Antlered mice and jackalope revisited

Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Some day soon, you might run into a vole, like this one, who sports a mighty rack on his head. (Photo courtesy of wikimediacommons/Soebe)

Some years back, I wrote about the elusive jackalope and his status in the Western States.

For those of you who don't remember, the jackalope is a fairly small animal, reaching only 24 inches in length, and weighing in at around 10 pounds. They live as long as 15 years in the wild.

The crowning feature of the jackalope, who is known on the streets as Parcervus antelope, would have to be the antlers. The antlers may reach as much as 12 inches in length, and a real trophy could have forked horns totaling four points. The female of the species, or does, do not have horns. In fact, they are often confused with jackrabbits as their appearance is nearly identical.

The fur on a jackalope is tawny or tan-colored, with white on the underside. The fur is thicker and softer during the winter months. They can run for short bursts of up to 30 MPH and are very sure-footed and agile. These critters are strictly nocturnal, which is why they are seldom seen.

As it turns out, the antlers on a jackalope may be caused by a virus. Rabbits with the unusual appearance on their head are often infected with Shope papilloma virus (SPV), also known as cottontail rabbit papillomavirus, a wart-like condition that affects the species. The growth will appear on the rabbit's head.

According to Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), humans and pets such as dogs and cats can't contract the virus, but the virus could spread from wild rabbits to domestic rabbits. The disease is most likely spread by contact among infected rabbits, as well as from ticks and mosquitoes. Fortunately, an outbreak of the virus is a fairly rare occurrence.

Sightings of jackalope in the wild have usually been associated with nights of debauchery, but that may soon change as science gets involved. Apparently, Chinese scientists have been able to grow mini antlers on mice, using stem cells from Sika Deer.

In the animal kingdom, antlers are one of the fastest-growing appendages there are. The antler can grow as fast as an inch per day during the peak growing cycle, usually in the spring. A full set of antlers can develop completely in just a few months.

According to a paper published February 23, 2023, by scientists from Polytechnical University in Xi'an, China, their experiments have yielded some strange-looking mini antlers on the head of rodents.

The results could possibly be used one day to heal bone injuries and regrow lost limbs. Research indicates many mammal species that have lost the ability to regenerate organs may still have traces of the regenerative genes. Scientists are trying to harness the rapid growth and regenerative strength of antlers for the long-term goal of helping human beings.

It is already known that a starfish can regrow limbs. In fact, a starfish can even regrow an entire new starfish from a severed limb. Octopuses can regenerate a lost tentacle, and lizards can quickly grow a replacement.

This may sound like something from a science fiction movie, but research points out this may be possible in the very near future. Imagine a person who has lost an arm or a leg, such as a combat veteran, having the ability to grow a replacement. The future is now.

This is not the first time that Chinese scientists have grown something like a deer antler on the head of a mouse. In a similar study published in August of 2020 in the Journal of Regenerative Biology and Medicine, researchers surgically removed antler tissue from living deer, then used a cryogenic freezer mill to process the antler material before inserting it into mice. The study produced similar results with mice sprouting visible, antler-like protrusions atop their heads.

With these newly identified stem cell types, scientists are hoping to expand the capacity of this research to clinical bone repair. It really piques the imagination of what is possible in the near future. Imagine getting something far more creative and individual than a tattoo. A person could don a fantastic set of 4x4 antlers on top of their head. An artistic person may choose to get a single horn growing from their forehead, akin to that of a unicorn.

When you are out in the great outdoors, and are as sober as a church mouse, and happen upon a mouse showing off a nice big rack, don't be alarmed. It is just science helping us out. If you happen to be in Douglas, Wyoming, home of the jackalope, you might be feeling the effects of alcohol poisoning.

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Colorado National Monument Association to launch Resiliency Ranger program at Colorado National Monument

Staff report

The Colorado National Monument Association (CNMA) proudly announces support from the Western Colorado Community Foundation and the Dave and Mary Wood Fund, providing a significant boost to the National Park Service's Resiliency Ranger program.

This support, totaling $10,000, is pivotal for launching an initiative focused on improving mental health and resilience for at-risk Veterans and youth in the Grand Valley.

With Mesa County facing suicide rates above both state and national averages, this mental health intervention is timely and crucial. The Resiliency Ranger program will deliver resilience and mindfulness-focused educational programming through partnerships with Suicide Prevention Mesa County (SPMC), the Veterans Administration (VA), the Vet Center, and Colorado Mesa University (CMU).

Launched in late April with an internship through the Mesa County Workforce Center, this program is now able to continue due to the backing from the Western Colorado Community Foundation and the Dave and Mary Wood Fund.

Amber Martin has been appointed as the first Resiliency Ranger, tasked with leading mental health programs outdoors.

Her work will focus on Veterans, Latino and LGBTQ students, and other underserved groups. Martin's responsibilities include organizing Veteran outreach events, leading resilience hikes, and collaborating with CMU and the Vet Center to offer targeted programming for at-risk Veterans and young adults.

The program plans to reach 1,000 underserved Veterans and youth through a blend of interpretive programming based on scientific research. Regular feedback will be gathered to adapt the program according to community needs.

This initiative reflects CNMA and the Colorado National Monument's commitment to fostering community well-being. While it cannot prevent every mental health crisis, the program is a proactive effort to uplift and empower the community through resilience-building activities. The long-term goal is to sustain the program through ongoing funding and support.

Amber Martin has been appointed as the first Resiliency Ranger, tasked with leading mental health programs outdoors. (Courtesy photo/Colorado National Monument Association)

For more information on upcoming programs or how to support this initiative, please contact Johanna van Waveren at johannavwaveren@coloradonma.org.