OPEN SEASON 2024

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CHANGES COMING to Colorado hunting in 2025

New Big Game Season Structure approved for 2025-29

By John Livingston, Colorado Parks and Wildlife

While most hunters are squarely focused on filling the big-game license they drew for the 2024 seasons, it's never too early to think about changes in store for upcoming seasons.

At its June meeting, the Parks and Wildlife Commission approved the new Big Game Season Structure (BGSS) for the 2025-29 seasons.

"There are some big changes to Over-the-Counter (OTC) archery hunting for non-residents as well as some notable changes to our regular rifle seasons that hunters need to be aware of," said Colorado Parks and Wildlife Area Wildlife Manager Brandon Diamond of Gunnison. Diamond was on CPW's Big Game Season Structure working group.

CPW's five-year BGSS sets the framework for annual big game hunting seasons, as well as the manner in which licenses are distributed. In preparing the 2025-29 BGSS, CPW conducted a two-year public engagement process that involved both residents and non-residents. Public feedback was crucial in the development of the new BGSS, especially as it pertained to archery OTC elk season.

OTC ARCHERY ELK LICENSES

Discussions related to the level of crowding and the overall hunting experience during OTC elk seasons were widespread during this BGSS planning process.

Specific to the September archery elk season, CPW heard from members of the public a strong desire to keep OTC archery elk licenses available for resident hunters while limiting all archery elk licenses for non-resident hunters. After deliberation and final approval by Colorado's Parks and Wildlife Commission, non-resident archery elk hunters will now have to apply for all archery elk licenses in the spring big-game draw in all Game Management Units (GMUs).

This will now include all GMUs that formerly offered OTC archery elk licenses for non-residents, and is a novel approach to license distribution in Colorado. Residents may continue to purchase OTC archery elk licenses in OTC units, however residents will still need to apply in the limited license drawing for units that are currently limited. Deer licenses will remain fully limited for all seasons for both residents and non-residents.

"Non-resident archery elk hunters should keep an eye out for the 2025 Big Game Brochure and take some time to review these changes," Diamond said. "Non-residents will have to think more about their upcoming hunts and application strategies because all archery elk options will now be limited.

"To be clear, the archery elk licenses that are limited right now, such as GMUs 54, 55, 551, 66 or 67 here in the Gunnison Basin, those units will continue to remain limited for all archers whether resident or nonresident. The big change only applies to units that are already over-the-counter for archery elk. This is a significant change taking effect in 2025."

As it has been previously, archery season will start Sept. 2 each year and run through Sept. 30 for a 29-day season.

RIFLE SEASONS

Some changes have also come to rifle seasons.

The upcoming BGSS allows managers the option to prescribe limited deer hunts during the first rifle season, which has traditionally been an elk-only season, based on local management considerations. Some areas may offer antlered deer hunts during the first rifle season, while others may only allow antlerless hunt codes.

"With support from local wildlife advocates, CPW is considering some limited doe hunting in the northern Gunnison Basin during the first rifle season in order to address some of the crowding concerns during the busy second and third rifle seasons," Diamond said. "The second and third seasons are incredibly busy, and we hear a lot about it from hunters. A limited doe season during first rifle likely won't significantly detract from the elk hunting experience, and will allow us to lessen some of the hunting pressure during our busiest seasons. It gives us flexibility

to put some surgical management on the ground based on our ever-evolving conditions."

CPW Senior Wildlife Biologist Jamin Grigg said having the ability to offer a limited number of deer licenses during the first rifle season may also allow the agency to manage Chronic Wasting Disease in areas where there are high densities of resident deer and high CWD prevalence is a concern. Some areas around Montrose and the North Fork of the Gunnison Valley may potentially benefit from an optional first season deer hunt.

"We have a number of units where we are expecting to allow some very limited first rifle deer licenses," Grigg said. "Likely, that's coming for the Gunnison Basin and, potentially, areas around Montrose.

"Those will be initiated for a few reasons. One is to redistribute hunters a little bit and alleviate some hunter crowding occurring during second and third seasons. We are not expecting to issue more licenses or hunt deer harder overall and will still manage to the objectives set in our Herd Management Plans. Really, it's just redistributing licenses and hunting pressure. Another reason is to target CWD hot spots. That's an impetus for first season deer licenses in places like Montrose – GMUs 70, 64 and 65 and some of those GMUs starting to see CWD prevalence increase a bit more than we'd like it to. That's one way of targeting CWD-positive deer is through that first season and having some licenses in there."

The Parks and Wildlife Commission also approved a few changes to rifle season lengths and dates.

- The first rifle season will start the first Wednesday after Oct. 8 and be a five-day season followed by a five-day break before the second season.
- The second rifle season will be nine days long, followed by a five-day break before the third season. Hunters will have two weekends to hunt the second season.
- The third season will be nine days, followed by a two-day break before the fourth season. Hunters will have two weekends to hunt the third season.
- Fourth season will be a five-day season beginning on the Wednesday following the third season.

"Generally, there will be shorter breaks between seasons than in the previous five-year structure, which results in seasons not going as late into the year and overlapping with Thanksgiving," Grigg said. "We heard from hunters that seasons were too late in some geographic areas and people had issues with the Thanksgiving overlap. Some folks liked that, but the majority of input was that season dates were too late and there was more interest in season dates not going quite so late. The tradeoff is not having quite as long of breaks between seasons now.

"The third season is also now longer to help those who can only hunt on weekends get a second weekend to hunt that season."

MORE CHANGES

A few more changes to BGSS were also approved, such as the addition of an optional "late" season cow moose hunt that would span through the regular rifle seasons rather than the traditional rifle moose season that takes place during the first two weeks of October. To see all of the approved BGSS, go to the CPW website and be sure to closely look at the 2025 Big Game Brochure when it is published in February 2025.

WHAT IS BGSS?

Big game management in Colorado is built on two main planning processes: Herd Management Plans and BGSS. Herd Management Plans establish population objectives and sex ratios for each of the state's big game herds. BGSS defines a framework for achieving those objectives through hunting seasons for different species and methods.

These two processes inform big game license recommendations through the annual rule-making process. The BGSS planning process is a critical component of big game management and big game hunting regulation development and determines:

- What, when, and where various types of big game hunting opportunities are available.
- How the timing of these opportunities are divided among hunters.

On the heels of this planning process, CPW will continue striving to maintain healthy wildlife populations by managing to established objectives. While BGSS provides a standardized set of management sideboards, there can also be extenuating circumstances that prompt local managers to evaluate novel approaches in consultation with the CPW Commission.

In those situations, hunting opportunities (seasons and license distribution) can be limited or modified geographically to meet biological or social management objectives.

"I want to thank all of our local partners that participated in the BGSS process," Diamond said. "Some of your friends and neighbors went well above and beyond to advocate for our community's big game resources. A lot of serious discussion took place that I anticipate will continue into the coming year. Those discussions included the potential for limiting OTC bull licenses during the second and third rifle seasons in the northern Gunnison Basin, and the potential for Regional season structures.

"Things don't always turn out exactly as folks hope for, but now more than ever, we need our local communities to stay engaged and participate in processes and on issues that impact our local wildlife resources."

THE DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WILDLIFE MANAGER

What's in a day? For wildlife managers, a whole lot of work

BY KATHARHYNN HEIDELBERG

ADistrict Wildlife Manager Stuart Sinclair scouts on horseback.

Stuart Sinclair beat the sun up one day during last hunting season, with a set agenda. The Colorado Parks and Wildlife district wildlife manager would be cruising likely hunting spots on the Grand Mesa, and contacting folks to check licenses, offer assistance, take information and complaints, and a host of other tasks falling under the umbrella of "customer service."

Then the call came. A hunter was trespassing on private land, and Sinclair instantly shifted gears, heading down toward Delta to help the sheriff's office deal with it.

"My plans changed immediately. We just have to be able to navigate being prepared to get torn into a bunch of different directions," Sinclair said on a rainy afternoon Aug. 13, just a few weeks before the first archery season was to open.

There is no "typical day" for a wildlife manager like Sinclair, but the state's hunting seasons will find him and the other six district wildlife managers based in the Montrose office constantly on the move, working patrols and contacts into the mix of call response, sunup to (often past) sundown.

After addressing the trespass, Sinclair dropped off his trailer and headed up Divide Road, a busy place for hunters. "My plan was to check as many hunters as I could throughout the day. While checking hunters, our goals are compliance checks to make sure people are following rules and regulations while they're driving their trucks, while they're driving ATVs and side-by-sides. (We're) going into camps, looking for game, making sure that game is properly tagged," he said.

"The customer service part of the job comes into play there, just talking to hunters about what they're seeing, what I'm seeing, if they have any complaints; if they're happy with their experience."

While checking the Divide Road hotspots, Sinclair ran into a hunter who self-reported accidentally shooting two elk instead of the one for which he had a tag. (He had not seen the second animal in his line of fire.) Sinclair soon found himself on a lengthy trek to the downed elk, which he helped the hunter field dress so the meat did not waste.

After they got one of the elk to Sinclair's vehicle, he called around to see whether there was someplace the elk meat could be donated before it spoiled. "I ended up going to Nucla. I went from the Grand Mesa, to Divide Road, to Nucla to drop off this elk."

It was all in a very long day's work, one that is common during the thick of hunting season. But a wildlife manager's duties extend beyond bouncing from call to call across vast distances.

They also entail communication and addressing human-wildlife conflicts.

Earlier in August, Sinclair responded to an orchard owner's report of a black bear that had damaged his trees. "This is a commercial orchard, so every time a bear breaks branches, it costs him money. The state is liable for such damages, so I had to talk to him about how we can navigate that sort of thing. Ridgway concurrently has a couple different bears in town that are getting into trash and dumpsters, birdfeeders and things like that. So (I'm) talking to people about that," he said.

"We have a lot of different job duties. Kind of how it branches out in statute is we're supposed to be one-third law enforcement, one-third customer service, and one-third wildlife management. The one-third customer service is a lot more than one-third customer service. It takes up a lot of our time, and customer service is one of those wide, varied terms where people call with a complaint or an interesting observation, or they're having issues."

INVESTIGATING

The wildlife managers usually have one of their group taking calls and relaying them by radio to the others, who are often out of cell phone range.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Colorado Parks and Wildlife staff assist a customer at the Montrose regional office on Aug. 13. (Katharhynn Heidelberg, Montrose Daily Press)

"We can pretty much count on whatever we have planned, the person who's on call is going to call and have something else for us to go do," Sinclair said.

"Trespasses are something we kind of drop everything to get to, if a hunter is trespassing onto somebody's land. That's a big one. Or going to investigate something," Sinclair said.

Last season, while Sinclair checked a camp, a man approached to report finding an elk that was apparently left in the woods. However, there is more than one reason a game animal can be found deceased; it has not always been illegally taken and left to waste, but may have succumbed to disease, starvation, injury or predation. So, wildlife managers like Sinclair have to determine what happened.

"That turned into me teaming up with a guy from Nucla and going on a horse ride into the middle of nowhere to find this random elk carcass to investigate how it died," he said. It could have been shot and left, or been shot and run off, with the hunter unable to track it, for instance.

"Another thing people call us about is if they shoot an animal and it runs onto private property, they often are not able to get that animal; that would be a trespass. That's something that we kind of get called into a lot; help them get permission, or for us to get permission to go onto this private property and look for it.

"There's a lot of different reasons we may get called away from what we're trying to accomplish and onto something else that might be more of a priority."

Sinclair and the others are sworn peace officers in the state of Colorado, empowered to enforce all laws, including traffic laws. So, yes, a

“People are for the most part good. Hunting is kind of a pay to play type thing, where people have a lot vested into going out, making sure they do things right and be successful,” Sinclair said

wildlife manager can pull you over, or even arrest you.

Sinclair’s work also entails investigations into willful criminal conduct in violation of state wildlife regulations and state laws, such as the wasting of game meat, the illegal take of game (poaching), and even schemes to rig the preference points system for license draws in coveted game management units.

Sinclair told of a hunter who had come to the office to report taking a bear, as required, but who also claimed to have eaten most of the meat. Sinclair saw that as a red flag and when he investigated, it emerged the man had actually harvested the trophy elements of the bear, leaving the rest to rot. The hunter paid a price for that “small little lie,” noted Sinclair.

In another case, a hunter harvested game and drove it into Utah without field dressing it as required. Sinclair worked with Utah authorities to solve the case.

District Wildlife Manager Stuart Sinclair’s job includes education and outreach. (Courtesy photo Stuart Sinclair)

The 2024 Big Game Guide is a must-review for hunters, who should pay close attention to information such as wildlife laws in the state. (Katharhynn Heidelberg, Montrose Daily Press)

Penalties for violations range from small fines, all the way up to $10,000 fines for the illegal harvesting of trophy animals under the Samson Law (named for Samson, a bull elk illegally taken in Estes Park).

Violations may also see hunters’ licenses suspended, or even revoked permanently. And that’s virtually everywhere — a hunting violation in Colorado will bar you from hunting in most other states, too.

Sometimes, hunters are criminally prosecuted for violations and jail is a possibility for certain offenses.

Most hunters abide by the regulations and when they slip up, it is most often ignorance or an oversight.

“People are for the most part good. Hunting is kind of a pay to play type thing, where people have a lot vested into going out, making sure they do things right and be successful,” Sinclair said, urging hunters to familiarize themselves with the rules, as well as maps to keep them from straying onto private property. “I think a lot of times people break one of the rules, or break a regulation, or break one of the statutes, it’s (ignorance). They had a moment of bad judgment, or maybe they forgot something. Those are all simple things to fix.”

In general, the public does a good job of looking out for wildlife officers and reporting issues and violations, he added. CPW also gets a lot

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of help from area law enforcement agencies.

"Our goals in hunting season are cover as much ground as we can, talk to as many people as we can, check as many hunters as we can, check as many camps as we have. In that, we're looking for those regulation-type things where people might have just made a mistake, but also trying to sniff out the big violation where somebody's trying to do something wrong, trying to work the system," Sinclair said.

HUNTING PART OF GAME MANAGEMENT

People hunt for many reasons — food, trophies, the experience — but what Sinclair predominantly sees are those who are in it for the meat. That was the case with a hunter who mistakenly shot a spike elk when he had a cow tag, Sinclair recounted. The man dutifully reported it and took the citation, but was disappointed to have to surrender the meat, which his family needed. A few weeks later, Sinclair lined up donated meat from another elk for the very appreciative man.

"I think the vast majority of folks are looking to fill their freezer, especially in the local communities. There are people I run into who are simply looking to put that on their wall and kind of as a byproduct for those people, they get meat. But for the most part, people are out there looking for meat," Sinclair said.

Hunting doesn't just fill freezers, put people outdoors, and (with fishing) inject about $3 billion into the state's economy — but it is also a critical game and wildlife management tool.

"I think it works wonderfully. There's always going to be conflicts with humans and wildlife on a lot of different levels for a lot of different reasons," Sinclair said.

For example, elk migrating down during the winter for food may find what a rancher has laid up for his or her cattle highly attractive, but it hurts the rancher's livelihood when they eat the feed. "If we weren't hunting the elk population, that population would grow, grow, grow, and that rancher would not be able to feed his cows," Sinclair said. "Hunting is a tool we have available to keep that pressure and keep that conflict at a minimum. It's never, ever going to go away, that conflict. ...We're not trying to drive elk numbers into the ground, but trying to find that happy medium of social tolerance, keeping the landscape healthy and hunters relatively happy. We can say that about every big game animal, whether that's deer, elk, pronghorn, bears, mountain lions," he added.

"I think our modern wildlife management is a system that is working."

Info, info, info!

Pick up your 2024 Colorado Big Game guide at the Montrose Colorado Parks and Wildlife office, 2300 S. Townsend Ave. (next door to Montrose Veterinary Clinic, and about two blocks from the Montrose Public Lands Center). Pay close attention to page 15, which details hunting laws. You can also get the guide online at cpw.info/big-game-brochure. Copies of statutes and regulations can also be obtained at the local office, or at cpw.info/regulations.The Montrose office can be reached at 970-252-6000. Report poachers to Operation Game Thief, 1-877-265-6648 (1-877-COLO-OGT), or email game.thief@state.co.usYou may receive a reward for reporting wildlife violations. Reports may be made anonymously.

At work in the field. (Courtesy photo Stuart Sinclair)

Some of the survival items I carry in my pack. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

SURVIVAL PACK

HAVING IT WITH THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT, AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF HOW TO USE IT, COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE.

By Mark Rackay

I have a fellow posse member, and a good friend outside of the posse, 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 Scott.

When not on a mission up in the hills, Scott 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.

Scott carries flashlights, chargers, cell phone, sandwich, first aid kit, checkbook, wallet, change of clothes, extra jacket, ten-speed bike ... need I go on? I don't know how he walks around in the things as they must weigh a hundred pounds. His pants arrive on the scene 15 minutes after he does.

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. Generally, I submit this column to coincide with the beginning of the big game hunting seasons here in Colorado.

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 because they succumbed to exposure, had a heart attack, injured themselves and had no way to summon help. The other ulterior motive might be that I, like many of you, wait all year for hunting season, and want

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to spend it in the mountains hunting, not on rescue missions.

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 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
- 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.

"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."

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, and we can't all bring a Scott with us.

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 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.

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 the Sheriff's Office if you are overdue. Information they provide to search and rescue folks will save countless hours looking for you.

Again, make sure this is 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.

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.

A survival pack should be with you at all times when you are in the woods. Having it with the right equipment, and the knowledge of how to use it, could save your life. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

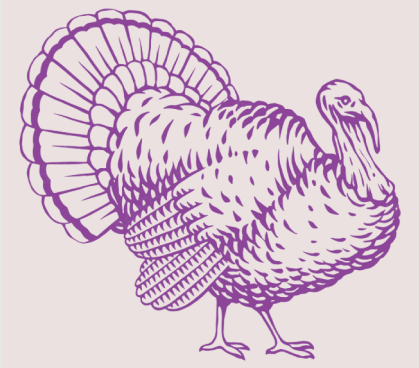
Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

For some of you, this annual article is just a quick reminder, and for others, it is a starting point. As you read this, I am out on a call out for an overdue archery hunter and Scot is on the mission with me. He has been at our staging area for around 15 minutes, so I assume his pants will be coming along shortly. Be safe out there this season.

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

A tom turkey in full strut, showing off his stuff for the hens. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

Turkey in Colorado



By Mark Rackay

My earliest memories of turkey go all the way back to when I was living with my grandparents. Every year, my grandmother would have the entire family of aunts and uncles over for Thanksgiving dinner.

She would cook the largest turkey that she could find, together with all the trimmings. She was a Polish lady and had many old family recipes for dumplings, cakes, breads, and many other side dishes.

The arrangement was simple. She would cook way too much food, and I would do my best to eat myself into a coma. Remember, this was during a time before they invented cholesterols and other foods that were bad for you.

The centerpiece of every Thanksgiving meal was always the big turkey, but it was not always the case. Contrary to popular belief, Thanksgiving did not become a traditional celebration because of the Massachusetts Pilgrims, and the turkey was not the center of the famous 1621 meal. The turkey did not make its way onto the Thanksgiving platter until around the early 1800s.

It is often thought that Benjamin Franklin pushed for the wild turkey to be the symbol representing the states on the National

Seal, but such was not the case.

The original "seal committee" formed in 1776, and was composed of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. The committee could not reach an agreement for a symbol, but the turkey was not one of the options.

It was not until 1782, when the third "seal committee" finally reached an agreement naming the bald eagle, another native to North America, as the official seal. Franklin eventually grew tired of the variety of bald eagle motifs used by various groups as the seal. Some of the representations were pretty sorry looking.

One of the badges called the Order of Cincinnatus apparently looked more like a turkey than that of an eagle. Franklin always admired the turkey and thought the bird was more respectable than the eagle, but he never officially recommended the eagle as the seal.

Each Thanksgiving, Americans consume 46 million turkeys. Fortunately, these are domestic and not the wild turkeys we have running around in our woods. Farm raised birds have a much higher fat content, and in comparison, to the wild bird, are quite tender.

Wild turkeys number around 7 million in the United States. But it was not always that way. In the 1930's, the population was down to less than 30,000, because of poaching and habitat destruction and uncontrolled hunting.

There are five subspecies in the U.S that include the Merriam's, Rio Grande, Osceola and the Eastern. If you head south, you can find the Gould's turkey, which lives in Northwestern Mexico and parts of extreme southern New Mexico and Arizona.

The ocellated turkey is a different species entirely, living in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and in several adjacent countries. This bird looks more like a peafowl than like its northern cousins. Males

A successful turkey hunt near Hotchkiss, Colorado. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

have a bronze-green iridescence, long spurs, but no beard.

Colorado is home to two subspecies of the turkey. One is the Rio Grande, which was introduced to our state in 1980. The Rio Grande lives mostly on the eastern side of Colorado, preferring river bottoms lined with cottonwood trees. The Rio Grande birds are often found in the farming areas of the plains.

According to estimates from the Colorado Parks and Wildlife, CPW, the turkey is thriving here. The current population estimates exceed 35,000 birds, and they are present in 53 out of 64 counties across the State.

The native turkey to Colorado is the one that lives in the Montrose and Delta area, called the Merriam's or Mountain Turkey. This bird lives primarily west of Interstate 25, preferring the mountainous regions. The Merriam's likes open meadows and parks, oak brush and pinion junipers.

The noticeable difference between the two species might be the amount of white on the tips of the tail feathers. Merriam's have some white on the very tips while the Rio Grande usually has a golden or brown tip.

A turkey has no sense of smell, like many other wild animals do, so they rely on very good hearing and eyesight to survive. The best way to describe their eyesight is with the word "incredible." It has been said that a turkey can see an arm movement at 300 yards, and from my own experience, I can attest to that. Turkeys, when hunting, have busted me more than all other game animals combined. The turkey has no night vision, which is why they stay on a roost during the nighttime hours.

These birds are capable of flying up to 50 mph for short distances, and can run at 25 mph, to escape a predator. When you spot a turkey in the wild, rest assure he has already seen you. It is amazing to me; just how fast they can vanish from sight.

I don't think that many of our Colorado wild turkey is destined to be on a Thanksgiving table. They are pretty crafty and overly cautious, making them an unlikely centerpiece for the big meal. That's all right with me because the grocery store usually has plenty of farm-raised birds that are much easier to obtain than the wild ones.

I miss the spread my late grandmother used to put out for us. Apparently, nobody ever told her that some of the food she prepared might be considered unhealthy, and I doubt she would have cared. She made it to 93, so maybe that says something about all this "healthy eating."

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If you have a properly sighted in rifle, and have spent some time at the range practicing, your chances of success go up at that important moment. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

SIGHTING IN YOUR RIFLE

BY MARK RACKAY

If you want success in the field, you need to spend some time on the bench with your rifle. (Courtesy photo/ Mark Rackay)

One of my pet peeves is people who do not sight in their rifle before they go hunting. Everyone owes it to the animals they seek to be certain their rifle is properly sighted in and functioning properly. Aside from that, you should spend considerable time at the range practicing your shooting, and not just from a bench, but in field positions to duplicate field shooting. Remember, it is not the arrow, it is the Indian that is the key to success in the field.

As anyone who hunts with me will testify, I am a stickler with my rifles and scopes. All the action screws, mounts and bases are properly torqued before each trip. The rifle is cleaned, zeroed, and ready for the trip. I usually start practicing at the range in May, giving me several months of time, and hundreds of rounds down range.

Choose the best quality equipment you can afford. Cheap scopes and bargain basement ammunition will fail or perform poorly. Usually, it is a case of getting what you pay for. When you are spending thousands on a hunt, don't scrimp on your equipment.

When you find an ammunition your rifle likes, and a bullet weight suitable for your game animal, sight in with that ammo. You must sight in with what you plan on hunting with. Different ammunition will not always shoot in the same place.

For some people, sighting in a rifle is akin to beating your head on the sidewalk, but it need not be that way. Our success in the field depends on our bullets hitting where we aim, and confidence in our equipment.

For starters, sight in your rifle from a good and solid bench. You need to be sitting comfortably or laying in the prone position. Your rifle can be sandbags, a Lead Sled or similar rest, or an adjustable front rest and a bag under the stock. It must be as stable as possible. A bipod will work if you use support bags under the stock. The key is to me solid.

Your posture and position should be relaxed, comfortable, and stable. If sitting, keep your feet flat on the ground. Do not change your position between shots. The idea is to keep everything the same for each shot.

Some people like to shoot a single shot and adjust the scope after each shot. You will not only lose your mind doing this, but you will also probably run out of ammunition. Shoot at least a 3 shot group and adjust the scope. Allow the rifle to cool before shooting another group. A heated barrel will usually send the bullets higher on the target.

I start with a rifle that is bore sighted. That simply means it will be on the paper at 100 yards. I will fire a three shot group to start. While my barrel is cooling, I will check the size of the group, find the center, and move the scope adjustments, left or right using the windage adjustment on the scope. Never adjust windage and elevation at the same time, as some scopes move off center, climbing some when elevation is moved and vice versa. One adjustment at a time.

When my group is centered on the target, I begin my elevation adjustments. For most rifles without a ballistic reticle scope, two or three inches high at 100 yards is good. When my elevation is set, and the group is centered, time to clean the rifle. I generally make another range session with the rifle before the hunt, not just for practice, but to doubly verify everything is right and sighted in properly.

The biggest mistake I see shooters making on a regular basis is rushing the sighting in process. They do not let their barrels cool enough between groups. A while back, I brought a rifle of mine to sight in on my handloads. The first group was beautiful, around a ½ inch.

I shot a second group, and it began to open up. Feeling frustrated and concerned, I fired two more groups, without waiting, and the groups just kept getting bigger. I put the rifle back in the case and went home. A week later, I brought the rifle back to try it again, shooting more patiently this time allowing the thin barrel to cool properly, and everything was fine.

If you take your time, you'll end up getting sighted in properly and with less frustration. If something does not seem right, stop and check it out rather than keep shooting. Sometimes a scope mount will come loose, causing you to scatter shots around the target. Better than burning up a box of ammo.

Remember that clean guns, with a little oil in the barrel may shoot to a different place. Fire a fouling shot before you head out for the hunt. If you fly, you will want to check your zero when you get to camp. The airline baggage handlers are not known for the gentle handling of firearms.

If you sight in your rifle in the summer, or at a lower elevation than where you will be hunting, recheck your zero when you get to camp. Humidity, elevation, and temperature can all affect your zero.

Sighting in your hunting rifle is a chore but treat it as a learning experience that lets you get to know your rifle and scope better. Not only is the trigger time good practice, but it will also give you the confidence to make a good shot when that big bull is standing in front of you.

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By the close of 2024 Mark Rackay and his wife will have hunted or fished on four continents, with trips on one more continent booked for 2025. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

TAKE YOUR SPOUSE

By Mark Rackay

When my wife and I were first married, we spent every weekend together in the outdoors. Depending on the season, it was always about hunting or fishing. We even went fishing on our honeymoon. We had to, as we were married in May and the hunting season was closed, leaving only fishing.

This arrangement lasted a half-dozen years, and life got in the way. As Zorba the Greek once said, "I'm a man, so I'm married. Wife, children, house-everything. The full catastrophe."

Fishing, hunting and camping had to take a back seat. Sure, I got to go but the wife had to stay behind and keep the home fires from burning down the house.

As the kids got older, I began taking them along on as many trips as I could. My son really took a shine to fishing, so he was my constant companion on the water. Again, my wife took a back seat to the kids, except for the occasional day trips.

I am always alert for possible marital pitfalls and try to avoid them at all costs. One way to avoid said pitfalls is to include your spouse in your outdoor activities. You will never find a better hunting or fishing buddy than the person you share your life with.

Women have always fallen behind in the outdoor sports, but that seems to be changing. In a 2019 special report on fishing, it was reported that there are 17.7 million female anglers, up 6 percent from

2015. In 2020, females accounted for 36 percent of all fishing participants in the U.S.

The statistics for just about all outdoor sports show the participation of women on the rise. For example, 26 percent of all backpackers are women, compared to 19 percent just 10 years ago. And 40 percent of all hikers are women.

In America, around 12.5 million people take part in the hunting sports, and that number has fallen some in the past 15 years. Surprisingly, the number of female hunters has held steady, and more young girls than ever are hunting.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1.2 million women hunt in America, accounting for around 9 percent of the hunting population. Hunting used to be a father-son activity, but recently there are more and more dad's taking their daughters out to hunt.

In her book Why Women Hunt, author and hunter K. J. Houtman conducted interviews with 18 women who hunt, to find their motivations for taking part in the sport. She found one of the common reasons was to fill the freezer with meat for the family. Not just any meat, but healthy meat that has been feeding on natural grasses, leaves, nuts and berries, completely free of chemical additives.

There is some sense to that reasoning. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration reported that some 143 drugs, chemicals and pesticides are likely to be found in raw domestic meat and poultry. Of those, 42 are known to cause cancer, or suspected to cause cancer.

Houtman said, "It goes beyond that for many women. For some it's a sense of independence that comes from possessing the skills to hunt, the ability to provide food without relying on others."

Many women grew up in families that fish and hunt, and many are married to a spouse that takes part in the sport. For many of them, life also gets in the way, and they never really seize the opportunity to go, don't take the time, or in some cases, are never invited to take part. When it comes to learning about the outdoors, hunting or fishing, sometimes a husband is not necessarily the best person to teach the basics, but there is an alternative.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) is very proactive in getting women and youth involved in the outdoors, especially hunting. CPW sponsors a program called Hunter Outreach that seeks out people with non-hunting backgrounds. They offer clinics, seminars, advice and educational hunts for novice hunters of all ages.

For the ladies who want to learn about hunting and fishing, there is Women Afield, a Hunter Outreach program dedicated to teaching women basic hunting, shooting sport, and angling skills in a comfortable environment. Women Afield offers seminars and clinics to teach the basics in the classroom, on the range, and on mentored hunts with plenty of hands-on experience. More information is available at www.cpw.state.co.us.

When the time comes that the kids move out of the house, the husband and wife that shared the outdoors together can really enjoy the time available that was missing all those years. Finally, they can take trips together and do the things outdoors that family obligations prevented in the past.

For a couple that grew apart, the empty nest time can be a nightmare. Perhaps a common interest in outdoor activities, like a hunting trip, might help to bridge the gap. For others that maintained the outdoor activity together, even if it was less often, the time can be a golden opportunity.

That is where my wife and I are at now. This year marks 47 years we have been married. I am asked all the time by people "why she puts up with you" and I really don't have the answer, except to say we survived it all together.

If you share your passion for hunting and fishing with your spouse, you might just find the best outdoor partner there is. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

It was not always easy as she survived all the crazy things I was involved in, from racing offshore powerboats, law enforcement, tournament fishing, running charter fishing businesses and even owning a marina, she has always been supportive and by my side. Now is the time for her to enjoy the outdoors with me, and she is excited.

By the close of 2024 we will have hunted or fished on four continents, and we have trips on one more continent booked for 2025. We have saved and planned for these trips for many years but unfortunately, Covid delayed it some.

The "full catastrophe" doesn't always have to be bad. Let it be a steppingstone, and not a stumbling block for your relationship, and share the outdoors together. It worked for us.

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Randy Forsyth, a hunting partner of Kevin Lane, and a 6x6 bull elk. (Courtesy photo/Kevin Lane)

RIGHT ON TARGET

An archery champ extols the beauty of bowhunting

BY JEREMY MORRISON

Randy Forsyth, Kevin Lane and another archer at an indoor archery tournament in Gunnison. (Courtesy photo/Kevin Lane)

Kevin Lane hasn't always hunted with a bow. In his younger years he headed out with a rifle, just like everyone else he knew.

"All my buddies, we were always just riflemen," Lane recalled. "We always just grabbed our .30-30s and went out there and harvested an animal."

But that changed in 1988, when the hunter was introduced to competitive archery.

"At first, it was just like a hobby, and then obviously it progressed into more — actually going to the 3-D tournaments, learning to shoot a bow, and then the hunting aspect of it."

Decades later, it certainly has progressed into something more. Lane regularly places in state competitions hosted by the Colorado State Archery Association. He's won two state titles. He's sponsored by Bowtech. During the winter, he travels to Las Vegas to join thousands of other archers and compete in the Vegas Shoot, which is billed as "the largest and most prestigious indoor archery tournament in the world," where he places in the top 100.

Cloaking bragging rights within a modest tone, Lane describes his evolution as an archer thus: "I picked up the sport. I became very, very proficient and pretty good."

But around this time of year, as summer begins to flirt with fall, Lane isn't thinking too much about competitions. Instead he's daydreaming about the upcoming

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bowhunting season, which begins in September.

"This year it's September 2 until September 30, so almost a month, but it's a perfect time," Lane said. "The weather is awesome, versus October, November, when it's snowing and it's cold."

Lane said he mostly hunts elk. Sometimes some deer, but mostly elk. He prefers elk because he can talk to them.

"We can talk to them — cow call, bugle — and it draws the animals in, whereas the bucks, the mule deer, are a lot more skittish," the hunter said.

Lane likes to draw the elk in close. To 65 yards or closer. It's an experience. And this close-range experience is one of the reasons Lane shifted from hunting with a rifle to hunting with a bow.

"Typically, if you make a good, long shot, hard shot within a very short distance, the animal will expire. I have yet to shoot an animal twice with my bow," Lane said.

"When you start chirping and talking to the animal and drawing him in and you've got all of his cows, his little harem is around him, and you're working that bull, working him in — I've been with some friends of mine that I've called that elk within 18 yards of my buddy, and yeah, it's a totally different experience," Lane said. "That bull's screaming at you, you scream back at him. I can distinctly remember that elk. You could feel the reverberation in your chest. He was so close. It's just a totally different experience, getting that close to the animal. It's much more gratifying than taking a 300 to 500 yard shot on an elk."

The trick, Lane said, is to get close and shoot hard. In this manner, bowhunting tends to provide a cleaner and more intimate kill than taking an animal with a gun.

Kevin Lane sets his site at the state championship in Salida, Colorado. (Courtesy photo/ Kevin Lane)

"Typically, if you make a good, long shot, hard shot within a very short distance, the animal will expire. I have yet to shoot an animal twice with my bow," Lane said. "Whereas with a rifle, you have that massive shock impact, and the adrenaline is cooking, and they take off running, and you're blasting at them again, trying to knock them down, because, again, it's a far, far long distance, and you want to put the animal down as quickly as possible, right? Whereas with a bow, you're up close. It's personal. And again, you put that arrow in

the right spot, and they don't go far, because there is not the loud noise, the heavy, hard impact. Of course, it hurts — I'm sure getting struck by anything hurts — but the broadheads are so lethal, they just bleed out a lot quicker."

Since taking up bowhunting, Lane said he rarely hunts with a rifle anymore.

"I have not hunted with a rifle since — " Lane began, struggling to remember the last time he went hunting with his gun. "I did go. I hunted white tail with the rifle. I went on a couple hunts with my wife and harvested some white tail deer. But I'd love to go do that one sometime with my bow."

During the decades that Lane has been immersed in the world of archery — in both competitions and in the field on hunts — he has seen an impressive evolution in equipment. As ancient of a technology as the bow is, modern designs and materials have enabled huge leaps forward in the sport.

"They got away from wood and laminated limbs to compressed fiberglass, carbon, and they shortened up the limbs," Lane said. "You know, the limbs on a bow used to be a foot and a half long. Now they've gotten them down to 14 inches, 12 inches. And we've gone from aluminum shafts to pure carbon shafts, which are extremely light and more durable."

"You know, back in the day when you were able to shoot over 280 feet per second, we thought we were smoking hot, but now we've got bows that will shoot over 340 feet a second."

As technology has pushed archery to the cutting edge, so too has an archer's capability increased. These more advanced tools have enabled archers to up their game in kind.

"Since I started shooting in '88, the bows are a lot more technical, they're a lot faster," Lane said. "You know, back in the day when you were able to shoot over 280 feet per second, we thought we were smoking hot, but now we've got bows that will shoot over 340 feet a second."

But technological advances aside, the thrill of bowhunting is the same as it's ever been — getting up close and personal, meeting an animal in the field, taking it down with a tool man has wielded for ages. Lane casts his thoughts back to that elk he drew in within 18 yards — to how he could feel the beast's presence as his friend took the shot — and eagerly awaits the upcoming bowhunting season and the experiences it will bring.

"At 18 yards you can hear him breathing. I mean, that bull screamed at us, and again, I could feel the reverberation from that," Lane recalled. "He took five more steps and John, who was a buddy of mine, placed that shot, that arrow right behind his front shoulder and he didn't even make it 60 yards, piled up."

Randy Forsyth and a bull moose he harvested in Alberta, Canada. (Courtesy photo/ Kevin Lane)

A mature bighorn stopped long enough for a picture, near Blue Mesa. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

BIGHORN SHEEP

By Mark Rackay

As a kid in the late 60's, my Father and I would fish the Poudre River, along Highway 14 out of Fort Collins. In the early evening, we would continue down the road to Chambers Pass, to a cut-off near the summit. From this vantage point we would look for the sheep clinging to the cliff walls across the canyon.

Even with binoculars, the sheep were difficult to see. From the distance they appeared as brownish-white patches. With the poor quality of glass my father had, you were almost better off viewing them with the naked eye. Nevertheless, we would stand there watching these magnificent creatures until nightfall.

It is difficult to imagine another animal that defines Colorado better than the bighorn sheep. That is probably why the bighorn was designated the official state animal of Colorado in 1961.

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, known scientifically as Ovis Canadensis, is one of four native sheep species found in North America, but the only one who lives in Colorado.

Bighorn earned their named from the massive curling horns that can reach over 50 inches in length. Once a male, called a ram, reaches seven or eight years of age, the horns make a complete curl.

Unlike the antlers of deer and elk, their horns are not shed annually. The horns grow throughout the sheep's lifetime, growing in circumference and length. At maturity, a set of horns can weigh upwards of 30 pounds. That is a lot of headgear for an animal to carry around.

Bighorn sheep are a relatively social animal. Mature rams stay in bachelor groups for most of the year. Ewes, lambs, and young rams usually stay in another group, dubbed the nursery group. The rams leave this group around three years of age to head off with the older rams.

The rut brings the groups together, beginning in mid-November, and continuing until the end of December. This is also when the annual migration takes place. During this time of year herds of up to 100 sheep can be seen together.

The ewe's pregnancy will last 180 days, leading to the birth of one lamb. The lambs are born in May. It

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is during this time that sheep are the most vulnerable to humans and predators.

The bighorn are herbivores, gaining most of their energy from eating plants. During the summer months, sheep feed on the grasses at elevations up to 14,000 feet. During the winter months the sheep will move to mountain pastures at much lower elevations and dine on woody shrubs and forbs to survive.

Bands of rams have a set social hierarchy that is determined by body and horn size. A fully mature ram will exceed 300 pounds in body weight. Dramatic head butting occurs between mature rams to determine leadership and dominance. Rams will charge each other at speeds exceeding 20 mph, crashing their heavy horned heads into each other.

Once the hierarchy is established, rams live in the same bachelor group with very little future conflict. The normal lifespan is 10 to 12 years but some rams as old as 15 have been documented.

Sheep come in many different shades of brown, depending on their home range. All sheep have a white underbelly, rump patch, and muzzle and eye patch. This white patch is what helps us locate them at distance. Sheep have a very thick coat to keep them warm in the winter but shed the coat during the summer months.

Sheep have a remarkable climbing ability. They can scale cliffs and canyon walls that we could only scale with the assistance of ropes and climbing gear. Because of the area they live, their natural predators, which include coyotes, wolves, bobcats, mountain lions and eagles, have a difficult time reaching them.

At the beginning of the 19th century, it was estimated there were somewhere between 1.5 and 2 million bighorn sheep across western North America. By the 1920's, bighorns were eliminated from Washington, Oregon, Texas, North and South Dakota, Nebraska and Mexico.

During the 19th century, as Colorado was rapidly expanding its industrial development, our sheep populations began to suffer. Human encroachment, habitat loss and hunting all took a toll on the herd, but new diseases had the greatest effect.

The domesticated sheep herds brought on the introduction of new diseases. Since domestic and bighorn sheep are in the same genus, diseases are easily transmitted between the two species. These diseases included scabies, foot rot, blue tongue and a score of others.

By the late 1800's, scabies and pneumophillic bacteria had killed hundreds of Colorado's bighorn. In 1950, it was estimated that only 2200 bighorns still remained in Colorado, being the lowest population ever recorded.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), formerly Division of Wildlife got involved in the mid 1950's. CPW began reintroducing large herds into the mountains of central Colorado and adopted new management practices.

Because of the management efforts, the population of bighorns has rebounded and is doing well. Colorado now has 79 separate breeding herds and an estimated population of 7,040 sheep.

Colorado has the largest population of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in the United States. It was also estimated that half of the herds within the state were native, meaning that they were completely composed of sheep born in Colorado.

During the late spring and early summer, sheep can be seen near Blue Mesa Reservoir. We usually see them in the early morning hours, around sunrise, slipping to the water's edge for a drink, before heading back up to the high country.

Let's hope we don't suffer any more drought conditions and keep plenty of water for the sheep in Blue Mesa. I enjoy watching the sheep, no matter how hard they are to spot. I hope their population does well and the mountain dweller won't fall off the precipice. Besides, I have better binoculars now to watch them with, compared to the junk I had as a kid.

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Proper care of game meat begins here in the field. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

This is the last, and very important, step for taking care of game meat, the processor. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

Taking Care of Game Meat

By Mark Rackay

I hear every hunter make comments about when the game animal is down, that's when the real work begins. I learned just how accurate that phrase is the first time I had a bull moose on the ground. A guy can feel pretty helpless when he is looking at 1600 pounds of animal on the ground in front of him.

The truth is, how tasty your game animal will be on the table, is directly related to how it is cared for in the field. Complaints about gamey, wild, strong and tough can usually be eliminated with proper handling.

The most important thing in hunting is to make the shot. Ethically, you owe it to the animals to make a clean kill. I do not want my game to suffer in any way. I respect the animals I hunt too much for that.

Aside from the ethical reasons, it is much better for table fare when an animal is killed cleanly. A gut-shot animal, or one who takes off after being shot, is in for a slow and agonizing death. Its body will pump adrenaline into the meat, not to mention bacteria from nicked or torn digestive organs. All of this leads to wild, strong and gamey tasting meat on the table.

GET THE INNARDS OUT QUICKLY

Few people can argue this point. The sooner you get the entrails out of the animal, the better. Getting them out as soon as possible starts the carcass cooling down. On an animal such as elk, the heat is held in the cavity, so skinning as much as possible will hurry along the cooling down process. Even if you can't completely remove the skin, splitting the hide along the back, to allow air to reach the carcass, will help.

COOL IT DOWN

The body temperature of a live deer is 101 degrees. Bacteria grow best at 70 to 100 degrees in an animal, so cooling it quickly is key. If it is cold outside, simply hanging the animal carcass in the shade will usually work, especially when the skin is removed.

You can also quarter up the animal and place it in coolers. Don't use ice, as moisture promotes bacteria growth. Instead, use frozen water bottles or Arctic Ice, pre-frozen.

HANGING AND AGING THE MEAT

Everyone knows that aged meat is best, but few know how to do it properly. Game meat should be dry aged for at least 5 to 7 days at a constant temperature of 34 to 37 degrees. Since few of us have this ability, it is best to get it to your processor as quickly as possible.

CHOOSE YOUR MEAT PROCESSOR CAREFULLY

There are many fly-by-night processors around these days. Look for one that has been around awhile and watch for cleanliness. If the processor can't keep his shop clean, how careful will he be with your animal? A good processor will give you a cut order to fill out, whereby you select the type of cuts, portion size, and number per package. The processor can also make sausage, jerky and snack sticks from your wild game.

These tips should assure that you have many tasty dinners from your game animal. Last thing any of us want is something that tastes gamey, especially if you can avoid it. Going to a reputable processor is one way to be sure and get your animal back, and all of it.

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Currently, the hunting of mountain lions in Colorado is managed by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife. In November, voters will weigh in on a ballot initiative seeking to ban the hunting of mountain lions in the state. (Photo/USFS)

Should mountain lions be hunted in Colorado?

Ballot initiative seeks a ban on hunting mountain lions and other wild cats.

This November, Colorado voters will decide whether to ban the hunting of mountain lions in the state. Proposition 91 will ask voters to declare that "any trophy hunting of mountain lions, bobcats or lynx is inhumane, serves no socially acceptable or ecologically beneficial purpose, and fails to further public safety."

This proposition made it on the ballot due to the efforts of Cats Aren't Trophies, which submitted nearly 150,000 signatures, more than enough to put the issue before voters.

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife has managed mountain lion hunting in the state since 1965. Annual caps on how many mountain lions hunters can kill varies from year to year; in the 2022-23 season, around 500 mountain lions were killed. The CPW estimates that there are between 3,800 and 4,400 mountain lions in Colorado.

While CPW isn't taking an official position on Proposition 91, the agency has issued this statement: "For many people, hunting is a continuation of the hunter-gatherer traditions and a way to connect to nature. It also helps maintain healthy wild animal population. There is no evidence of managed hunting leading to the extinction of any species in Colorado, or of well-regulated hunting negatively affecting the population stability of the state's mountain lions."

"Allowing lions to coexist with humans without thoughtful management has not proven successful in real-world scenarios," continues the CPW statement, listing off successful wild cat management efforts in Florida, South Dakota, North Dakota and Nebraska.

The only state that currently bans the mountain lion hunting is California. Colorado could be the second such state if Proposition 91 passes in November.

This issue of hunting mountain lions and a potential ban on the activity has elicited arguments from both ends of the spectrum. Here are two such viewpoints.

HUNTING IS A VALUABLE TOOL IN MANAGING LIONS

Andrew Carpenter

Asking the public to decide if it's a good idea to ban hunting mountain lions and bobcats is no way for a state to run its wildlife agency. We all have opinions, but most of us aren't experts in managing wildlife. The state constantly monitors lion populations to keep lions out of trouble, set hunting limits and promote stable populations.

Yet an effort is underway to ban hunting and trapping lions, bobcats and even lynx, which are already protected by the state. Anti-hunting advocates are working to collect enough signatures to get a ban on the ballot this fall.

I urge Colorado residents not to sign this petition because I think voters across the West should resist voting on decisions that are better left to biologists and game managers at state wildlife agencies.

Unlike eastern states, most states in the West allow citizen-initiated ballot measures to make changes to their laws. But using this format of direct democracy, also known as ballot box biology, means citizens take it upon themselves to make policy concerning highly technical topics such as big cat hunting or wolf reintroduction.

The proposed ban is not straightforward.

Including lynx, which cannot be hunted outside of Alaska, is confusing. Another confusing goal of the ban is its goal of preventing hunters from killing cougars and bobcats as trophies, rather than for meat. In Colorado, hunters are already required to take all edible meat from their kills of lions though not for bobcats. States like Montana and Utah exempt big cats from meat-salvage regulations, but how hunters utilize their harvest is better left to experts.

But animal rights activists aren't trying to make sure hunters eat the mountain lions that they hunt. Their true goal is to prevent hunting in general, starting with a species the public knows little about. If voters think about the ethics of hunting mountain lions, they will realize it's more complicated than simply banning or allowing the practice.

Consider California, where mountain lion hunting has long been outlawed. In 2023, state wildlife agencies received 515 reports of cougars attacking livestock. In response, the state issued 204 "depredation" permits. Thirty-nine of these permits allowed the cat to be killed, while 165 allowed the non-lethal removal of the animals.

Biology requires that some predators be hunted, regardless of how voters feel about it.

Cougar population management of the state's approximately 4,000 cougars is such a complex issue that all Colorado hunters must take a course and pass a test before being issued a hunting license to pursue cougars. Last year, 2,599 of these hunters killed 502 mountain lions in the state; if they hadn't, a much larger number of deer and elk would have undoubtedly been killed by the big cats.

Managing this balance is a full-time job for hundreds of biologists who determine the number of permits to issue based on science rather than a vote.

I'm thankful for these experts, and I don't want to see them lose hunting as a tool for managing mountain lion populations.

I live in mountain lion country. Walking in the woods behind my house, I often see deer carcasses hanging in trees, evidence of lions storing their next meal. Female cougars screaming during mating season sometimes keeps my family up at night.

Andrew Carpenter

Despite these frightening sights and sounds, bees kill far more people than mountain lions. While a recent fatality in California reminds us that cougars are dangerous predators that can kill us, there have been fewer than 30 fatal attacks on humans in the past century.

I support hunting these apex predators to prevent overpopulation. If there are too many mountain lions, they can overhunt prey species and come into more frequent contact with humans. Hunting is a more intelligent, humane approach to wildlife management than allowing populations to grow out of control and die of starvation.

As much as I dislike ballot box biology, the practice is apparently here to stay across the West. But if someone asks you to sign a petition to change hunting laws or your ballot asks you to vote on how to manage specific wildlife populations, ask yourself if you're an expert on cougars and bobcats.

Let's not vote to override the sound policies of the state wildlife agency.

Andrew Carpenter is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is a hunter and writer and lives in Colorado. This opinion piece was originally published by Writers On the Range.

VOTERS ARE SMART ENOUGH TO DECIDE MOUNTAIN LION MEASURE

By Samantha Miller

Cat's Aren't Trophies (CATs)Andrew Carpenter (Writers on the Range column, "Hunting is a valuable tool in managing lions," May 15) says Coloradans aren't smart enough to have an opinion about recreational killing of mountain lions or bobcats in nature.

It's too "complicated," he says, too "highly technical" for mere citizens. Leave it to the big boys, those state government agency biologists and game wardens.

Actually, it's not at all complicated, Coloradans are smart and deserve a voice because our wildlife is not private property and deserves better, as do future generations.

It may surprise this author to hear that decades ago voters similarly banned the baiting and hunting of bears using dogs in spring when moms have dependent cubs and one of the loudest supporting voices was Tom Beck, our Colorado Division of Wildlife's bear biologist.

The agency has stated its neutrality on the Cats Aren't Trophies (CATs) measure, noting on its website that its job is to carry out the will of the citizens on these exact issues. CATs supports CPW.

Lion-hunting in Colorado is just for sport — and it's very unsporting

Carpenter admits his dislike for Coloradans exercising democratic freedoms, but that doesn't give him an excuse to confuse the voters. Or maybe that is the goal.

He does this by failing to point out that the CATs measure bans the recreational trophy hunting of lions to keep heads and hides, which has nothing to do with modern science-based wildlife management for the benefit of lions as they are key to ecosystem health for future generations.

Colorado's statute is quite clear, mountain lion hunting is a "wildlife-related recreational opportunity" and nothing else.

Carpenter tells us to respect biology yet fails to provide any biology to support his litany of excuses to sport kill lions, including: "biology requires some predators to be hunted" and lion sport hunting "prevents overpopulation of lions" plus "overhunting of prey species."

There's good reason for this key failure to cite evidence: there isn't any.

There is, however, a half-century of peer-reviewed, published science by leading biologists and population ecologists to show us that recreational killing of lions is not managing anything besides sport hunting for a minority view of fun times.

Killing for for fun is a losing argument and trophy hunters know it.

Leading lion ecologists from across the West have tested a series of hypotheses to evaluate benefits to humans from increased lion-killing. From 1971 through 2023 , scientists have killed predators to test artificially drawing down lion populations, as well as to test giving us more deer and elk for our freezers, or to test protecting our dogs and our livestock from predation (read the peer-reviewed and published studies on the Science page website with citations at www.catsarenttrophies.org).

The conclusions are consistent: Killing has never, ever worked. (In fact, studies show recreational hunting mountain lions increases risk to domestic animals.)

Colorado Parks and Wildlife reports that after killing half the

Samantha Miller

population of mountain lions in Colorado's Arkansas Valley, the slaughter had no remarkable effect on deer populations. Researchers for the Hornocker Wildlife Research Institute found that after increased killing of lions to lower their number, populations rebounded back to nature's normal without human interference and without overpopulation.

"Our research (10 years) in New Mexico indicates that mountain lion populations will stabilize at a level depending on available habitat and food resources" the experts concluded in their exhaustive study.

There is no overpopulation in California, where lions have not been sport hunted for 50 years.

"Anyone familiar with population ecology knows that killing lions for sport is a social decision, based on attitudes and what is considered acceptable as recreation," explains Rick Hopkins, a lion population ecologist of 45 years in the field.

Killing for for fun is a losing argument and trophy hunters know it.

Last year, lion hunters killed 500 lions ((296 males, 204 females) in the name of sport. These were native wildlife existing as nature prescribes, not in conflict with humans.

But you will never hear from Carpenter and trophy hunters like him about the actual details, including that outfitters charge up to $8,000 and "guarantee" a kill. Packs of dogs wearing GPS collars chase and corner sentient mountain lions up a tree. The shooter then walks up to a tree, where the lion has no escape, takes aim and shoots.

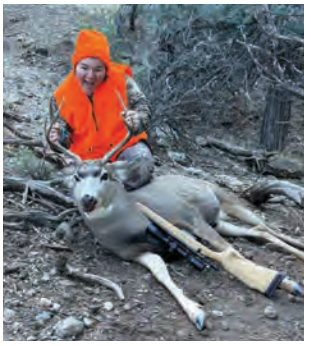
This is shooting, not hunting, and disregards ethical hunting principles of "fair chase" in the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation

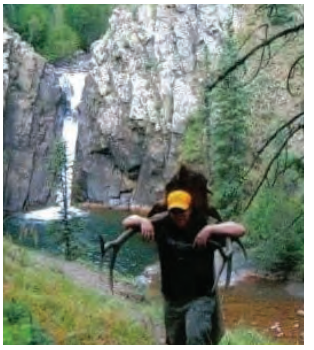
Sometimes lions are pushed out onto cliffs and fall; there is ample video online showing dogs in bloody battles with lions. It is undeniable kittens are orphaned when you have nearly half of lions killed are females and CPW says mothers will leave kittens alone up to 12 days to go find food.

Carpenter does not want you to hear these realities on the ground or in the trees, because it's all a losing argument for him. So he must rely on false statements, hoping that our journalists won't fact check or ask about ethics. It's a well-oiled misinformation campaign that could certainly benefit from a reality check by good journalists today.

Samantha Miller lives in Grand Lake and is campaign manager for Cats Aren't Trophies (CATs), which is a citizen-led effort to ban trophy hunting of mountain lions and fur-trapping of bobcats. More info: www.catsarenttrophies.org

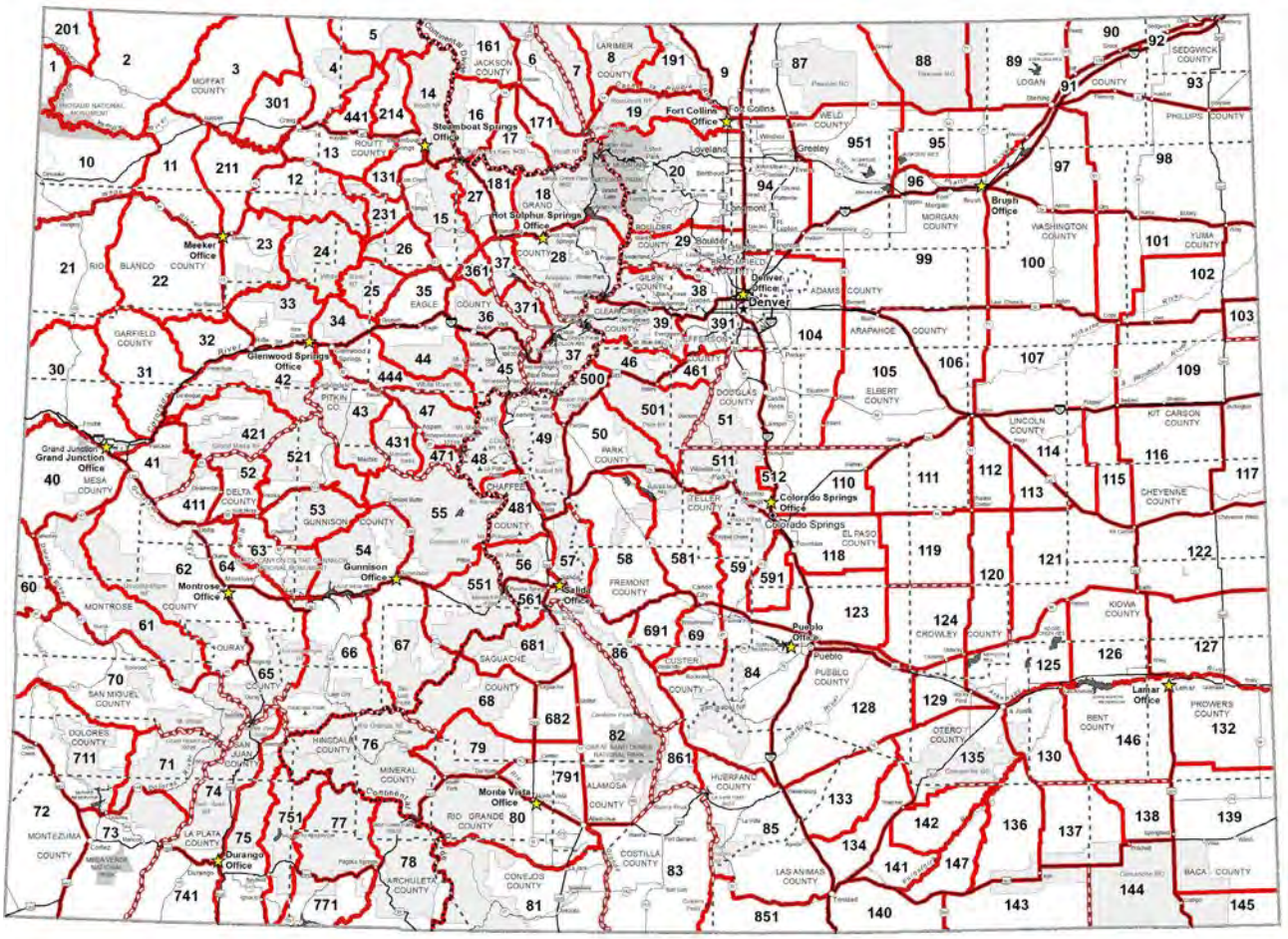
READER'S PHOTOS





2024 STATEWIDE GAME MANAGEMENT UNIT (GMU) MAP

Please check the 2024 Big Game Hunting brochure for unit-specific regulations. ▪ Colorado Parks and Wildlife ▪ **cpw.state.co.us** ▪ 303-297-1192



ARCHERY

Deer/elk (west of I-25 and Unit 140)	Sept. 2-30*
Plains deer (east of I-25, except Unit 140)	Oct. 1-25, Nov. 6-30, Dec. 15-31
Whitetail-only (limited)	Oct. 1-25, Nov. 6-30, Dec. 15-31
Moose	Sept. 7-30
Pronghorn (limited)	Aug. 15-20 or Aug. 15-20 & Sept. 1-20 (split season)
Pronghorn bucks only (over-the-counter)	Aug. 15-31
Pronghorn either sex (over-the-counter)	Sept. 1-20
Bear (over-the-counter and/or limited)	Sept. 2-30

MUZZLELOADER (BY DRAW ONLY)

Deer/elk/moose	Sept. 14-22*
Plains deer (east of I-25, except Unit 140)	Oct. 12-20
Whitetail-only (limited)	Oct. 12-20
Pronghorn	Sept. 21-29
Bear (over-the-counter and/or limited)	Sept. 14-22

*unless otherwise noted in the brochure tables

RIFLE

Moose	Oct. 1-14
Separate limited elk (1st season)	Oct. 12-16
Combined deer/elk (2nd season)	Oct. 26-Nov. 3
Combined deer/elk (3rd season)	Nov. 9-15
Combined limited deer/elk (4th season)	Nov. 20-24
Plains deer (east of I-25, except Unit 140)	Oct. 26-Nov. 5
Late plains deer (east of I-25, except Unit 140)	Dec. 1-14
Whitetail-only (limited)	Oct. 26-Nov. 5
Late Whitetail-only (limited)	Dec. 1-14
Pronghorn (limited) *Check hunt code tables in brochure for early and late rifle seasons for certain hunts.*	Oct. 5-13*
Bear Sept. (limited)	Sept. 2-30*
Bear (1st season) (over-the-counter and/or limited)	Oct. 12-16
Bear (2nd season) (over-the-counter and/or limited)	Oct. 26-Nov. 3
Bear (3rd season) (over-the-counter and/or limited)	Nov. 9-15
Bear (4th season) (over-the-counter and/or limited)	Nov. 20-24
Bear Private-Land-Only (over-the-counter)	Sept. 2-Nov. 24*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