for a healthy visit to the altitudes.

Doing strenuous exercise at altitude, such as packing out an elk as Cameron Yarberry does here, can bring on a bout of altitude sickness for someone not used to the high country. (Photo/Mark Rackay)





Chief Travis Thompson of Olathe Police Department and his family enjoy a deep hunting heritage. (Courtesy photos)

Introducing kids to hunting

BY MARK RACKAY

A kid's first big game hunt is probably the most important hunt of their life. Done properly, they will embark on a lifelong passion for adventure and appreciation for nature and wildlife. Done wrong, and they will grow up to be criminals, or seek their adventure in bowling, golf, or skateboarding (According to my old man mentor back in 1971).

I had a rough introduction, but it turned out perfect in the end.

I was being raised by grandparents who were too old for hunting, and too old for a whiney little kid, but we were stuck with each other. I could hunt anytime I wanted if I stayed on our property. Unfortu-

nately, game was rather scarce on our little place. Occasionally a rabbit or a racoon might pass through, but never any big game. What I really wanted was to go deer hunting with the men.

My old man mentor of all things outdoor related was Mr. Caster, a longtime friend of the family. Everyone loved Mr. Caster except my old grandmother, who considered him a reprobate. She did not want him influencing her innocent little grandson with his "evil ways of the devil." Alas, after months of begging, arguing, and whining, she gave in, and said I can go deer hunting with him.

Mr. Caster told outrageous stories, liked loose women, smoked Chesterfield Kings, drank cough

medicine from a flask, knew hundreds of swear words, and shared this knowledge profusely with me. In other words, Mr. Caster was the perfect mentor for a boy.

Grandma was easy to sell, but Mr. Caster would be another story. He said, "The men I hunt with don't want a little kid coming along pesterin' them."

I said, "Good, I don't want any little kids to go either." As I argued with Mr. Caster to allow me to tag along, he offered excuses like his old war wounds, blinding headaches, severe chest pains, a cold coming on, and about anything else he could think of, but he finally caved, probably from exhaustion and a few sips of his medicine in the flask.

Kids mature at different levels; some take longer than others. My wife is still waiting for me to grow up, but that is a story for another day. A properly executed hunting trip involves a collection of emotions in a child, from excitement, nervous, sadness, and the child type complaints that include boredom, tired, cranky, and hungry.

You as a parent must assess your child's level of maturity before embarking on the trip. Sometimes waiting another year makes all the difference in the world. The best way might be to bring them along as an observer, participating in many of the hunt activities like scouting, glassing, camping, cooking. Once an animal is down, see if they want to participate in the field cleaning, caping, and hauling out. If the kid jumps all over this, they are probably mature enough for a full hunt.

Before any young person can hunt in Colorado, they must successfully complete a hunter safety program. This program gives them an introduction to wildlife, survival, etiquette, and firearms safety. I say "introduction" because it is up to the parent to follow through with this. The child is going to need lots of practice shooting and in the safe handling of firearms. During

these practice sessions, keep an eye on how well the child does, and if they have solid muzzle control of the weapon at all times. Inform them of all the necessary precautions, such as no loaded weapon in the vehicle, and make sure they practice these safety precautions,

physically demanding times, and they need to be able to weather it all the same.

For example, kids might not want to, or understand why, we get up at dark-thirty, and head into the woods when it is so cold and early. Explain to them why the best



without missteps, because any misstep can cost a life.

Hunting can be demanding, both physically and mentally. Keep your child's expectations in check. Weather conditions, hunger, not enough sleep, all put a demand on you, and it is much worse for a child who has not done this before.

In the months before the trip, you can quiz the kid on things like safety, firearms handling, and the animal they will be pursuing. At the same time, help keep their expectations down to earth. Tell them it won't be all fun and games, that there will be tough times and

times are early mornings and late evenings to find game. Help them understand why we rest in midday because many species are bedded down. If they understand our little rituals, they will be onboard.

Make sure the child is properly equipped with the right clothes. The clothing must fit properly, meet safety standards, and keep them warm. Don't give them hand-me-downs that don't fit or aren't comfortable. My first hunting attire was all war surplus gear, and none of it fit properly, but it was all we could afford.



Footwear is another area to pay attention to. Kids grow out of shoes faster than a jackrabbit can change fuses on a date. Their hunting boots need to be warm, fit properly, and broken in before the trip. A child with a painful foot blister can ruin a trip for everyone. Hunting means

a lot of sitting and waiting time. The trip will be more fun for everyone if the kids are comfortable throughout the hunt.

Stay focused on the fun factor. Not all hunts end with a kill, sometimes you miss, others you never get a chance. Make sure the kids

understand this. One last tip, keep plenty of snacks around. A teenager can make food disappear faster than a sanitary landfill, especially if it is cold, and a hungry kid is a miserable kid.

If you do your job properly, you will have a hunting partner for life, and they will embark on a lifelong journey in the outdoors. I did not get a deer on my first trip, but what I did get was an understanding. The entire trip, I interacted with that raunchy, smelly, old woodsmen. I listened to every one of his old stories, over and over, and I even tried one of those Chesterfield Kings. I now understand why he needed that medicine in a flask. I decided right then and there, this was what I wanted to do every day, forever, and having hunted for 55 years on four continents, the old man did a good job mentoring me, and I don't play golf or skateboard, and am not a criminal.



Author's grandson, Tyler Rackay, with a whitetail deer from the Colorado Eastern Plains. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

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Little things like super glue and duct tape can be a lifesaver in an emergency. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

The all-important survival pack

BY MARK RACKAY

Every year, I write an article about carrying a survival pack and provide a starter list to get folks thinking about what to bring. I cannot stress enough the importance of having a pack like this with you, together with the knowledge to care for yourself while in the woods.

My purpose for this article is to save lives. I cannot begin to tell you how many people I have helped carry out in a body bag, or on a stokes, because they succumbed to exposure, had a heart attack, injured themselves and had no way to summon help. Having some survival supplies with you, and the knowledge necessary to use them correctly can prevent you from becoming a statistic because you boarded the last train west.

The best way to start this might be to share one of my experiences where I learned something the hard way, my chosen method of self-

education. This goes back a dozen years to a late season elk hunt. I had intended to only head about a half mile up the hill and glass around from higher terrain. I left my pack (containing all the survival essentials) on the seat of the truck. I was only going to be gone for a few minutes so why bring the extra weight up the hill, right? Bad idea.

Once at the top of the hill, it was obvious that the viewing would be much better if I went over one ridge. Off I went, oblivious to the thickening clouds around me. As you can probably guess, I spent a night in a thick stand of spruce trees while a series of snow squalls blew on through.

I was lucky because I had survival skills and immediately got into some shelter, rather than try and walk back the several miles to my truck. Had I carried my pack with me, I could have enjoyed something to eat over a fire. I got lucky. Someone else could have been writing

this story.

Begin with making a small survival pack. Keep it small and lightweight so you can carry it with you all the time. It will not help you if it is sitting in the truck. Probably 90 percent of the missions that search and rescue conducts are for folks who have no survival kit with them. Being unprepared turns a minor inconvenience into a life-threatening four-alarm emergency. Let's take a look at the basics to include in your pack:

- Compass, maps and GPS with extra batteries
- Signal mirror and whistle, sound making device to help searchers locate you
- Knife and multi-tool
- Flashlight with extra batteries-I prefer lithium as they hold power better in the cold than alkaline, don't leak, and last longer. I also carry a small headlamp for walking and using for tasks

- Fire starter-waterproof matches, metal match and flares; carry at least two types and some tinder for wet conditions. I use the product called Wet Fire.
- Drinking water-a hydration bladder or camel back works well. Life Straw-this is a small, personal water filtration device. You can safely drink from A puddle with one of these.
- Food-high energy foods, power bars, nuts, trail mix, jerky, fresh for the trip
- Cell phone and extra power source. These extra battery chargers can be had for around ten bucks, are very small and weigh mere ounces.
- Rain Gear or poncho because Colorado weather changes by the minute
- Space blanket bivy-much better than a blanket as you can crawl into a bivy to stay warm, like a sleeping bag
- Duct tape-good for just about



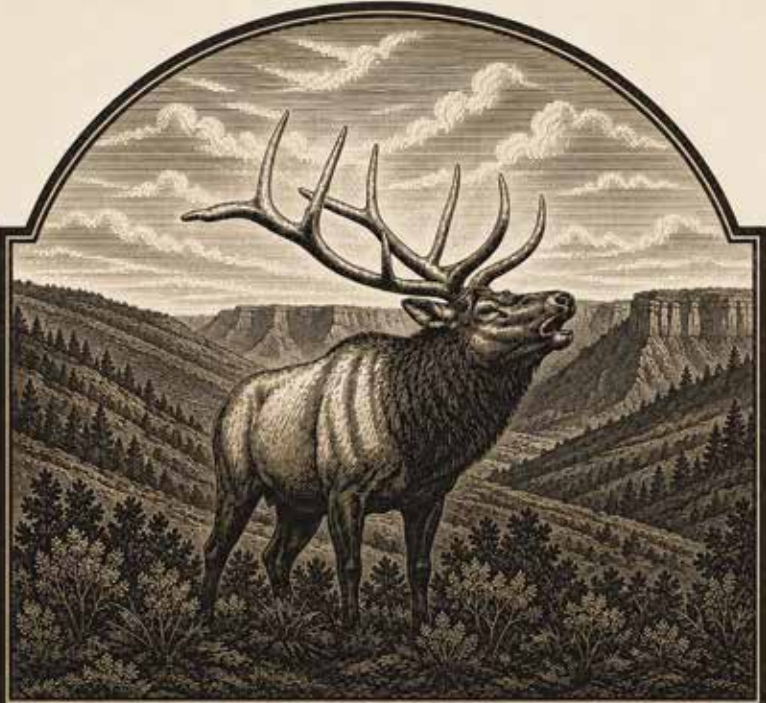
anything from first aid to repairs

- Toilet paper-you just never know about how old those snacks were

My personal first aid kit contains the basic life-saving items, including a tourniquet, Israeli Compression Bandage, Combat Gauze, a couple band-aids, and some Tylenol. The kit carries just the basics to save a life. All the other things I can

deal with back at camp. Again, if the kit becomes too expansive, you will not lug it with you, and it does no good sitting at home when you are in the woods.

Keep your cell phone off during the day. The phone will use up its battery while constantly searching for service. Turn it on when needed and carry an extra power supply. If you do need help, make certain you contact 911 with your phone. Many



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people make the mistake of calling someone back home and having them make the call. When you make the call, 911 personnel will get a GPS ping on your location that will save many hours for search and rescue folks in finding you.

If you have no service, try moving around to higher locations. If all else fails, send 911 a text. Sometimes a text will go through when a call will not. Remember the motto: call when you can and text when you can't. The good folks at the 911 centers can receive texts and reply to the text conversation.

If you hunt in a group and go separate directions, make sure everyone knows where everyone else is going. Set times and locations to meet up and communicate any changes to each other. The small, hand-held walkie talkies work great for this. You can monitor them or set check-in times with each other.

Have a responsible contact person back home. This person

should have names, descriptions, vehicle, and personal information of everyone on the hunt. I can't stress enough how this must be a responsible person. 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. 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 the Sheriff's Office if you are overdue. Information they provide to search and rescue folks will save countless hours looking for you.

For those of you who carry a GPS, turn it on and use it whenever you are away from your vehicle or camp. Before you start out, take a GPS coordinate of your starting point. We once had a man who brought a GPS but did not turn it on until he was

lost. He was able to give us his exact location but had no idea where his truck was parked. Needless to say, we found him quickly and it was a happy ending.

At your starting point of your hunt each day, leave a note. This note, which is sometimes referred to as a "backpacker note" can be left on the windshield of your vehicle, tied to the tent or taped to your ATV. Just state which direction you went off on foot and the area you plan on hunting in. This gives search and rescue a great start on finding you, again, saving time that could be lifesaving.

One thing for certain here in Colorado; the weather is going to change. I have seen temperatures drop 40 degrees in 30 minutes and sunny skies turn to raging blizzards. Carry some extra clothes along. It might be a balmy 50 degrees in the morning. A front can push through, bringing rain changing to snow, all by afternoon. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

There are thousands of packs to choose from, just find one that is comfortable. (Photo/Mark Rackay)



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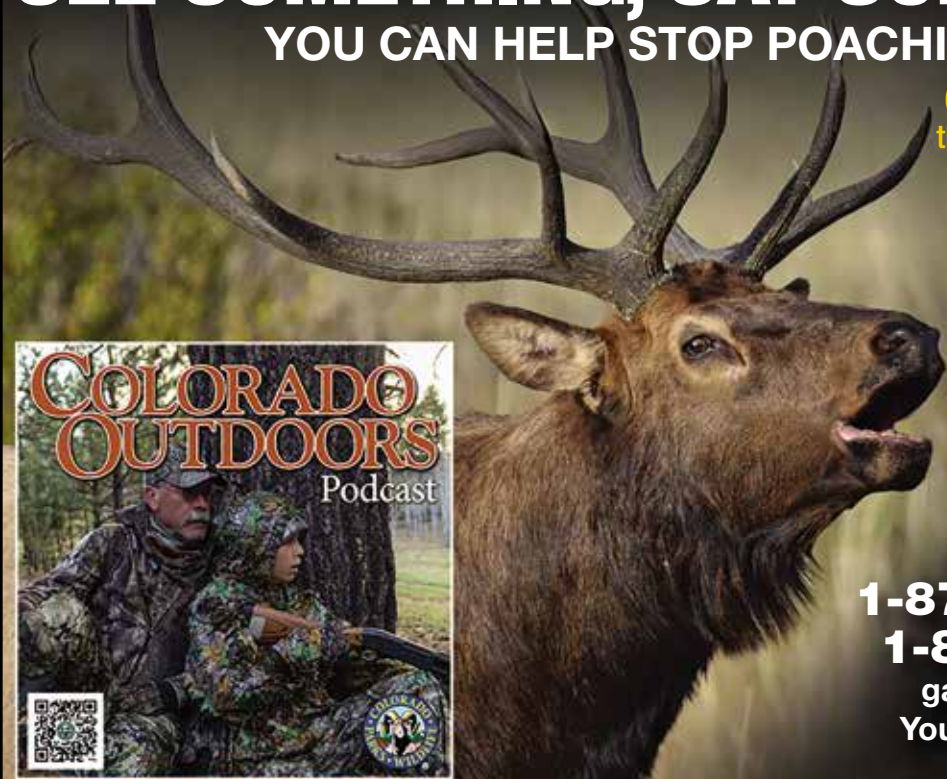
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