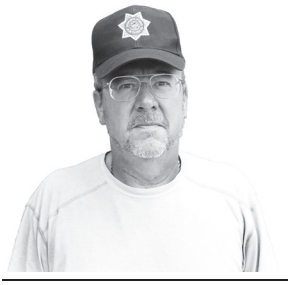


# A hunt for the Asian water buffalo



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Sunrise found us wading through muck, mud, and dirty water, rising well above my knees. My wife, who stands a foot shorter than me, was having a more difficult time as the water reached her never-mind region. She mumbled something about boy scouts and idiots.

Every step brought up a new squadron of mosquitoes, so thick they could carry you away to nourish their young. We sprayed down with insect repellent every 30 minutes, but the mosquitoes didn't seem to mind. Right after I sprayed down again, a bloated mosquito, obviously suffering from heartburn, landed on my arm for seconds.

What would bring us to a place, 6,000 miles from home, on the Argentina side of the Parana River? A hunt for the Asian water buffalo. Our guide, and longtime friend, Roberto Torres, thought it best that we stay on the edge of the swamp, where the buffalo live, so we might have a better view of any potential proceedings.

The Asian water buffalo is one of the most dangerous animals around, period. Some confusion arises because there are 2 types of water buffalo in Asia, India, and other parts of the world. Some are domesticated and used as a beast of burden. These are no more dangerous than ordinary cattle, sometime allowing people to ride on their backs.

The wild water buffalo is another story. If you wish to attempt to ride his back, you best have your affairs in order first. A large bull water buff will weigh in at near a long ton, similar to his African cousin, the Cape buffalo. He is equipped with a very capable set of horns, and hooves the size of fire hydrants, with the disposition of a constipated rattlesnake. He just plain does not like you.

The water buffalo, *Bubalus bubalis* is known in scientific circles, hails from the Indian subcontinent to Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and many countries in between. They were introduced to the Amazon River basin in 1895, and the domesticated herd is used extensively for meat and dairy production. As of 2019, Brazil boasted a population of 1.4 million head.

There are 2 subspecies of water buffalo, the river buffalo, and the swamp buffalo. River buffaloes have longer faces and bigger limbs. The swamp buffalo have bigger bodies, appear much stockier,



A water buffalo looking at us. You can already tell, she hates us, and does not like our presence in her territory. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

and have shorter bodies and limbs. They aren't called water buffalo for nothing as they are usually found in water over your never mind.

Skin color on the water buffalo varies. Most of them have black skin, but some will show a grayish, slate color. There are stories of the albino, but they are rare indeed.

The most impressive feature, and it is most apparent when he is looking at you, would be the horns. Water buffalo have the largest horns of any living animal. The average horn size for a water buffalo is 24 to 32 inches, 16 inches in circumference at the base, and can easily exceed 4 feet in distance between the outer edges of their horns.

Despite their massive size, water buffaloes are herbivores. They dine on the aquatic plants, grasses, and leaves found in the area. They can swim well, often spend time submerged, eating the water plants on the bottom of the water bodies they reside in, raising their heads occasionally to breathe and swallow the food.

The lifespan of a water buffalo that has been domesticated can exceed 25 years, but in the wild, 10 years is about the oldest they will survive. They are not overly aggressive, but when cornered or wounded, will easily turn on you. If you see one coming, best be prepared to repel borders, lest you wish you hadn't opened hostilities in the first place. And don't try to

outrun or out-manuever him because he can reach 30mph.

Many of these countries, Argentina included, have a large feral population of water buffalo. Hunters from around the world come to hunt these feral populations, which continue to grow at a steady pace. Some of these feral populations have lived in the wilds for over 150 years.

In 1974, Guam shipped 4 water buffalo to the University of Florida for study, which resulted in more coming over for commercial farming 4 years later. Several ranches raise them currently for meat production, mostly hamburger, and for making high-quality mozzarella cheese. There are currently no feral

populations in the United States.

I doubt we will see any water buffalo on ranches in Colorado, as it gets too cold for their liking. They can tolerate extreme heat and humidity, but don't like temperatures below 32 degrees, especially if it freezes their water holes. Water availability is important, especially in hot climates, since they need wallows, rivers, or splashing water to assist in thermoregulation, and Colorado just doesn't fill that bill.

As the 3 of us continued our trudge along the edge of the swamp, my wife noticed a set of black horn tips sticking out of the water and moving directly toward us. Once those horn tips reached the shallower edge, about 40 feet in front of us, a massive river water buffalo emerged, staring directly at us. The look in his eyes made it very clear I was the undisputed center of his attention. Game on.

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# Colorado saw more human-bear conflicts in 2024

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

Colorado Parks and Wildlife received 5,022 reports of sightings and conflicts with bears in 2024 which is 14.8% higher than the previous 5-years. Trash continues to be the number one source of conflicts between humans and bears.

Of the 5,022 reports CPW received in 2024, 2,225 resulted in property damage to a shed, garage, home, vehicle, fence, etc. Over 50% were linked to trash, 21% to livestock, chickens and beehives, and 18% to bird seed, pet food, barbecue grills, coolers and refrigerators.

## CPW bear reporting system

In 2019, CPW launched a bear reporting system to help wildlife managers track and quantify bear activity and conflicts across the state. The data collected is used to see overall trends and identify sources of conflict on a localized, regional and statewide level.

Since its implementation in April 2019, CPW has recorded 26,913 reports of sightings and conflicts with bears.

The data from the annual bear cycle informs CPW's wildlife managers where bears are at and what they are up to, helping CPW identify sources of conflict and make educated management decisions. If you see a bear causing trouble in an urban area, call CPW to report it.

## Recapping bear reports from 2024

There are an estimated 17,000 to 20,000 bears in Colorado and every year the majority of incident reports involve bears trying to access human food sources. 2024 was no different with trash continuing to be the number one source of conflicts. Other constant sources of conflict included birdfeeders, livestock and bears accessing open garages and other human-originated items that are left unsecured. These

conflicts could all easily be reduced if the public takes some simple steps around their homes and properties to prevent bears from accessing them.

Nature and human behavior play a role in the amount of bear activity that we see annually. Drought conditions and other factors that may influence the availability of natural food crops for bears, such as a late freeze, vary across the state, as does the behavior of people when it relates to human-bear interactions.

In 2024, Colorado experienced varying levels of human-bear conflicts, with some areas seeing increases while others saw declines. Natural food conditions were inconsistent across the state, influenced by localized droughts, late frosts, and variable precipitation. Some regions, particularly those with poor acorn and berry production, reported increased bear activity in

residential areas, leading to property damage and vehicle collisions. Trash management remains a leading factor in human-bear interactions, with unsecured garbage, bird feeders, and improperly stored food continuing to attract bears. While educational initiatives and community efforts have helped mitigate some issues, the need for improved coexistence practices, including securing attractants and reinforcing bear-proofing measures, remains critical.

## Report bear sightings and conflicts to CPW

One concern CPW is aware of from the public is a reluctance to report bear activity over a belief it will lead to the bear being put down. Data shows that of the 5,022 reports wildlife managers received on bears in 2024, only 1.95% led to euthanization. The vast majority led to wildlife officers getting involved early enough to prevent the need to euthanize a bear.



A bear pokes its head out of an unsecured dumpster in spring of 2024. Trash remains the number one source of conflicts between humans and bears. (Courtesy photo/CPW)

When CPW is made aware, especially when conflicts first begin, wildlife officers can educate the community, make site visits to homes to help them secure attractants and can haze bears in an attempt to reinforce their natural fear of humans. In some circumstances, wildlife officers can attempt to relocate bears out of conflict areas to alleviate safety concerns or before that animal's behavior escalates to a dangerous level which may require euthanization. However, wildlife

officers stress relocation is not a fix-all solution as there is no way to unteach a bear once it learns that homes, garages or vehicles might contain food.

Below is the number of reports and bears euthanized and relocated by CPW annually since 2021:

2024: 5,022 reports, 68 relocated, 98 euthanized  
 2023: 3,528 reports, 33 relocated, 63 euthanized  
 2022: 4,293 reports, 59 relocated, 94 euthanized  
 2021: 3,707 reports, 51 relocated, 66 euthanized.



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