

Blue signs don't guarantee parking spot

'I would give anything to be able to walk across the parking lot.'

— Shelly Schock,
on people who park in
handicap spots

By Heidi Bell
Journal Staff Writer

Shopping trips can be a nightmare for Shelly Schock, and the problem has nothing to do with credit-card temptation.

Finding a place to park and getting into the store is often the biggest challenge for Schock, who has used a wheelchair since she broke her neck

in a 1980 car accident.

Schock has trouble parking "usually about every time I go out," she said. Sometimes it's able-bodied people who are illegally parked in handicap spots. Other times, it's people who park too close for her to get into her van, or handicap parking spots that aren't big enough in the first place.

Problems are worse in private lots. "It's frustrating because it might

stop you from being able to shop there," Schock said. "Usually it's 'I'm sorry, I was just running in for a minute.' But that minute could be when you need to use it."

One woman who had parked in a handicap spot so she could unload a carpet cleaner actually argued with Schock when she realized she was blocking her way.

"She was not pleasant," Schock said. "The way I feel about it, there

really isn't any excuse.

"I would give anything to be able to walk across the parking lot."

Chris Benson has had few parking problems in the three years she's lived here. "I just moved here from Denver, and Rapid is like heaven," said Benson, who has used a wheelchair since a diving accident 17 years ago. "I mean there's always going to

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be jerks and lazy people, but not like (in the) city."

She makes it a point to avoid problem situations. Unlike Schock, whose van requires an eight-foot-wide parking space for access, Benson drives a car.

"The main thing that's important to me is that I'm parking on an end," she said, because she needs to completely open her car door. "I just don't park where somebody can park up next to me."

A photographer, she often has bulky equipment with her. "It just is so much easier when I don't have to

wheel to the end of the parking lot."

Brad Morgan said Rushmore Mall has good handicap parking. "They're the best. The mall has gone all out to try to make those spots available and put them in good locations."

His pet peeves lie downtown.

"My biggest complaint would be that none of the handicapped parking spaces on the street ... have the buffer zones next to them," Morgan said. "They're marked with blue signs, but they don't have any extra space next to them."

Like Benson, Morgan needs to open his pickup door all the way to get in and out. "With cars parked right next to us ... it just makes dents in neigh-

boring vehicles," he said. "I just hate doing that, but sometimes there's no other option."

Morgan, who has used a wheelchair since he was hurt in a 1988 car accident, rarely sees nonhandicapped people use "blue" spots. But he did watch a young family park in one, then jump out and run inside.

"They did it right in front of me. I thought it was extremely rude," he said. "I entertained breaking their headlights."

He sees other things as bigger problems. One bad spot is the Rapid City Public Library, Morgan said. "There's not enough space between the concrete (front tire bumpers) to

get a wheelchair."

A ski instructor, Morgan uses "snow tires," or bicycle tires, on his wheelchair. "I can cruise over any obstacle." But people with motorized chairs who don't have strong arms can't. For them, snow is a problem.

"I think shop owners should take responsibility for cleaning the snow out from around the handicapped spots in front of their buildings," he said, noting that they are already responsible for sidewalks.

Benson thinks most people feel it's "really uncool" to park in handicapped spaces. Instead of handicapped license plates, she has a small sticker in her window. People often

stare pointedly at her when she parks, until they see her wheelchair.

"So people are like patrolling. I see that happen all the time," she said. "Especially older people. They're just on the patrol."

That may be because they have needed handicap spaces themselves or foresee the time when they might. Schock points out that anyone could have a disability at some point. Some disabilities, like heart trouble, are less visible than others.

Benson said elderly people often need handicap spaces the most. "I would give up a space for them to park there before I would park there," she said. "Absolutely."