

BOOK REVIEW 2012 – #1

Colorado's Spanish Peaks Region: An Exploration Guide to History, Natural History, Trails and Drives by Dr. Richard Keating. 350 pp. The Missouri Botanical Garden Press, St. Louis, MO. USD \$24.99 ISBN 9781930723856.

If a person were to require one book about this area of southeastern Colorado as an introduction to its physical and historic marvels, that book should be the newly-released *Colorado's Spanish Peaks Region: An Exploration Guide to History, Natural History, Trails, and Drives* by Richard Keating.

Perhaps it is our "orphan" status that keeps this area from so-called complete guides to geology, trails, history, etc., of Colorado, even those claiming to cover the Front Range or the Sangre de Cristos. If covered at all, Huerfano County usually merits a paragraph or two, possibly a page at most, and it is not always accurate information. In one fairly recent publication, for instance, the author could not tell the Devil's Stairsteps from Profile Rock, with a picture of one and the name of the other beneath it.

Keating's book, all 350 pages of it, is nearly all about Huerfano County, though it includes a bit of information about the region from the Great Sand Dunes National Park clear east to the dinosaur tracks of the Purgatoire Valley. Perhaps five percent of the text covers Las Animas County, which is just the way Huerfanos like it!

The author explains that his purpose for writing the book was the paucity of information about the Spanish Peaks area and his goal to fill that vacuum. He and his late wife have been regular visitors for some years, and so he has, alas, fallen in with the local disregard for correct names. Thus, the Cucharas river, pass and valley have become the Cuchara, and Mt. Mestas evolves into Mt. Maestas. These localisms in no way detract from the text.

Colorado's Spanish Peaks Region covers historic, geologic, and ecologic topics, giving a synopsis of inhabitants and travelers from prehistoric to frontier times, answering the common question of how the stone dykes were formed and other geologic mysteries (complete with a glossary of terms), offering guidelines on how to avoid predators, "real and rumored." (No, he says, there are no wolves or grizzlies.) A very simple and straightforward explanation of why higher altitudes have higher radiation levels and thus different vegetation is offered. An understatement, at least this week, tells us "wind...is rather constant in this region," giving fair warning to lady tourists worried about their coiffures and "local small pet advisories."

Keating describes 12 scenic drives, from the all-paved Highway of Legends to the four-wheel-drive Medano Pass. Again, warnings are included to the uninitiated to the weather and its effect on dirt roads, noting road "conditions vary year by year" (a nice thing to say when often, they vary hour by hour). He further explains that much of the territory these roads cross is private property and goes so far as to include the state regulations on trespassing.

His thoughtful coverage of these tours includes a mile by mile itinerary of scenic, geologic, recreation, historic and biologic highlights, explaining how the monumentless Monument Lake got its name and even why not to go on a side road from Mosca Pass (because it only leads to a microwave radio tower).

A respectful explanation for our roadside memorials, called *descansos* in Spanish, is given and is an education in itself.

There are 20 hiking trails described here with their conditions and more warnings about weather – which cannot be overstressed in the mountains – trespassing, and rules of etiquette such as keeping pets on leashes and packing out trash. He cautions readers about the occasionally difficult task of locating trailheads, and sometimes, even trails. His list of 10 basic necessities to take on a hike include a map and or compass to tackle some of these more elusive paths. One of these trails is the Baker Creek, which he says, “gives a close-up view of nature. Few area residents know it exists.” He also tells us there is construction trash dumped there. Keating includes the North Fork trail as a leisurely three-and-half hour walk with spectacular views and a less rigorous grade than some of the others, like the old road to the Bullseye mine on the West Spanish Peak.

He thoughtfully adds a section of topographic maps to show the roads and trails covered in the text.

Keating dedicates more than 100 pages to the descriptions and locations of flora and fauna, from prairie to peaks. Interesting trivia is included, such as the use by native tribes of a certain type of pine for lodgepoles, and thus the meaning of the tree’s name. At the end of the book, a separate index is provided for plant and animal names.

The author provides an extensive list of books, maps, pamphlets and other resources where more information about the Spanish Peaks area may be found. This is subtitled “The wood pulp section. Read so that trees won’t have died in vain.” This might give the impression that the section is extraneous, but it isn’t. Current web site addresses are included.

Keating’s text is accompanied by sharp photos, recent photos [!], of scenes and living things, to illustrate his points of why so-and-so is scenic, or a hard climb, or a unique plant. He shares his knowledge of photography so the reader can take equally clear pictures.

All in all, this is a fine book. The author deserves all congratulations for fulfilling his self-avowed aim of writing a comprehensive guide book to the seldom mentioned Spanish Peaks area. Bravo!

Review by Nancy Christofferson. Reprinted with permission from *Huerfano World Journal* 127(15): 7. Editor: Gretchen Lorr.