



Natural Areas Program

2005 Annual Report



From the Director

The Natural Areas Program was established by the City of Fort Collins in 1992. In some ways, 2005 felt like the beginning of a new era for the Program. For example, the City Council created a new citizen advisory Board—the Land Conservation and Stewardship Board—that will be exclusively involved with the work of the Program. Nine new Board members began meeting in January of 2006 to begin reviewing and advising

staff and City Council about the activities of the Program. Also in 2005, intensive efforts were undertaken to plan and implement improvements at our first regional open space, the 2,600-acre Bobcat Ridge Natural Area near Masonville.

Perhaps most importantly in 2005, the Natural Areas Program began a new effort to significantly enhance our service to the public. The theme of this effort is, “How can we better serve you?” As public employees, we are acutely aware of our role as

your servants, and we want to excel in our efforts to understand and be responsive to your perspectives. This summer we will be conducting surveys in our natural areas to find out what our visitors think of their experiences. I hope you’ll share your point of view with us, and we will use your responses to inform our continuous efforts to improve our services. Thanks for your help!

John Stokes

Land Conservation Actions Increase Acres Conserved

Following a tremendous year in 2004 when the Natural Areas Program helped conserve 18,672 acres, 2005 was also successful and exciting. The emphasis in 2005 was on community separators. Conservation easements and fee lands acquired in the Timnath, Loveland, and Wellington separators totaled 839 acres. These lands will maintain their semirural character and provide an aesthetic transition between Fort Collins and neighboring communities.

The Natural Areas Program also acquired a 316-acre inholding at the Soapstone Prairie Natural Area, made a scheduled payment for the 2,600-acre Bobcat Ridge Natural Area, and assisted other organizations in placing a conservation easement on a ranch in the Laramie Foothills Mountains to Plains project area (of which Soapstone Prairie Natural Area is a major component).

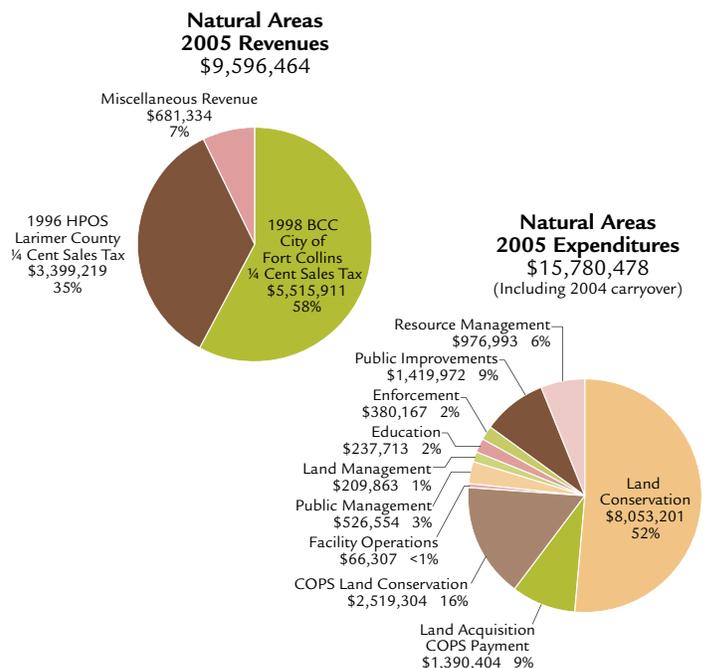
By year’s end, the Natural Areas Program had spent \$10,572,505 on land conservation and had helped conserve 2,300 acres.

In 2005, the community’s ongoing conservation efforts received national recognition. Fort Collins and Larimer County together were named one of the most nature-friendly areas in the United States in the book *Nature-Friendly Communities* (Island Press). Fort Collins also was recognized by *Outside* magazine as one of 18 “perfect towns that have it all,” recognition based in part on the city’s system of Natural Areas.

Revenues and Expenditures

The Natural Areas Program received \$9,596,464 in revenues in 2005. As the graphs demonstrate, the bulk of the funds were spent on land conservation.

The COPS referred to in the expenditures graph are Certificates of Participation. These long-term financing instruments enable the Natural Areas Program to spread out the cost of Soapstone Prairie and other acquisitions over 15 years, thereby preserving funds for other land conservation opportunities.





Hikers enjoy the Foothills Trail.

Improved Foothills Trail Opens

After several years of closure due to the Bureau of Reclamation's dam reconstruction, the Natural Areas Program reopened the popular 6-mile Foothills Trail. The dam reconstruction, along with new federal regulations, required rerouting portions of this trail, which connects Reservoir Ridge, Maxwell, and Pineridge natural areas and hugs the shoreline of Horsetooth Reservoir.

Crews made many improvements to the trail, including installing a new footbridge across a ditch at Soldier Canyon Dam and rebuilding a significant portion of a highly eroded section of the trail between Soldier Canyon Dam and Michaud Lane. In addition, Natural Areas rangers installed new signs that provide directional, trail identification, and regulatory information.

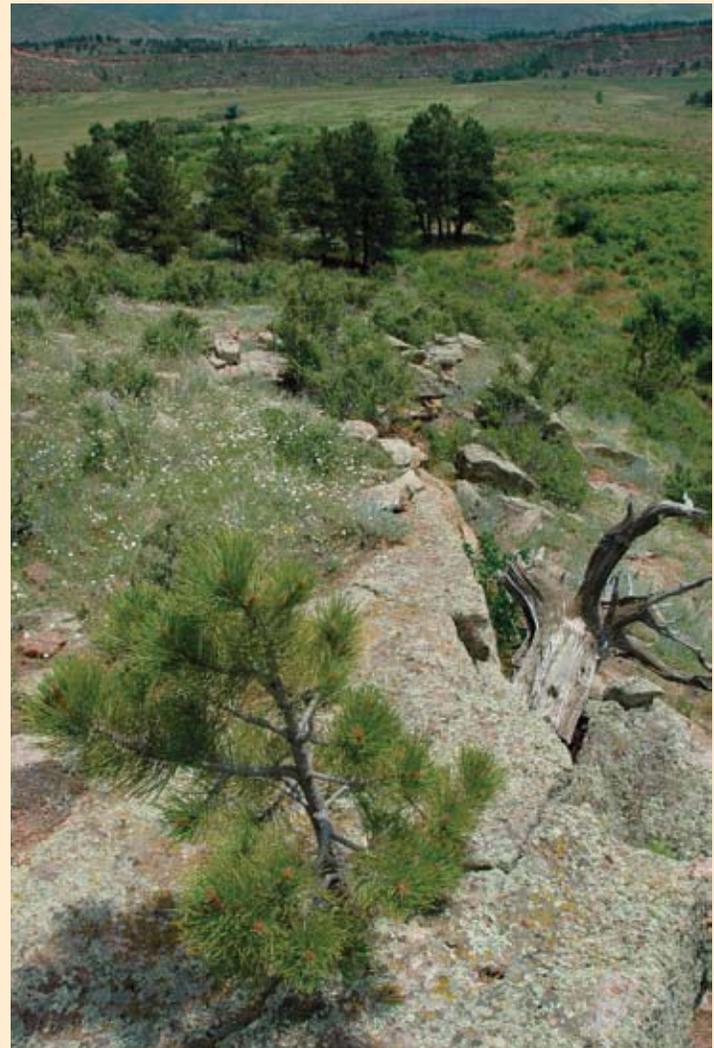
At the north trailhead, a new parking lot is now open on Reservoir Ridge Natural Area at the west end of Michaud Lane. There is space available for 17 cars, 1 handicapped vehicle, and 1 bus or trailer. To better accommodate visitors, an information kiosk and a vault toilet were installed.

Progress Report: Bobcat Ridge Site Development

The City spent 2005 preparing the 2,600-acre Bobcat Ridge Natural Area near Masonville for its grand opening slated for fall of 2006.

The first 4.2 miles of the trail system were built, and design work began on future trails. When complete, there will be over 13 miles of trails, portions of which will facilitate handicapped access. To assist with trail placement, specialists conducted a cultural resources survey and a survey for Preble's meadow jumping mouse, a species protected under the Endangered Species Act. Investigators found evidence of Native American use of the site, as well as a Preble's mouse—the first ever found on one of the City's natural areas.

Larimer County requires the Natural Areas Program to improve County Road 32C before opening the site. In 2005, an agreement was reached with the County that the City will widen the road, remove rock at several curves, and provide flood-related improvements.



Bobcat Ridge Natural Area



Soapstone Prairie Reveals Surprises

Research on recreation opportunities and cultural and natural resources began in preparation for the Soapstone Prairie Natural Area opening scheduled for 2009.

There were exciting biological discoveries. Botanists found the federally threatened Colorado butterfly plant, (*Guara neomexicana* ssp. *coloradensis*) the only known population of the plant in Larimer County. Several wildlife species of particular interest are making their homes at Soapstone Prairie, including swift fox, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, Swainson's hawk, golden eagle, loggerhead shrike, and lark bunting.

To provide a glimpse of this natural area, the Natural Areas Program offered guided tours of Soapstone Prairie from spring through early fall. Over 300 people participated in the tours. A common reaction from visitors was one of delight and surprise as they took in the beauty and natural riches of the area. Visitor perspectives will be helpful in developing the management plan for the site. Tours will continue in 2006.

Considerable cultural resources exist on Soapstone Prairie. Cultural research activities in 2005 included collecting oral histories from local families and securing a \$25,000 cultural resource assessment grant from the Colorado State Historical Fund. The grant application was submitted with two partners, the Fort Collins Museum and Colorado State University.

Natural Areas staff, working with a cattle grazing association, instituted a new grazing plan focusing on diversifying habitat through careful management.



Top: Citizens enjoy a tour of Soapstone Prairie Natural Area.
Above: Colorado butterfly plant

Volunteers Contribute Over 2,000 Hours

Volunteers are a valuable asset to the Natural Areas Program. In 2005, over 120 volunteers donated 2,494 hours doing site clean-up, helping with restoration, building bat and flicker houses, doing research, preparing native seed packets, providing education services, and much more. Volunteers included individuals as well as groups such as Pioneer School students, neighborhood groups, Agilent employees, and Audubon Society members. During a bird survey at Bobcat Ridge, Audubon volunteers spotted a white-winged crossbill, a member of the finch family that is very rare in Colorado.

The City's volunteer Master Naturalist Program had a record-breaking year. Over 80 Master Naturalists provided 170 nature



Crews manage prescribed fire.

Prescribed Fire Restores Natural Area

A prescribed fire in early April began the rehabilitation of about 80 acres of weed-dominated grassland on the eastern portion of Coyote Ridge Natural Area. Prescribed fire reestablishes a natural process with which grasslands evolved and can improve grassland health by removing excessive biomass or decadent vegetation, recycling nutrients, and reducing weed infestations. After the fire, native plants rebounded and weedy plants were suppressed. Additional weed control was done in the spring and fall to ensure native plant regeneration. The area now has a relatively weed-free

stand of native grasses. A supplemental planting of native forbs will help increase vegetative diversity. Ultimately, this restoration project will result in native plants outcompeting weedy plants and a greater diversity in the plant and animal communities.

As with all prescribed fires, this project included outreach and notification to the public and cooperation with various agencies. The Natural Areas Program is grateful to the Poudre Fire Authority for its assistance.

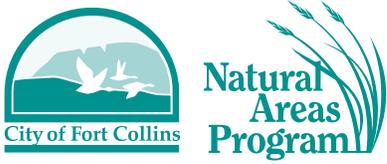
hikes, classroom presentations, slide shows, and more serving 6,914 people.

In March, Fort Collins was named a *Take Pride in America* community. This national partnership, established by the U.S. Department of the Interior, aims to engage, support, and recognize volunteers who work to improve public lands. Five of the City's Master Naturalists were among local volunteers recognized for their hard work.

In 2005, rangers began planning a new volunteer trail host program. Announcement of the program is expected in 2006.



Adopt-a-Natural Area volunteers clean up Two Creeks Natural Area.



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