Can I consider this lovely place truly quiet if there are few sounds coming from the world around me, but the chatter in my head will not settle down? Sometimes I head out for a hike to do some focused thinking about something. But today I came out here to do the opposite – to try and make my mind as clear as the nearly cloudless blue sky that is holding a warm, late winter sun.

I heard lots of noise from a bunch of Stellar’s jays and a few juncos when I was hiking down in the pines, but up here, on this sunny south-facing hillside where most of last night’s snow has melted, the sounds are few. Tucked between a pinyon pine to my back and a clump of gnarly oaks in front of me, with no one else here but me, I take some deep breaths and consciously decide to notice what is right here around me. I imagine I am at the very center of a circle with a three-foot radius, and I am to note everything that I am sharing the circle with.

At first, aside from a couple of yuccas, a small prickly pear cactus, and the ground covered with lots of rocks of the burnt-orange granite variety, there’s not much else to see. But I slow way down and focus on a patch of ground smaller than a square foot just to my right. I see one dried out deer scat; a crumpled brown oak leaf loaded with galls that are a rich shiny brown; several rocks of different sizes hosting at least two species of lichens; the yellow stalks of a bunch grass with many little hairs growing out of their lower sections; a small old pinyon pine cone; many pinyon needles, most in clusters of two, in varying stages of decomposition; and a tiny insect flying above all of it.

I keep looking – there’s one lonely, dark red mountain mahogany leaf; a piece of dirty white quartz a bit smaller than a ping pong ball; a tiny ant the color of dark chocolate carrying a piece of vegetation that is the same size as the ant; one sickle shaped seed head of grama grass; and another ant carrying nothing.

I broaden my scope of view and notice the new leaves of a wild onion poking though the rocks. I snip a little piece of it and put it in my mouth – yup, that’s definitely an onion. I see a small plant, about the size of my wedding ring, with light green leaves growing about an inch away from a patch of last night’s snow. I recognize it as a member of the mustard family, known locally as mountain bladderpod, that produces little yellow flowers in early spring. There’s a clump of rich green moss, and the swollen leaves of}

“THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING IS ONE THING, AND THE FIRST SPRING DAY IS ANOTHER. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM IS SOMETIMES AS GREAT AS A MONTH.”
~ HENRY VAN DYKE
stonewort (a native sedum that also produces yellow flowers, but later in the spring). There's a spider mite crawling across my pant leg, red and as small as a pinhead.

All that I am seeing reminds me of an article I read the other day about how so many of us walk around on auto-pilot, lost in our over-active minds, never really seeing what is around us. When I first sat down here, that description fit me very well. I've hiked the trail I walked today hundreds of times over several decades. It is somehow all too easy to be in this familiar landscape and forget to really look at where I am.

For me, just now, it took a deliberate and intentional effort to get past the familiar and truly look at my immediate surroundings. Sure, much of what I have noticed in this circle is still familiar to me, but I just wasn't seeing any of it until I really looked. Seeing all of these things adds several layers to the texture of being in this place, this lovely place that is still quiet on the outside, and, thankfully, is now much more quiet on the inside too.

~ Dave Van Manen
March 5, 2014

The White of Winter: Snowfall Totals So Far

This snow season started out looking like it may be a white one for the park. October’s seven inches was followed by over twenty inches of snow in November. But once the calendar of winter arrived, things slowed way down. December, January and February combined brought only 26.8” of white stuff, bringing the season total through the end of February to 54.5”. There are still several weeks of potential snow delivery to bring us closer to the annual average of around 115”. It is snowing as I write this on March’s first Sunday morning, so maybe March – statistically the area’s snowiest month – will match its reputation. April, and even early May, can bring some nice wet spring snows as well. Come on snow!!!
Hitting the Trail Once Again for Nature Education

By Dave Van Manen

Just a couple of weeks ago, I found myself in front of a small group of people from around the country who had flown in for a retreat at the Horseshoe Lodge. I was presenting on my adventures along the Colorado Trail that I did a few years ago. It was a pleasure to relive the many miles of amazing scenery, sharing stories of the trail, and connecting the adventure to the reason behind it — to raise funds for MPEC’s Nature education programs.

Last year, I got word through the Colorado Trail Foundation — the organization that stewards the trail — that the Colorado Trail was expanded to include 80 additional miles of trail through the spectacular Collegiate Peaks, home to a dozen of the state’s 14,000-foot mountains. The new “Collegiate West” forms a western complement to the classic 80-mile stretch of Colorado Trail on the eastern side of the Collegiate Peaks from Twin Lakes, southwest of Leadville, to south of Monarch Pass, southwest of Salida.

It did not take long for me to come up with the idea that I needed to hike this new 80-mile stretch. Along with learning about the new section of trail, last year presented MPEC with some budget challenges associated with some unexpected expenses while dealing with cuts from some funding sources. The fact is that many local non-profits have not felt any significant improvements since the economy took a nosedive several years ago.

Since the original Colorado Trail Fund-Raising effort was a success, it only makes sense that this new section of trail is providing another opportunity for MPEC. So, sometime this summer, I will be backpacking these new 80 miles with the intention of raising money for MPEC’s Nature education programs. We have set a goal of raising $24,000 from the hike, which translates to $300 per mile. Please consider making a pledge to what we are calling Ranger Dave’s Collegiate West Fund-Raising Backpack for Nature Education. You can use the attached coupon, or you can go to our website (www.hikeandlearn.org), click on the Help MPEC Grow icon on the lower right of the page, and then choose Ranger Dave’s Backpack as the donation category. Every penny that is raised will directly support MPEC’s programs that help children experience the wonders of Nature. Thanks so much!

Ranger Dave’s Collegiate West Fund-Raising Backpack for Nature Education

Yes, I want to support Ranger Dave as he hikes so kids can experience the wonders of Nature!

Name __________________________________________
Street Address ___________________________________
City, State, Zip ___________________________________
Phone # _________________________ E-mail address ___________________________

I pledge _________ per mile, for a total of _________.

_____ Let me know when the hike is complete and I will send in my donation.

_____ My donation is enclosed.

Return the coupon to: MPEC PO Box 99 Beulah, CO 81023
Let’s Go Build a Fort

By Dave Van Manen

Now in our 15th year of operations, the Mountain Park Environmental Center has grown in ways that I never imagined in those early days when I was developing those first school programs and creating our first schedule of summer camps. Renovating the Horseshoe Lodge, running a Retreat Center, installing and operating a woody biomass heating system, dealing with the numerous issues of managing a 611-acre mountain park…. The list goes on, but I am proud to say (and not for the first time) that, in spite of all the ways that MPEC has evolved, connecting people, and especially children, to Nature remains the foundation of why MPEC exists. Kids need Nature, they are much less in tune with it than previous generations, and MPEC has always been all about bringing children to Nature.

Some of the activities that we utilize in fostering that connection have evolved as well. A realization that is working its way into the psyche of many environmental educators is that one of the most effective ways of encouraging a deep and lasting relationship with Nature is through less structured experiences with more of a “free-play” spirit. David Sobel of Antioch New England in southern New Hampshire, a leading thinker in the field of environmental education, makes the provocative statement, “…perhaps even environmental education is one of the causes of children’s alienation from nature.”

What he means is that the ethic of preserving and protecting the natural world, which grew in response to so much destruction of Nature by the planet’s growing human civilization, has worked its way into much of today’s environmental education practice. The “take only photographs, leave only footprints” philosophy, certainly a good one in so many situations and places, may actually be a hindrance when over-applied to the on-the-ground reality of what it actually takes for children to learn to love Nature.

This is an important conversation, and indeed a challenge for those who manage places that are needed and used as places to learn about and connect with Nature. How can we protect delicate plant species from being trampled to death while simultaneously giving kids the hands-on, get down and dirty experiences that research indicates is the best way for children to develop a lasting love of the outdoors?

We have been having this conversation at MPEC for some time. In general, we feel that the park that we manage is a place where wild Nature and the human footprint meet. There will be impacts, but we also need to preserve the ecological integrity and health of the park to the degree that we can (e.g. we have no control over impacts like climate change, but we can encourage folks to stay on trails to prevent soil erosion).

Relative to the focus of this article, we use certain areas of the park over and over again, limiting the heavy impact of thousands of children’s feet to certain areas which could be referred to as “sacrifice areas.” One such area has come to be known as “Hobbitville.” There is an area of the park, just a short walk from the Horseshoe Lodge but still rather tucked away, that for various reasons has collected a large amount of downed trees, branches, and various woody debris. One summer day, one of our summer camp groups wound up in this area. One thing led to another, and before long, forts were
Yes!!!

I want to join the Mountain Park Environmental Center and be a part of an organization that helps folks of all ages connect with Nature!

Members receive the Mountain Park News, a discount on bookshop items and program fees, and the satisfaction of supporting an organization dedicated to the promotion of ecological literacy. Your Support is tax-deductible!

Make secure online donations using your credit card at our website: www.hikeandlearn.org

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Total enclosed: $________

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Call 719-485-4444

Mail to: MPEC PO Box 99, Beulah, CO 81023

Can we tell a friend about the MPEC?

Name___________________________ e-mail___________________________

Address________________________ City, State, Zip______________________

Yes, MPEC may be busy with lots of things, but our Nature education programs are what we are all about, and they are getting better all the time. If you want to pay a visit to Hobbitville, stop by the office and we’ll let you know where it is. And if you go there, and you feel so inspired, feel free to climb into one of those forts and maybe feel something – something that is quite magical - that you haven’t felt since you were ten years old, sitting in a fort that you built.
MPEC’s Fabulous 2014 Summer Camps

Please visit www.hikeandlearn.org for more details and to register. Includes round-trip transportation from Pueblo, scholarships are available. Don’t wait – spots are limited! Non-member price in parentheses.

Mountain Adventure Camp (4th-6th graders): During this five-day residential camp, campers will enjoy hiking, playing Nature games, team building on our challenge course, arts and crafts, and lots more exciting activities. All meals included. Dates: July 21st – July 25th. Cost: $370 ($395)

Little Kids Camp (Children entering K through 1st Grade): During this day camp, kids will participate in gentle hikes, Nature games, nature music and stories. Parents Welcome! Dates: June 16th-20th or July 7th – 11th or August 4th – 8th. Cost: $85 ($95)

Wonders of Nature Day Camps (2nd – 4th graders): Hike, explore, and play Nature games in the mountain park with MPEC naturalists. 8:00 am - 3:00 pm daily. Dates: June 23rd – 27th, or July 14th-18th. Cost: $135 ($145)

Survival Camp (5th-6th graders) During this 3-day / 2-night camp, gain knowledge of the basics of surviving in the woods with minimal tools and technology. Dates: June 30th– July 2nd or July 15th- 17th. Cost: $250 ($270)

Camp Mission: Wolf (6th-9th graders): This 3-day / 2-night program is a service learning camp where participants spend time with the resident wolves of the Mission: Wolf Sanctuary. Hear the wolves howl!!! Dates: June 24th-26th or July 8th-11th. Cost: $260 ($280)

Greenhorn Wilderness Camp (6th-9th graders): This 3-day / 2-night camp is designed for young people with a love for Nature and physical activity. Participants will carry the food and gear they need through some of the wildest country in the area. Dates: July 29th-31st. Cost: $275 ($295)

Boys Only: Mountain Man Discovery Camp (6th-9th graders): Led by an all-male team, boys participate in several outdoor activities like challenge course, hiking, rock climbing and rafting to open discussions on what it means to be a responsible man in the 21st Century, particularly as it relates to teen pregnancy issues. Dates: June 17th-19th. Cost: $190 ($210)

Girls Only: The Birds and the Bees and the Flowers and the Trees (6th-9th graders): This fun and empowering 3-day/2-night residential camp, led by an all-female team, combines Nature activities with lessons designed to give young women the information they need to make informed and healthy decisions about their bodies, relationships, and future. Dates: July 29th – 31st. Cost: $90 ($100) (balance of this $400+ program funded by the Health Department, MPEC members, & the Nurturing Life Foundation)

Mountain Pathways for Young Women (6th – 9th graders): In this popular award winning “girls only” camp led by an all-female team, girls will participate in outdoor activities like ropes course, hiking, rock climbing and rafting and have open discussions on many topics, including body image and choice-making. Dates: August 6th - 8th. Costs: $250 ($270)
SPRING CLASSES, PROGRAMS, WORKSHOPS & RETREATS AT MPEC

For all the details, pricing, and to register for these programs, go to MPEC’s website at www.hikeandlearn.org and click on PROGRAMS.

If you need assistance with registering on-line, or if you do not have access to a computer, please call 719-485-4444.

Spring Equinox Drum Circle Friday, March 21, 6:30 – 8pm
Spring Break Day Camp Monday – Friday, March 24 – 28
Nature Toddlers (Note different days and times) Friday, April 11, 10am; Saturday, April 26, 2pm; Saturday, May 10, 2pm; Friday, May 16, 10am; Saturday, June 14, 2pm; Friday, June 20, 10am.
Homeschool in the Park Wolves in Colorado and Low Challenge Course, Apr 25; Rock Climbing and Creative Nature Writing, May 30.
Homemade Suet Cakes Class Saturday, April 12th, 9 - 11:30am
Gluten-Free Cooking without the Box: An Introduction Saturday, Apr 26, 10am-1pm
Yoga at MPEC Tuesdays, April 29 – June 17, 6-7:30pm
“Plein Air” Art in Nature Workshop Saturday, May 10, 9am – 3pm
Felting Class: Making Brooches with Ina Bernard: Saturday, May 17.
Family Day at the Challenge Course Saturday, June 7, 10am-2pm
Hearty Eating on the Trail (make your own from scratch for day or overnight adventures) Saturday, June 14, 1-4pm
Summer Solstice Drum Circle Friday, June 20, 6:30-8pm

“IT IS SPRING AGAIN. THE EARTH IS LIKE A CHILD THAT KNOWS POEMS BY HEART.”
~ RAINER MARIA RILKE

MPEC wishes huge thank you’s to Carol Kyte, Joni Smith, Jan Myers, Anne Whitfield, Pam Kubly, and Elaine Sartoris for putting the winter newsletter mailing together; a donation was made in honor of Rex & Leslie Jakeman by John, Michelle and Cathrina Jakeman. MPEC sends a big thank you to all of you.

A memorial donation was made in loving memory of Luke Van Pelt, son of Jean & Kenneth Van Pelt of Pueblo, by Pat Myers. Many thanks to all. Honorary donations were made by John and Elaine Sartoris to: Neill McGrath, Colin McGrath, Chris & Meo McGrath, Tristan McGrath, and Peter Sarotirs & Jessy Amick. MPEC sends a heartfelt thanks to all of you. The following honorary donations were made on Colorado Gives Day, December 10, 2013: In memory of Josephine, by Laurie Sankey; in honor of Attie (the Mountain Park craft lady), by Carol Fortino; in memory of Alton Zanders by Mary Twinem; in honor of Dave Van Manen by Maria Tucker; in memory of Fern & Robert Coleman by Thomas Coleman; in honor of Alina Bartosz by Susan Finzel. A memorial donation was made in loving memory of Wilbur Garfield, the father of Linda Overlin, by John & Elaine Sartoris. A memorial donation was made in loving memory of Marion E. Cardoza, the mother of Steve Douglas, by John & Elaine Sartoris. An honorary donation was made in honor of Joe Arrigo by John & Elaine Sartoris. Many many thanks to all of you for your generosity.
Life Lessons
by Audra Goodsell

The mid-winter session of the Earth Studies program for fifth graders, session number three, focuses on Mammals and Tracking. This is one of the most popular sessions among the fifth graders, and the teaching staff, as we learn about some of the amazing mammals that live in Pueblo Mountain Park.

A couple of the most exciting parts for the students is, one, the hands-on time they receive as they observe and handle different skins and skulls and, two, the time spent tracking animals in the outdoors. The truly wonderful part about this session though, and Earth Studies in general, is that as the school year gets farther along, we start to notice how many of the students are beginning to exhibit a deep caring for the world in which they live, including the animals that they share it with. In this session in particular, it becomes more apparent that the students are interested and concerned about the welfare of our planet and other species. You can see their worlds opening up as they consider what extinct and extirpated mean, and as we discuss endangered species and how humans have played a part in their endangerment.

We also discuss what it means to reintroduce a species, and how different groups feel about such reintroductions. For example, through the lesson about reintroducing wolves to Colorado, we encourage debates about whether or not wolves should be reintroduced. Topics such as these encourage these students to be involved in their community and world, and to be a voice for those who have none.

The other day, after teaching my students about tracks and gaits, I took them out in the woods so that we could look for animal signs for ourselves. As soon as the hike began, all the children were looking at the ground and making all sorts of discoveries about the animals that walk and live in the park. They observed squirrel tracks disappearing as they came to a tree and eagerly discussed where it had gone from there.

They followed deer tracks that led them down to a small frozen creek.

Farther down the trail we came across a dead bird that was in a bush. The cause of death was not evident and the kids were very concerned and saddened by the little creature. They talked about what we should do with the bird’s body. Should it be buried? Should we take it out of the bush and put it on the ground? Their distress over the little bird was encouraging, as they would not like to see any creature injured. As they talked about what to do with the bird, one boy pointed out that we should leave it where it was because it could feed another animal, like a fox or a bobcat. The consensus showed that the rest of the students agreed and they decided to leave it where we found it.

As we continued throughout our afternoon, the students’ conversations occasionally drifted back to the dead bird. All were glad that they had come across the creature, and that they had decided to leave it alone. The fifth graders in Pueblo are learning invaluable life lessons about our natural world as they participate in Earth Studies. I hope that these students will continue to learn about and care for all creatures as they get older and move on in life.
Spring Guided Hikes

A guided hike in Pueblo Mountain Park is a perfect way to witness the “green thoughts” of the land becoming reality. Some folks think these spring months are the best months to hike in the park – birds are melodically carrying out their breeding activities, wildflowers are at their peak, and the winter skies are behind us. MPEC has another great line-up of hikes during these lovely months. It is best to dress in layers and wear good hiking shoes. Also bring along a water bottle and snacks on these moderately strenuous hikes that are educational and fun. Unless otherwise stated, most hikes last from two to three hours and are appropriate for adults and children over 12. MPEC members free, non-members $5.

Registration required: www.hikeandlearn.org

❖ Fri, Mar 21, 2pm, Spring Equinox Saunter The sun is halfway on its sky-climbing journey between its December low point on the winter solstice and its June high point on the summer solstice. We’ll be searching for signs of spring as we acknowledge the equinox on this hike along the trails of the park. Ideal for retired folks, and those who have some flexibility in their schedules to enjoy a Friday afternoon saunter.

❖ Sat, Mar 22, 10am, A Saturday Spring Equinox Saunter For those who do not have the flexibility in their schedules to come up to the park for a Friday hike, we’ll be out along the trails for a Saturday morning hike to acknowledge the beginning of spring.

❖ Sun, Apr 6, 1pm, “Zuke’s” April Walk Your Dog Hike Enjoy a guided hike with your pooch, with the added bonus of healthy treats for your dog provided by Zuke’s Dog Treats! This hike is for all you dog lovers out there. Dogs must be leashed.

❖ Sat, Apr 26, 10am, Mid-Spring Earth Day Hike Join us as we saunter along the trails of the park, enjoy the emerging spring, and celebrate the earth on this Earth Day hike (the official Earth Day is April 22, but every day is really Earth Day, isn’t it?).

❖ Sat, May 10, 10am, Spring Wildflower Hike There should be plenty of wildflowers in bloom along the trails of the park, and we’ll be looking for them on this spring morning hike.

❖ Tues, May 13, 7pm, Full Moon Hike Enjoy a magical evening excursion as day becomes night underneath May’s “Flower Moon” on MPEC’s first full moon hike of 2014.

❖ Sat, May 17, 10am, “Zuke’s” May Walk Your Dog Hike MPEC’s guided hikes for folks and their dogs have been very popular, so we’re doing one each month this spring. Your dog friends will also be treated with healthy snacks provided by Zuke’s Dog Treats! Dogs must be leashed.

❖ Sun, Jun 1, 10am, “Zuke’s” June Walk Your Dog Hike One more time this spring, we offer our Walk Your Dog Hike for all you hikers who want to bring your dog along, with the added bonus of healthy treats for your pooch. Dogs must be leashed.

❖ Fri, June 13, 7pm, Full Moon Music Hike Enjoy a magical evening excursion as day becomes night hiking under the “Strawberry Moon” with a mini folk concert along the trail…truly a delightful experience.

❖ Sat, Jun 14, 8:00am, Birding Hike Pueblo Mountain Park is breeding habitat for many birds, and we will be up early with the birds, looking – and listening – for them. Bring along your field guides and your binoculars if you have them – if not, you can use ours. A perfect way to welcome the impending summer season!

❖ Sat, Jun 21, 9am, Summer Solstice Hike Celebrate the arrival of summer hiking along the trails of Pueblo Mountain Park.
Looking for Grace
by “Ranger” Tania Garcia

In my life I have always been waiting for that spectacular and revealing moment of spiritual revelation. I searched for it like a starving beggar.
I worked twenty years in the correctional system as a substance abuse counselor, thinking, “I am among thieves and criminals and I am reaching out to them. I am exercising an incredible amount of compassion for these lost souls.” I thought I was looking good. I thought that soon I would have this incredible moment of revelation that I was working so hard on finding.
Meanwhile, as I looked up in the sky in the middle of the night gazing into the stars, I experienced nothing.
I sat in meditative back raging pain and... nothing. I study compulsively Zen, Tao, and Buddhism... nothing. Then I retired and... nothing. I study the Bible and pray.
I attempted to empty my boat; to get rid of all that I was, all that I am and all that I wanted to be. I attempted to get rid of me and my ego, just for that one single moment of grace. I cried and I pleaded, I supplicated to the universe and... nothing.

I got tired, not defeated but tired, very tired as I had been beaten, laughed at and humiliated by everything and everyone that I know. Shame overcame me as I hid on my couch and fed my face with potato chips.
Then I applied for a job as an Environmental Educator at Mountain Park Environmental Center because I needed to get off of the couch and out of the house, and I got the job! One day teaching a session on wildflowers and birds to 5th graders, a child hugged me for no apparent reason. One day while sitting on the ground under the ponderosa pine ecosystem, reading to the students about wild land fires, a child put his head on my shoulder while reading. One day after rolling down on a snowy hill with my students, a child said to me, “You are awesome, Ranger Tania, you are awesome.”
What can I say now? I have not only had that one moment of Grace, I have been blessed by many moments. Every child is a gift full of Grace.

It's spring fever. That is what the name of it is. And when you've got it, you want - oh, you don't quite know what it is you do want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so!"
~Mark Twain