Mule deer facts

Tips from the Posse

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. I slobbered over every issue of any hunting magazine I could find. 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. I was just 14 when I realized this dream.

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.

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 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 six and a half 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.

The sight of a mule deer buck like this always gets my "hunter blood" pumping. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

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.

I achieved a rite of passage with my first mule deer and felt like the richest boy in the world as I brought him home. I had no idea then that I was going to grow up and hunt lions, elephant, and buffalo in Africa, but somehow, the mule deer still stands at the time for getting my heart pumping, after all these years.

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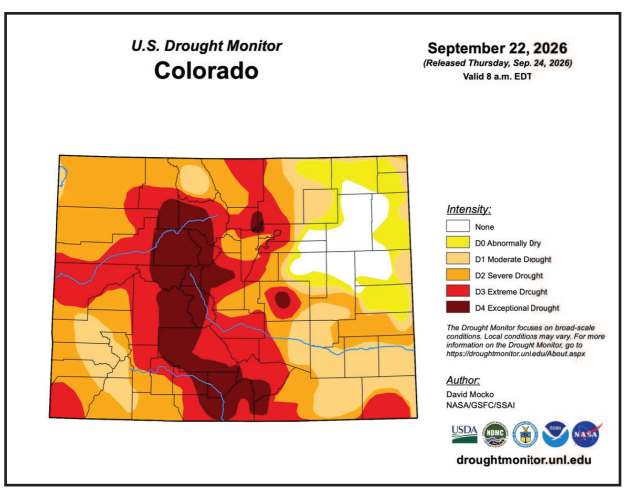
FROM PAGE B1

critical blow. The stretch of warm days started a surge of snowmelt that ran off weeks earlier than the usual peak for snow buildup in the mountains.

Farmers and ranchers had to scramble to catch the water earlier and adjust their planting practices. Tourists were calling outfitters to make sure there was enough water to raft and fish. Cities were announcing watering restrictions earlier than usual, and Colorado ramped up its drought response, convening the state Drought Task Force earlier in the year than ever before.



About 38.5% of Colorado was experiencing extreme or exceptional drought Sept. 22. (U.S. Drought Monitor,

Everything was happening a month early, which meant by July and August, irrigation water for cropland was already in short supply, and toxic algae was blooming in more reservoirs than usual. Roughly 30,000 fish died in one Colorado pond because of high temperatures and low oxygen levels.

Large fires, like the 102,000-acre Aspen Acres fire, ignited. Some communities, like La Veta in Huerfano County, had to scramble to make sure they had enough water to get through the year.

By the end of the summer, Colorado Parks and Wildlife had closed fishing on 28 river sections that covered 650 miles. Some reservoir managers closed boat ramps to recreation or completely drained their storage, like at Daigre Reservoir, Douglas Reservoir and Denver Water's Antero Reservoir.

And it was the worst year on record for runoff on three major rivers in Colorado: the Colorado River, the Arkansas River and the White River, Goble said.

A rough end and a new start

Colorado is ending the water year with about 38% of the state in extreme or exceptional drought, about twice as much compared with the same time in 2025. And it has just over half of its usual water supply in storage reservoirs.

The state's snow storage capacity is so big, the melting snow from one banner year is enough to refill all of the state's reservoirs, Goble said. That happened in 2019 and 2023. Otherwise, the best way to get them back is a few average years and careful management.

"If we have another dry year, it could lead to more severe restrictions and curtailments," he said. "In some cases, we have basically no carryover storage."

The rain that did come from monsoons this year arrived later than usual. Even though the precipitation amounts might be decent, monsoonal moisture doesn't contribute much to water supply.

What's next?

"Looking at the forecast, there's a chance for more moisture," Goble said.

That could come from more monsoon activity, or this year's Super El Niño. But the long-term forecast still shows that this winter could be drier or wetter than normal, according to Goble.

"I know there's those out there who are saying, because we're in a Super El Niño, we need to get really excited about a big powder year," he said. "I've got to kind of tamp down those expectations because we don't know that for sure."

The monsoonal moisture helped avoid a record-smashing wildfire year in Colorado, and looking ahead, officials expect the fire potential this fall to be close to normal, according to presentations at Monday's Drought Task Force meeting.

"Average means we're still going to have fires. We still may have large fires," said Vaughn Jones, chief of the wildland fire management section in the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control.

As the water year closed, the Drought Task Force also had its last meeting of the year.

Gov. Jared Polis issued a statewide drought emergency proclamation June 4 and activated the task force in March. The group facilitates communication among state agencies and makes recommendations as part of the state's drought response.

This year, the state task force compiled economic resources for the public and created subgroups focused on specific topics, like supporting agriculture. Specific state agencies helped out in their areas, like CPW's fishing closures.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board helped with emergency reservoir releases and approved $29 million in water grants for Coloradans, Lauren Ris, CWCB director, said. Now they're focusing on the next water year.

"We're at the end of the irrigation season now, so we're starting to focus more on snow accumulation, or hopefully, we'll be focusing on that here soon," Ris said. "Fingers crossed."