

Circle back



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The term “circle back” has become sort of a catch phrase for Washington, D.C. politicians when giving press conferences. They use the term to go back to a previous question when they feel a subject passed by without the opportunity to let enough light on the subject.

The place you never want to exercise the “circle back” philosophy is in the great outdoors when you are lost. A better term to remember when you have lost your way might be, stay put.

In countless searches for lost persons, usually during bad weather, we have found that folks really do walk in circles. Several times I have found myself walking in a circle when I was temporarily misguided (another word for lost.)

My wife of many years claims that I spend my life going in circles, never finding a landmark. Perhaps those long years of marriage could be the reason for the circling, but in the interest of marital bliss, I shall keep that thought to myself.

I recall a search for four lost hunters a couple of years ago. They had left camp in the early afternoon on foot. Weather moved in, bringing eight inches of heavy, wet snow in just a few hours. These hunters had no GPS or compass. They were using visible landmarks, which the

falling snow had immediately turned into invisible landmarks.

We started following their tracks around 10 that night. Our GPS showed we were about to close a circle when we happened upon them. The total distance they had covered in that circle was near 2 miles, but they were about to come upon their own tracks in the newly fallen snow.

These four hunters were borderline hypothermic when we caught up to them. Another few hours in the cold and wet conditions, these folks would have boarded the last train west. If they would have stayed put in the spot where they became confused, we would have found them right out of the gate.

Another search we conducted involved a man who parked his jeep on a 2-track that headed up a couple of miles into a wooded area. He walked up the 2-track, hunting elk, traversing into the surrounding woods as he searched for game.

The man realized he was lost around noon because the 2-track forked, and he came out on the fork, rather than on the original track. He proceeded to walk, leaving the track, in search of his jeep.

We arrived at 4 p.m. that evening and found his tracks and following them was like walking around in a can of worms. The snow was sparse so there were large areas where his tracks disappeared, and a large area had to be covered in order to pick up the trail again. The search went on for the entire night, and the next two days. His trail crossed back over itself a dozen times.

The conclusion of that search was on the third day when his body was found several miles across a canyon, miles away from the



This hunter (center) was walking in circles when member Dave Fowler found him, and brought him to safety. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

original 2-track and his jeep. The sad part of this is it all could have been prevented if he would have just stayed put. We were on the fork of that 2-track about 7 p.m. If he was there waiting...you get the idea.

It is too easy to blame this phenomenon on good old Mr. Murphy as another one of his ploys to make a bad situation worse, but I think there may be a bit of science to this.

Jan Souman, a psychologist at the Max Planck Institute in Germany, conducted a study in 2007. Previously, researchers had suggested that walking in circles could result from subtle differences in the strength or length of the two legs that would bias a person to veer toward the left or right.

Souman's experiments found that most subjects showed no strong bias for left or right turns, even though subjects did have small differences in the strength of their left and right legs. These differences did not correlate with their turning tendencies.

The findings did suggest to Souman that the reason people walk in circles involves the brain. When people are blindfolded, the brain has to plot a course for straight ahead, based on

limited information, including input from the vestibular system, which informs the sense of balance and movement sensors in the muscles and joints.

According to Souman, those signals have small errors that can lead a person on a random, meandering path. Occasionally, the errors in a particular direction build up, leading us to walk in a circle.

Another theory is that we all have a dominant eye that misaligns to a focused point when both eyes are open. Being a past competition shotgun shooter, I have a fair amount of experience with a dominant eye. I have little confidence in that theory because your dominant eye will take over and lead the way, hence the term “dominant.”

The way I look at this is very simple. Forget the science. If you have no idea where you are, why keep walking? You should climb a nearby hill and try to get a visual bearing, with the hopes of reorienting yourself. But if that does not work, or if it is dark or weather has ended all your visual reference, what sense does it make to keep walking? Just stay put.

Spend your energy building a shelter and fire for the

evening. Not only will you feel better in a shelter with a warm fire going, but rescue people will also find you sooner.

I have always said that it is always darkest right before it turns completely black. Night falling can take away your visual references in a hurry. If it is a clear night, you can use a bright star or the moon as a visual cue. Keep in mind the rotation of the earth, which will affect your direction of travel over the long haul of several hours.

Inclement weather, such as heavy rains or a snowstorm can cause your visual landmarks to vanish. The simplest solution is to use a compass or a GPS. Staying on a course using either of these instruments will keep you going straight.

If you have neither of these, it may be best to wait it out. When you are not positive of the proper direction, and start getting concerned, stay put. The morning is just eight or nine hours away, and the light will probably help you reorient yourself. If not, you are still closer to being found than if you had wandered off into the darkness.

In the Hug-a-Tree program, we teach lost children to do just that when they

are lost, hug a tree. Kids learn to stay put, rather than wander around aimlessly, risking becoming injured or further lost. Staying put increases their chances of being found.

My wife says I just go in circles all the time, something about chasing my tail. I tried to explain that it is not circling, but “hovering,” waiting to move in. It is more of a tactical maneuver, but she refuses to hear the explanation. If you happen to see me in the woods, going around in a circle, or hovering, just point me toward my truck.

Unless my wife is looking for me, then it is a tactical maneuver, and you didn't see 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 For information about the posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

New regional forester for Rocky Mountain Region

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

United States Forest Service Chief Randy this week announced the appointment of Troy Heithecker as the new regional forester for the Rocky Mountain Region, effective later this summer. Deputy Regional Forester Steve Lohr will serve as acting regional forester until Heithecker reports.

Heithecker will lead more than 2,000 permanent and seasonal employees and share stewardship of 22 million acres of national forests and grasslands with partners and forty-eight affiliated tribes in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming.

“Troy is a proven and compassionate leader who will bring experience to the Rocky Mountain Region essential to carrying out agency and regional goals. Through his guidance, we will continue our vital work with

partners to improve ecological function, reduce the threat from wildfire to forests and grasslands and the surrounding communities, enhance the user experience, provide outstanding recreational opportunities and, internally, care for the physical, mental and psychological wellness of the workforce,” said Moore.

“His exceptional leadership strength makes him well fit to address the opportunities and challenges across the region in supporting the multiple uses and interests of these public lands.”

Heithecker currently serves as associate deputy chief for the National Forest System where he oversees national programs for Forest and Rangeland Management, Vegetation Ecology, Lands, Minerals and Geology, the National Partnership Office and the National Forest System Equity/Justice 40 Initiative Team.

Heithecker has also served in

numerous leadership positions throughout his career with the Forest Service including roles as forest supervisor of the Ouachita National Forest in Hot Springs, Arkansas, deputy forest supervisor on the Tongass National Forest and has held temporary assignments as deputy regional forester in the Rocky Mountain Region, and forest supervisor on the Tongass National Forest.

“I'm honored to serve in collaboration with our five states, tribal governments, communities, partners, and the workforce of the Rocky Mountain Region,” said Heithecker. “The region is flush with opportunities for shared stewardship and meaningful advances toward sustaining and enhancing these amazing public lands, and I look forward to strengthening relationships as we pursue important goals together.”

Heithecker started his career with the Forest Service in 1997

as a volunteer with the Pacific Northwest Research Station in Juneau, Alaska, working as a field technician in research silviculture.

While completing college, he spent his summers implementing research silviculture projects on the Tongass and Gifford Pinchot National Forests where he learned the complex dynamics of managing public lands for multiple uses.

Heithecker earned a bachelor's degree in computer science from Colorado State University and a master's degree in forest ecology from the University of Washington. He enjoys all things outdoors, playing music and spending time with his wife and two kids.

Heithecker replaces Regional Forester Frank Beum who has served as regional forester for the Rocky Mountain Region since April 12, 2021. Beum is retiring May 31, after a 43-year career in public service.



USDA Forest Service Chief Randy this week announced the appointment of Troy Heithecker as the new regional forester for the Rocky Mountain Region, effective later this summer. (Courtesy photo/U.S. Forest Service)



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