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Number, please: Taking your phone for a hike

Cellphone apps make it easy to ID birds, flowers, not get lost

By Dave Buchanan

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The world is getting smaller, thanks in great part to the way we see the world.

Emerging with the growth of cellphones and other electronic devices is software adapting high-tech to traditional outdoor activities.

Whether you Google a route prior to leaving home, leave “digital bread crumbs” marking the way in and out, or use a special app to identify trees, birds and wildflowers, it's all about being mobile while going mobile.

Hunters for several years have depended on their phones as compasses, topo maps and GPS devices, reducing the expectation they know how to use map and compass or can figure out which way is north.

Thanks to Google Earth and the new Colorado Fishing Atlas (see accompanying story), that secret fishing hole isn't a secret since anyone with a cellphone, tablet or laptop can get an osprey's-eye view of your once-special spot.

“In general, mobile applications have made it easier to communicate more effectively in a non-urban environment,” said Ted Florence, creator of Avenza's PDF Maps app (<http://www.pdf-maps.com>).

He said apps such as Avenza's “provide constant access to geographic information and points of interest with additional interactive tools such as measuring, place-marking and location-tagging, features that are essential in the outdoors when you're a casual explorer or a more experienced outdoorsman.”

The key attraction for some of the newer apps is that once the maps or field guides are downloaded, they operate without cell service.

While there are benefits to knowing which end of the map is up, the ease afforded by modern devices in getting there and back makes it all the more difficult to explain how that short hike “over the hill” turned into an unexpected all-nighter.

Avenza's PDF Map app, such as the one for Colorado National Monument, and similar GPS-style apps will track how far you have to walk, how long it will take you and how you get home.

They also allow you to mark your digital trail as you go and afford reminders of places to check the second time around.

The new “Colorado Rocky Mountain Wildflowers (\$9.99, High Country Apps, <http://www.highcountryapps.com>) works without cell service and offers full-color photos and descriptions of more than 500 wildflowers, trees, shrubs, and ferns common to the Colorado Rockies and the greater Rocky Mountain

region.

The clear photos, illustrations, field descriptions, habitat and information on the plant's ecology and cultural uses make this app one more reason to leave the guide book at home.

The app also offers a search function: Enter a few key descriptors and the app identifies the plant for you.

Other High Country apps include guides to Yellowstone National Park, glacier wildflowers and the flowers of Washington state.

Apps for the beginner and advanced birder include iBird and iBird Pro (\$5 on sale), iBird Yard Plus (\$10) and Audubon Birds (\$20).

You can even learn bird songs using Chirp! Bird Songs USA Plus (\$3).

Florence has a few tips for those he calls the digitally addicted, aka the city-slicker heading out into unfamiliar territory.

1. Along with the essentials — water, snacks, sunscreen, first aid kit and a jacket — pack a well-charged phone and maybe an extra battery.
2. Take advantage of the many national forests and national parks offering digital recreational and trail maps that use your mobile phone's GPS system and don't require cell service.
3. Get home with digital bread crumbs: A miss can be good as a mile, or a long night out. Know where you are and where you have to go by laying a digital trail marking spots along the trail.
4. Love it or hate it, taking notes will keep that hike fresh in mind. Avenza's PDF Maps app allows hikers to write descriptions and take pictures alongside previously noted spots, so you know what to watch for the second time around.