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2007  
Colorado  
Youth  
Outdoors

# CYO

There are few things more powerful than an idea whose time has come. For two brothers, Tom and Bob Hewson, the seed of such an idea germinated in 2001 and has since grown into full flower in the form of an award-winning, nonprofit organization: Colorado Youth Outdoors (CYO).

The idea sprung from the realization that more children in Colorado were growing up in fractured families, spending most of their waking hours hypnotized by computer screens and televisions, instead of learning outdoor skills essential to enjoying Colorado's open spaces.

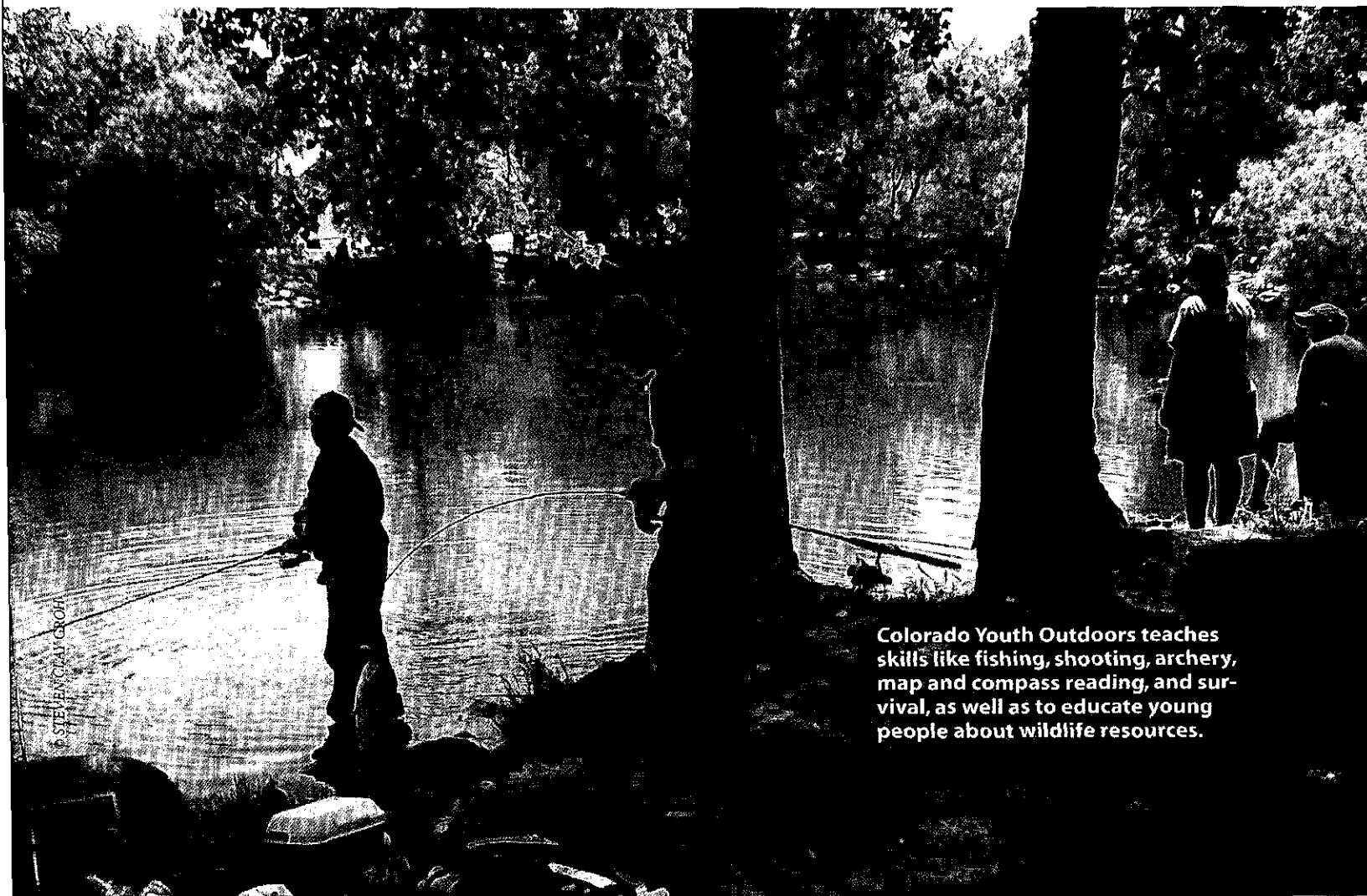
And the Hewsons mourned the alienation between parents and their children. Disturbed by the pervasive changes in

the social fabric, the Hewsons formulated a plan to introduce outdoor education to high school students in Colorado while fostering traditional family values. The result was Colorado Youth Outdoors.

Its mission was to strengthen connections between young people and their parents through traditional outdoor activities that foster family interaction and encourage life-long participation.

The idea was to teach skills like fishing, shooting, archery, map and compass reading, and survival, as well as to educate young people about our vast wildlife resources. A structured curriculum was to be offered in classrooms after school. There would be no cost to the participants. And, most importantly, every child would

## By Steven Clay Groh



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have to be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

It was a bold idea which was not universally accepted by the educational establishment. But the program that began in Thompson Valley School in 2001 has reached out to 12 high schools in Colorado. The goal of CYO is to offer programs in all 354 Colorado high schools by the year 2020, which will take resources.

Colorado Youth Outdoors is entirely privately funded, and it takes the commitment of a \$9,000 per year sponsorship to initiate a program in a new school. Funding for the organization relies upon alumni, friends and one spectacularly successful fundraising event, the Tom Rouen and Amy Van Dyken Celebrity Shoot Out, held annually at the magnificent Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch west of Loveland. The week-long event witnesses over 1,500 guests and raises more than \$200,000.

Moreover, it is a shining example of how to conduct a fundraising event and a reflection of the excellence of the organization.

The shoot generally takes place in the last week of April, when the Big Thompson Canyon is at its most verdant, the river coursing through the red rock-walled canyons of Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch, a spectacular 3,200-acre setting for the organization's flagship event. From the moment a guest arrives, greeted by helpful volunteers and ushered into a massive hospitality tent, one is struck by the remarkable attention to detail.

The *raison d'être* of the event is sporting clays, the fastest growing clay target sport, and the shooting takes place along the most scenic course imaginable. Each station is manned by volunteers, children and their parents, who dispense cartridges to the shooters, trap the clay pigeons upon the call of "pull" and, incredibly, pick up off the

ground each and every remaining bit of biodegradable target larger than a quarter. After the event, the land is as unspoiled as it had been before the fun began.

The target presentations suit all levels of ability — and a wide range of skills are on display — from Master class competitors to rank Beginners. The event brings people together, and it fills the organization's worthy coffers. Everything about the event is first class, from the genuine hospitality of sports celebrity hosts Tom Rouen and Amy Van Dyken to the minute details, such as the water truck that gently sprinkles the roads to suppress the dust. Mounted peace officers survey the scene, and emergency medical attention stands at the ready.

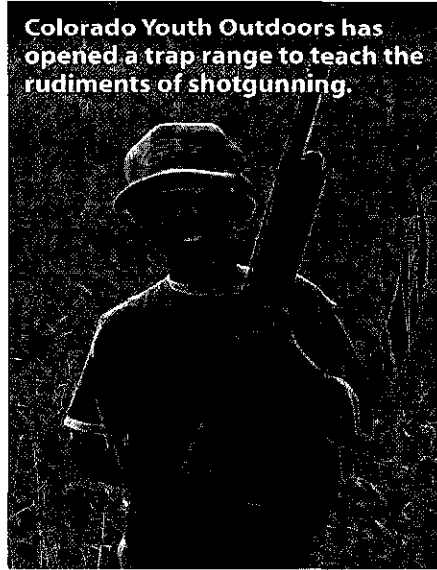
It is an operation run with military precision, and one cannot help thinking that, if the organization runs its programs half as efficiently as it runs its fundraiser, it is a worthy cause indeed.

And CYO has found supporters in very high places. Celebrities, athletes and captains of industry have responded to the message with generous support. And corporations like Anheuser Busch and Johns Manville have stepped up to the plate, as have the Gates and Coors foundations. Without public funding, survival depends upon the strength of many pulling on the same end of the rope.

And with the support of generous contributions, CYO has survived and thrived. With the help of a bargain sale from the estate of Louis Swift, Colorado Youth Outdoors acquired the Swift Ponds, a 240-acre property located near I-25 and Harmony Road in Fort Collins in October 2007. The legacy of former Colorado Wildlife Commissioner, Louis Swift, who created the ponds to foster youth fishing activities, Swift Ponds became the headquarters for outdoor activities for schools in Northern Colorado. It has long provided legendary fishing for cold- and warm-water species, but with the recent approval of Larimer County Commissioners, Colorado Youth Outdoors has opened a trap range to teach the rudiments of shotgunning. With an archery range and a proposed teaching pavilion, Swift Ponds will become the premier facility of its kind in Colorado.

Protected by development by a conservation easement, the property is available on a reservation-only basis to all legitimate nonprofit groups who promote youth education in wildlife, outdoor conservation and recreation. On any given day the visitor may witness a child from the inner city electrified by the connection to his first fish or a farm kid learning the basics of

Colorado Youth Outdoors has opened a trap range to teach the rudiments of shotgunning.



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map and compass. The sounds of laughter echo among the cottonwoods and the smiles reflect off every pond.

But what makes CYO so unique is how it fosters connections between parents and their children. In Colorado Youth Outdoors, parents are much more than chauffeurs transporting minivans loaded with kids to one activity or another, delivering them to a long-suffering soccer coach or a scoutmaster. Instead, a parent or guardian is required to attend all classes, participating in all activities alongside their children, sometimes teaching, sometimes learning, but always caring.

One parent sums it up. "I am thankful for this program because as the world is changing and parents work more, trying to keep up with everything in a child's life becomes a challenge. CYO helped remind me of my priorities."

And her child says, "CYO has done so much for my mom and me. We have

grown so much together. Before CYO we hardly spent any time together."

There is ample anecdotal evidence of the program's success, but Colorado Youth Outdoors is run like a business. The organization commissioned A-Train Marketing Communications, Inc. to complete a strategic results and assessment study, to measure their success.

Their findings were no surprise:

- 88.6 percent said CYO was a positive influence on their family.
- 71.9 percent said they made new friends at CYO.
- 65.0 percent said they spend more time outdoors with family as a result of CYO.
- 75.4 percent said they identify and connect with other outdoorsmen as a result of the CYO experience.
- 98.4 percent of participants would recommend CYO to others.

The program has a solid record of success, and a thoughtful eye to the future, thanks to the commitment of organizers and supporters and the enthusiasm of parents and kids. But there are hundreds of schools with no such program.

To learn more about Colorado Youth Outdoors, including how to implement a program in your school, visit [www.coloradoyo.org](http://www.coloradoyo.org) or call (970) 663-0800.

For generations families have shared times in the great outdoors, the memories of which endure in the hearts and minds of parents and children alike. The most treasured moments become memorialized in a photograph or an often-told story. But the enduring legacy of times afield is the lessons learned, not necessarily practical skills, like how to attach a fly to a tippet or how to dress a pheasant (although those are important), but more valuable revelations, like my dad is a pretty good guy or my daughter has so much determination.

Somehow all of us see more clearly when the sun is setting across the wheat fields stretched out before us or the moon is shimmering on a mountain lake.

When parents and children work together, good things happen. And Colorado Youth Outdoors is a rare success, a small organization with a humble mission, but thanks to the initiative of two brothers, a worthy one it is indeed, born of a small idea whose time has come.

But mighty oaks from little acorns grow. ∞

*Steven Clay Groh is a freelance writer and photographer. This article is copyrighted by the author.*

## CYO Influence on Relationships

