

MULE DEER OF COLORADO



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay



I think the mule deer is the most iconic big game animal in Colorado. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

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

Being raised by grandparents who were too old to hunt anymore, that was their excuse anyway, I was forced to find other means to fulfill my hunting desires. This is where Mr. Caster and his best friend, Mr. Ingman came into play.

After several years of begging, pleading, and harassing Mr. Caster, he finally agreed to let me go along with them on their annual deer hunt. I loaded my gear in the old Jeep Waggoner and in the predawn hours, we headed up into the mountains of Colorado.

The mule deer, or *Odocoileus hemionus*, just in case you were wondering, are known for their oversize ears, closely resembling the ears of a

mule. They are mostly a brown gray in color, with white/yellowish rear ends. The deer will tip the scales at 150 to 300 pounds and stand up to 3 and a half feet tall at the shoulders. Science has identified 11 subspecies of mule deer.

The breeding season, or rut, generally occurs in November and into December. The necks of the bucks will swell up and fighting for the attention of the girls becomes regular play. Once bred, the gestation period lasts 7 months, with fawns dropped late spring and early summer.

Does will have one or two fawns, with twins more common among does in prime breeding age whose nutritional needs are met. Keeping track of the fawn/doe ratios is one of the most important indicators of the health of the herd. Fawns may weigh 5 pounds at birth, but heavier birth weights during good food and water years increase the probability of survival rates among the newborns.

Mule deer are herbivores with a four chambered stomach, similar to cattle and elk. They are not always efficient at digesting fibrous material, so they feed on plants that provide concentrated and highly digestible nutrients. The diet will change seasonally depending on what is available. During winter months, mule deer may burn more calories in a day than what they can consume, meaning the loss of body weight can be substantial.

In the mid 1800's, when gold prospectors were pouring into Colorado, commercial hunters killed large numbers of big game for meat. By the beginning of the 20th century, the large herds of deer and elk were gone. The population boom of the 20th century continued to hurt the troubled population of game.

The first hunting license for deer was issued in 1903, as management of the near extinct deer herd began. Thanks to hunter's dollars, and careful

management by CPW, the population of mule deer peaked in 1989 with an estimated population of 600,000 animals. That is a far cry from the 6,000 that remained in 1900.

Development is no friend to mule deer. Thousands and thousands of acres of habitat are lost to the development of ski areas, residential developments and oil and gas operations. We see the results of the development around town as just about every subdivision has a few deer living within. You can see this first-hand when you spot a few deer feeding in a small field next to a shopping center.

Loss of habitat in the valley to the ever-increasing amount of hemp fields has had an impact on our local deer populations. Fields that were corn or alfalfa had plenty of deer visitors, but once the hemp came, the deer left.

Nature also plays havoc on the herd. Severe winters can be catastrophic on the populations. During the bad winter of

1983-84, CPW launched a 4 million dollar feeding program to help the starving deer. In spite of the noble effort, fawn mortality that winter was as much as 95 percent.

Droughts and wildfires also harm the populations of deer. The wildfires, which come more in drought years, burn off much of the woody shrubs that mule deer need to eat. This allows cheat grass and other noxious weeds to establish on rangelands and preventing the sagebrush and mountain shrubs a chance to grow.

In many areas of the state, predators are to blame for problems with the deer populations. Mountain lions, coyotes and bears can all play havoc on deer, especially young fawns. Regardless of what you may have been told, mountain lion and coyote populations are excessive in Colorado, and they put a beating on deer numbers. I won't mention the wolf, except to say, it is the last thing the mule deer needs.

If that is not enough, we now have a disease call Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). CWD is a neurological disease found in deer, elk and moose, and is always fatal. The disease is caused by prions, which are misfolded protein for you medical folks. The disease is similar to mad cow disease in cattle and scrapie in sheep.

What happens is the disease attacks the brain of the animal, causing it to display abnormal behavior. The infected animal quickly becomes uncoordinated, clumsy, emaciated, and eventually dies.

It is not known exactly

how CWD is transmitted. The disease may be passed in feces, urine and saliva. Transmission of CWD may be lateral, meaning animal to animal and may be transferred from mother to fetus.

The disease seemed to be contained in the Western United States. In the areas around Montrose and Delta, a number of deer have tested positive for the disease. I did not realize the extent or danger to the herds until recently. Colorado Parks and Wildlife reports CWD has been detected in 33 of 54 Colorado deer herds.

Our mule deer are tough. They have survived many diseases, droughts, wildfires, development, and all the bad things man has done to them. Thanks to hunters, and the hunter's dollars, the herds have a chance to get back to healthy numbers. In the meantime, I still love them as much as I did on my first trip over 50 years ago, and hopefully, for more years to come.

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

Tips for wrapping up the fall gardening season



Gardening From A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh



Ornamental grasses are stars of the fall garden yet can be left to sway in the breeze to add interest to the winter garden. (Courtesy photo)

I don't know about you but the unseasonably warm weather has made it a little bit difficult to believe that this is actually fall, not July, and winter really is on the way. It's good to know that the trees with their incredible yellow, orange and red leaves sense the

seasonal change and serve beautiful reminders that winter really is coming. I guess I'm mentally ready for it but my garden is telling me I need to get busy.

Autumn is such a pleasant time to be "working" in the garden that it really does seem like pleasure instead of another thing to check

off of a to-do list. So if you're ready to get out there for some fall gardening here are a few autumn pointers you can do while you're enjoying your landscape every chance you get.

Like it or not, those beautiful leaves are going to fall off of the trees sooner or later. So if you dread the annual

fall leaf-raking ritual, why not try mowing the leaves from the grass instead of raking them. This will give you a perfect mixture of grass clippings and leaves that can be used in compost, or as mulch in perennial beds. You can even add this mix to your vegetable garden and work it into the soil for a great

start to next season's garden. But whatever you choose to do, don't let the leaves lay thick and matted on the grass or flowerbeds during the winter. This can suffocate and kill your lawn and perennials. On the other hand, those mowed chopped leaves can be beneficial when used as mulch. There are a few

species of insects that will over winter in piles of fallen leaves so there's another good reason to rake them up. Because disease can also overwinter in fallen leaves, especially those around the base of a plant that had disease problems this summer, you'll want to rake them up and get them away from the infected shrub or plant.

I like to leave my ornamental grasses to sway in the breeze to add interest to the fall and winter garden. If you want to encourage wildlife and provide even more winter interest to your landscape, leave the seedpods, berries and rose hips on your plants.

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