

## AN ECHO PRESS EDITORIAL

# Don't let distractions take the wheel

Pay attention to this. Don't brush this advice off. It could save you a lot of headaches or heartaches down the road.

Don't be a distracted driver. With decreased pandemic restrictions and increased vaccinations, more people are hitting the road and traveling to see friends and relatives that they haven't connected with in a while.

Remember to keep your eyes on the road and not on a cellphone, the radio, food, your passengers or the many other distractions that can, in an instant, lead to a crash.

This month is Distracted Driving Awareness Month – a good time to brush up on your safe driving skills.

This isn't a topic to take lightly. Lives are on the line. According to 2019 data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, distracted driving crashes killed 3,142 people in the U.S. – an average of nine deaths per day. That number was up 10% from the year before (2,839 deaths in 2018).

In Minnesota alone, there were 29 fatal crashes involving a distracted driver, resulting in 29 fatalities in 2019.

"Distracted driving remains a growing traffic safety problem nationwide," said Meredith Mitts, spokeswoman for AAA – The Auto Club Group. "Any distraction, whether it is texting or talking to a passenger, could be enough to cause a crash. AAA strongly urges drivers to focus on what's most important, that's the road in front of them."

The AAA identifies these top three risky driver distractions:

- ▶ Mobile phone use.
- ▶ In-vehicle technology.
- ▶ Passengers in the vehicle.

Unfortunately, drivers who use their cellphones behind the wheel have chosen to ignore the message that it's extremely dangerous. In 2019, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety conducted a nationwide survey which found:

Most drivers (96 percent) believe typing or reading on a hand-held cellphone while driving to be very or extremely dangerous.

Unfortunately, some of them do it anyway. A total of 39% admitted to reading and 29% admit to typing on a smartphone at least once while behind the wheel within the past month.

The AAA points out that checking your phone at the stoplight can be risky too. AAA research found that drivers can experience a "hangover effect" where the mind stays distracted for up to 27 seconds after using smartphones or voice-to-text vehicle infotainment systems to send text messages, make phone calls or update social media.

In other words, once that light turns green, your mind may still be focused on your phone and not on the road, according to the AAA.

"The bottom line is, if your mind is not focused on driving, you're unable to properly react to what's happening on the road in front of you. That puts other drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians at risk," Mitts said.

AAA offers these tips to avoid distracted driving:

▶ Put it away. Place your mobile device out of sight to prevent temptation.

▶ Know where you're going. If using a navigation system, program the destination before driving.

▶ Pull over. If you must call or text while on the road, pull off the road safely and stop first.

▶ Ask passengers for help. If riding with someone, seek their help to navigate, make a call or send a message.

▶ Be a good passenger. Speak out if the driver of your vehicle is distracted.

▶ Don't be a distraction. Avoid calling or texting others when you know they are driving.

▶ Activate Do Not Disturb. Setting up this feature on an iPhone or Android device will prevent calls from coming in while you're driving.

So the next time you're out and about, whether it's just a quick trip to the grocery store or a two-hour trip to the Cities, stay focused, keep your eyes on the road and expect the unexpected.

Sylvia Luetmer  
Alexandria, MN

## The thrill of spotting an eagle

Most of us don't remember a lot about 1782 but that was the year that the Bald Eagle was designated the national symbol.



JOHN STONE  
In the Know

Ben Franklin didn't like that idea and two years later he proposed that the wild turkey become the national symbol. That didn't fly. When many of us



Echo Press file photo

Two bald eagles look down at the road near their nest site at Arrowwood Resort near Alexandria in the fall of 2018. Eagle sightings have become common in Minnesota in the past decade.

grew up in the 50s and 60s, the only eagles we would likely see were in pictures. They were in a population decline caused by hunting, urbanization and chemicals that killed the birds outright or reduced their ability to reproduce. In 1963, eagle counts hit an all-time low with just 417 nesting pairs in the entire lower 48 states.

In 1978, the Bald Eagle was included in the protections provided by the Endangered Species Act. In probably one of the greatest reversals of a species' decline, Bald Eagle populations increased to such levels the species was removed from the endangered species list in 2007.

An article in the Star Tribune last week gave updates on Bald Eagle numbers. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates there are 316,000 Bald Eagles in the lower 48 states, nearly four times as many birds as it estimated were here in 2009.

The estimates are based on nest counts of some

71,000 nests. That nest count represents a 131% increase in nests from 2009.

Minnesota and Wisconsin are at the heart of eagle numbers' growth. The FWS figures there are 13,233 nests in the two neighboring states. Lori Naumann, who runs the Eaglecam program for the Minnesota DNR, said that Minnesota knew of only 181 nesting pairs in the state in 1980. Now Minnesota has 9,800 nesting pairs and is on par with Florida, the other large eagle count state in the lower 48. Alaska has the most eagles, estimated at 30,000.

It was in the late 1990s or early 2000s that eagles really seemed to move back into this area. What magnificent birds!

Eagles like fish and in the spring they will sit on the edge of ice by open water waiting for some innocent fish to come near the surface and serve as lunch or dinner.

The Mississippi River is a popular place for the birds. The National Eagle

Center is in Wabasha and is worth a stop if you are in the area, it usually has several eagles that have been injured and cannot survive in the wild for people to see. To see one up close reveals how big they actually are.

Whether it is gliding through the air, sitting in a tree looking for prey, eating some roadkill on a highway or ditch or sitting in a nest, seeing an eagle is a thrill. It is also a grand symbol of something we have done right in protecting wildlife.

For me, every eagle sighting is a day brightener. Even though they have become more plentiful, a good eagle viewing is still a memorable event. To be able to see such a magnificent bird come back from near extinction is a joy to behold, national symbol or not.

John Stone is the former mayor of Glenwood and former publisher of the Pope County Tribune and Starbuck Times. In the Know is a rotating column written by community leaders from the Douglas County area.

## 1971: Non-stop bus replaces Alex-Minneapolis train

This week in 1971, 50 years ago: In the wake of Burlington Northern's decision to drop rail passenger service through Alexandria, Greyhound Lines West has announced a special nonstop run from Alexandria to Minneapolis.

1971, 50 years ago: Construction has started on a 50-room addition to the Alexandria Holiday Inn, according to innkeeper John Grussing Jr. The addition will bring the total number of rooms available to 150 and expected to open in June of this year.

Bellanca Aircraft Corporation has canceled plans to move its Osceola, Wisconsin plant to Alexandria. The decision was announced by Bellanca President Robert DePalma, who said that the Osceola plant, which had been destroyed by a fire in March, would be rebuilt. Prior to the fire, Bellanca had planned to move the Osceola plant to Alexandria. Osceola had been the production site for the aerobatic Citabria for the past 16 years. According to Douglas McConnell, director of sales and marketing for Bellanca, the Alexandria plant will continue to manufacture Bellanca aircraft.

1996, 25 years ago: Officers at the Alexandria Police Department will be going "high-tech" this year with new laptop computers in every squad car. Police Chief Chuck Nettetad announced that his department would receive a \$17,678 federal grant from the U.S. Department of Justice through the federal



RACHEL BARDUSON  
Observations from the Archives

COPS MORE program. That money, along with approximately \$4,000 in matching funds set aside by the Alexandria City Council, will be used to purchase six laptop computers, at least a few installed with internal fax modems, and at least one will be carried with a portable computer scanner.

Alexandria Antiques on Broadway has opened for business and is in the former and newly renovated Kolstad building in downtown Alexandria. Manager Judith Ann Zellner has had experience working in several antique stores as well as assisting at antique shows.

2011, 10 years ago: Three young men from Alexandria, Dylan Hauer, 22, Kevin Koep, 23, and Landon Lien, 16, are World War II re-enactors, and over the course of five months, put their skills to the test while filming scenes for the movie "Souvenir." The movie is expected to be released sometime in May. It is the story of two generations and two wars. It was Hauer, an avid history buff who began re-enacting while in high school, who got the trio involved, not only in re-enacting, but in the war movie.

Sheryl Bakewell, broker associate with RE/MAX Lakes Area Realty, was presented with the RE/MAX Lifetime Achievement Award. Bakewell has been working in the real estate

industry for 31 years, of which 20 have been with RE/MAX.

Just for fun 1971 – 50 years ago: About 4,000 visitors were in attendance for the Anderson Florists and Greenhouse open house on Palm Sunday. They had the opportunity to tour and view the many displays with an abundance of lilies, which had been arranged by the staff, including MarLynn Eastlund, who has assisted Lorraine and Ardyce Anderson for the past 18 years. Vicki Eckdahl also worked on displays. She has been a designer's assistant for the past two years and plans to make working with flowers her career. Ken Anderson of the nursery department, and Gerald Brown, grower, arranged the courtyard display.

Sports trivia 1971 – 50 years ago: Stan Kaess, Evansville, was one of 10 men recognized for outstanding service to high school athletics for the past 25 years. The citation is made annually and is co-sponsored by the State Coaches Association and the Minneapolis Star and Tribune.

The Alexandria Golf Club opened for the 1971 season on temporary greens on the back nine with plans to place pins on the front by next week, weather permitting. John Baster, golf pro, says that there is more interest in the club than ever before with quite an influx of new members locally and several from the Minneapolis area, bringing the club membership close to 400.

Rachel Barduson of Alexandria is a regular contributing columnist to the Echo Press Opinion page.

## LETTER

### Mandates are meant to curb pandemic, not take away freedoms

To the editor:

(In response to the March 26 Our Turn column, "We could learn a lot from a squirrel.") Yes, Lowell, it has been a long year. Jan. 1, you suggested giving "a gift that will keep on giving... it will cost nothing in actual dollars," but "may cost you dearly in other ways." This gift was giving people "the freedom to be themselves and not be controlled by us or others," clearly referencing the mask mandate.

The costs have, in fact, been "dear:" 6,864 Minnesotans lost their lives; others are struggling with chronic symptoms; jobs lost; businesses devastated; and healthcare workers exhausted. Government mandates and the recommendations of medical experts are meant to curb the pandemic through community effort, not to take away individual freedoms.

March 26, you again suggested readers throw caution to the wind and act like a risk-taking squirrel. You pontificate about 10 mph speeds, limiting government

involvement and condescendingly inform us that we should get over our fears and stop hiding out because, in case we didn't know, "We will all die someday from something." Could you be anymore callous?

While you may be privileged enough to sit at home getting paid to observe and report on the daring behavior of squirrels, please remember those who have not been able to work from home have often contracted COVID-19 from "fearless" unmasked folks passing it around the community. Before using your platform to chastise people who choose to wear masks, socially distance and spend more time at home perhaps you could reflect on the possibility that one might make choices out of respect for themselves and others.

Meanwhile, numbers are climbing again. I appreciate those who continue to wear a mask in public and support businesses that enforce the policy. Urging the community to work together to curb the pandemic would be the more appropriate way to use your platform.