



2013

NATURAL AREAS ANNUAL REPORT

City of
Fort Collins
Natural
Areas

naturally yours

Naturally Yours

Naturally Yours to Treasure

In many regards, Fort Collins is the envy of other communities. Again and again publications and surveys tout our high quality of life. There are many factors contributing to the success of Fort Collins. The friendly and creative business climate, the culture of entrepreneurship, a great local school system, Colorado State University, the fabled beer breweries, and the bicycling culture are key building blocks. In addition to these factors, there is a highly visible, tangible “connective tissue” that binds together the qualities that make Fort Collins great: our natural areas

system of conserved lands. Fort Collins’ natural areas are a leading expression of our community’s values, hopes, and aspirations.

Thank you for your support! It is all made possible by citizen-initiated sales tax ballot measures in Fort Collins and Larimer County that fund land conservation and visitor services. We hope you enjoy reading about the Natural Areas Department’s 2013 accomplishments.



Flood Recovery

The floods of September 2013 were devastating to nearby communities of Fort Collins. Fort Collins experienced less damage to infrastructure, homes, and businesses in part due to less precipitation than our neighbors, but also due to conserved land along the river that helped absorb flood waters. The City’s trails were covered in mud and some were washed out, but the City was relatively undamaged due to careful land conservation and insightful planning. Floods are natural and the river ecosystem requires periodic scouring and flooding to stay healthy, so Fort Collins has long adapted its land use to this reality.

The Natural Areas Department also helped flood recovery “behind the scenes.” Neighbors of Bobcat Ridge Natural Area were cut-off from their road access in the Big Thompson Canyon, so the Natural Areas Department worked to make quick emergency improvements that allowed the rugged, steep and rocky Power Line Trail to serve as the Cedar Park and Storm Mountain evacuation route for 2,000 vehicles over two months. Rangers worked with the Larimer County Sheriff to monitor use and allow credentialed residents to access their homes.

Awards & Grants

The Poudre Heritage Alliance supported the Natural Areas Department’s project to create and install coordinated interpretive signs at the 17 natural areas along the Poudre River with a \$70,000 grant. The signs will be installed in two phases, look for the first phase in early 2014.

The Natural Areas Department and Cable 14 won an Award of Distinction from Videographer Awards, a coveted honor in the video industry. The prize is for the Natural Areas School Field Trip Video, which helps elementary school students make the most of their natural area visit.

The Fort Collins Landmark Preservation Board presented the Natural Areas Department with a Friend of Preservation Award for the restoration of two historic buildings at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. The upcoming restoration of a historic equipment shed and poultry building was funded by a grant from the State Historic Fund for \$141,877. The Pulliam Charitable Trust granted \$43,000 to fund the majority of the matching funds.





Yours to Explore: New Trail & Parking

A new trailhead and trail were opened at Reservoir Ridge Natural Area, off of North Overland Trail road this year. The trailhead features parking, a picnic area, an art piece by Joe McGrane, a kiosk, and a vault toilet. From the new parking lot visitors may hike, bike, walk leashed dogs, or ride horses west on the 1.4-mile extension of the Foothills Trail. Everyone is invited to enjoy the new trailhead and trail!

On the Trail

Rangers and gate attendants are the Natural Areas staff that visitors see most often. Rangers logged 6,872 visitor contacts in 2013 which includes casual, friendly, and educational contacts. Likewise, Rangers responded to over 800 phone calls from the on-duty ranger line. Staff at Gateway Natural Area welcomed more than 27,000 visitors in 2013 – a record! In 2013, Rangers utilized smartphone technology to update trail conditions in real time on fcgov.com/naturalareas. Similarly, QR codes printed on trail closure signs allow visitors to link directly to current trail conditions from their smart phones. The community helps out with the public education effort – 72 Volunteer Ranger Assistants donated more than 2,500 hours of service and made nearly 4,000 contacts with the public.



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Naturally Dark Skies

A dark sky is part of a natural areas experience and it is important for wildlife, so the Natural Areas Department works with partners to conserve darkness. Since 2011, night skies have been monitored at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area. Since then, night sky monitoring has grown-volunteers now monitor eight strategic locations. Additionally, the Natural Areas Department continues to work with other City departments and Colorado State University to help protect dark-sky buffers around natural areas and better measure/model how development or mitigation measures will affect night sky brightness.

Bringing Back the Dace

The northern redbelly dace (*Phoxinus eos*) is a small fish that is listed as state endangered by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). In 2013, Natural Areas worked in partnership with CPW to reintroduce them into Spottlewood Creek within Soapstone Prairie Natural Area. Water flows are crucial to sustaining these special fish as well as other fish, amphibians, and mammals. The Natural Areas Department continues to work with the Colorado Water Conservation Board and CPW to protect water flows in four streams at Soapstone Prairie and the adjacent City-owned Meadow Springs Ranch.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife awarded the City \$50,000 to restore the Shields Pit – a former sand and gravel mine west of Arapaho Bend Natural Area. The restored wetlands and native fish habitat will be a place for Natural Areas and CPW to reintroduce northern redbelly dace and brassy minnow (*Hybognathus hankinsoni*, a state threatened species).



River Projects

Supporting a healthy and resilient Cache la Poudre River ecosystem is a priority, articulated in the City's comprehensive plan. In 2013, the Natural Areas Department worked to accomplish this through a large restoration project, a comprehensive open house focused on river projects and by making strategic investments.

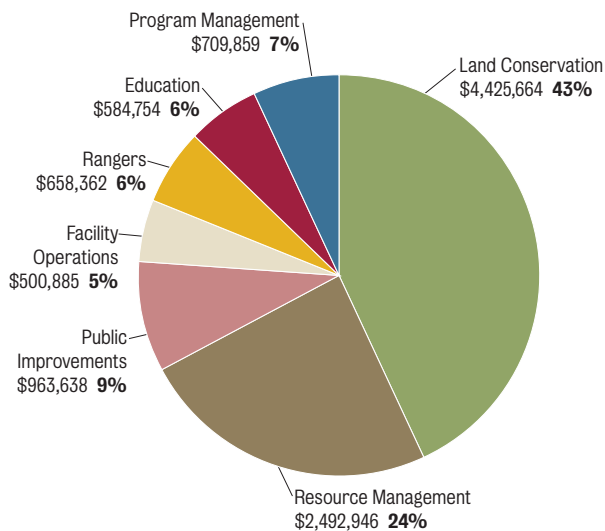
At North Shields Ponds Natural Area, there was an extensive river and floodplain restoration including removal of the Josh Ames diversion structure. This multi-faceted project will incubate five new acres of wetlands, eight new acres of cottonwood forests, and naturalized the riverbank setting, which had been impacted by past gravel mining. Local beer breweries and the Colorado Water Trust supported the removal of the abandoned diversion structure. The Colorado Water Trust secured a grant of \$300,000 from the Colorado Water Conservation Board,

with the diverse support of members of the South Platte and Metro Basin Roundtables. In addition, Odell Brewing Company, New Belgium Brewing Company, Pateros Creek Brewery, and Funkwerks Brewery contributed nearly \$37,000 in matching dollars. Thank you!

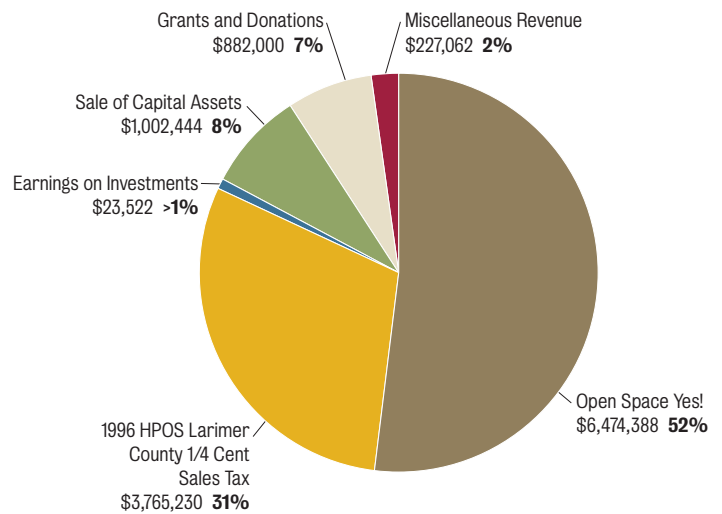
An Open House in June was an opportunity for the community to learn about the over 25 projects coming to the river corridor in the next few years, including the Downtown Project – a master plan for the river corridor between Shields Street and Mulberry Street. Over 300 people attended!

The Natural Areas Department acquired a 40% interest in the Coy Ditch (the water that formerly irrigated the Link-N-Greens golf course). The water can be used to enhance environmental values.

Natural Areas Department 2013 Expenditures \$10,336,107



Natural Areas Department 2013 Revenues \$12,374,646



Land Conservation

It was a busy and very successful year beginning with the sale of two conserved farm properties, which is unusual because the Natural Areas Department rarely sells property. The two farms are in the Timnath and Wellington community separators. They were purchased with the intent to remove all development potential (though a conservation easement) and then resell, which conserved these valuable agricultural lands.

Natural Areas partnered with Fort Collins Utilities to purchase a 37-acre parcel near Vine Drive and Taft Hill Road, which will become a regional stormwater detention pond and a natural area. Natural Areas also partnered with Xcel Energy to purchase a 12-acre parcel and then separately purchased an adjacent 5-acre parcel, both along the Poudre River. These parcels have been added to Kingfisher Point Natural Area. In the future they will be restored to enhance wildlife habitat and provide access to the Poudre Trail from Mulberry Street. A long sought after 10-acre parcel adjacent to both Magpie Meander and McMurry natural areas was added to the Magpie Meander Natural Area. The last acquisition of the year was a donation from the Colorado Department of Transportation: a 2.7-acre parcel along the Poudre River. This parcel will be incorporated into a new natural area being transferred to Natural Areas by Woodward Inc. in 2014.

Outstanding Volunteers

Natural Area volunteers are incredibly special people who dedicate their time to natural areas education, conservation, and excellent customer service. In 2013, 1,633 volunteers donated over 10,000 hours which is the equivalent of five full time employees and a value of \$238,181 (\$22.43/hour *independentsector.org*).

Master Naturalists and Assistants provided over 200 educational activities and events about everything from geology to astronomy to cultural history. Every educational program offered was free including the field trips for 1,300 students to natural areas.

Volunteer Ranger Assistants spent their time on the trails, creating a safer, friendlier outdoor experience for everyone.

Natural Area Adopters kept your natural areas clean by picking-up litter monthly.

Service Learning – Over 1,000 volunteers participated in one-day service learning projects such as trail-building, tree planting, or litter clean-up. Thanks to these volunteers, 15 miles of trail were maintained, 320 bags of trash were picked up, and more than 550 trees, shrubs and willows were planted. Several local groups have adopted trails, committing to three years of service; employees and members of Otterbox, Team Peloton, Trailcology and Trout Unlimited graciously share their talents and time.

The Natural Areas Department gives its sincere and hearty appreciation to every volunteer! Thank you!



Ferrets Coming Soon?

The black-footed ferret is a federally endangered species native to the shortgrass prairie and one of the rarest North American mammals. They eat prairie dogs nearly exclusively. The Natural Areas Department has been working to manage Soapstone Prairie Natural Area's prairie dog populations so that someday they might support re-introduced black-footed ferrets. To date, there are approximately 3,600 acres of black-tailed prairie dogs on Soapstone Prairie and Meadow Springs Ranch, both City-owned sites. In 2013, Soapstone Prairie and Meadow Springs were selected as test locations for a new vaccine to control sylvatic plague in prairie dogs. The Natural Areas Department's plan for black-footed ferret reintroduction was approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2013 and efforts in the future will focus on receiving approvals at the state level.



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