



2009

NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM Annual Report



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Opening Soapstone Prairie Natural Area

Several years of incredible dedication, teamwork and partnerships culminated with the opening of Soapstone Prairie Natural Area in June, 2009. It is the City's largest natural area, encompassing over 28-square miles of nearly pristine grasslands, shrublands and the Lindenmeier Archeological Site. It took an amazing effort from a variety of people and organizations to conserve Soapstone Prairie Natural Area and open it to the public. A big thank you to everyone involved! Here are some highlights of the process.

2002–2004

In 2002 the Open Space Yes! sales tax initiative was passed due in large part to the leadership of Kelly Ohlson and Linda Stanley. The ballot language called for regional land conservation.

To define "regional land conservation" the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Program facilitated a planning process with the community. The outcome was the *Land Conservation and Stewardship Master Plan* that was adopted by City Council. The plan identified the Laramie Foothills (encompassing Soapstone Prairie) as a high priority area. Around the same time, the Soapstone Grazing Association decided to sell the Soapstone Ranch. The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Program seized the once-ever opportunity and bought the property. With a Great Outdoors Colorado grant and using the purchase of Soapstone Prairie as matching funds, Larimer County bought the adjacent property, the 15,000 acre Red Mountain Ranch in 2004.

2005–2007

Once the land was purchased, it was time for Fort Collins and Larimer County to work together on management plans. Work included collaboration with a technical advisory group; gathering public input via meetings and site tours; archeological surveys; vegetation and wildlife surveys; and City Council and County Commissioner review. The vision focused on rigorous protection for cultural and natural features and a high-quality visitor experience. Thus, trails, structures and other public improvements were planned to keep away from sensitive areas.

2008–2009

Construction began next and included 42 miles of trails. Construction areas were carefully restored. Each year various aspects of the project are carefully monitored and management actions are taken if necessary.

2009

It was time to celebrate! The Grand Opening Weekend brought over 500 visitors



A plaque honoring Kelly Ohlson and Linda Stanley

who enjoyed the trails and educational activity booths. The Grand Opening Ceremony honored Kelly Ohlson and Linda Stanley as well as other key partners such as Great Outdoors Colorado, Larimer County, The Nature Conservancy, Legacy Land Trust and private landowners in the area. Soapstone Prairie's first season was very successful with over 10,000 visitors meeting the past, enjoying the present and preserving the future. National media even took note – Soapstone Prairie's opening was covered in National Geographic Adventure magazine in June, 2009.

2009 in Review

It was a very exciting and busy 2009! We hope you enjoy learning about the Natural Areas Program's accomplishments this year.

With over 40 City of Fort Collins natural areas, it is easy to get outside and enjoy the outdoors. You can experience these special places through hiking, biking, horseback riding, wildlife watching, picnicking, fishing and more. You can explore and learn through hundreds

of free educational programs such as field trips, nature talks, family programs and events. You might discover wild creatures, amazing plants, ancient rocks or stories of the past. If you are inspired to give back, volunteer opportunities are available, too.

There are many ways and reasons to treasure natural areas. We hope you like reading about the Natural Areas

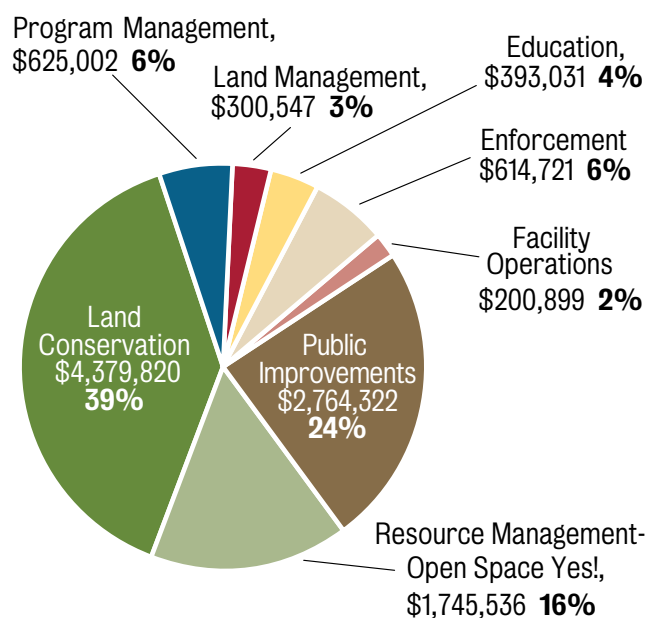
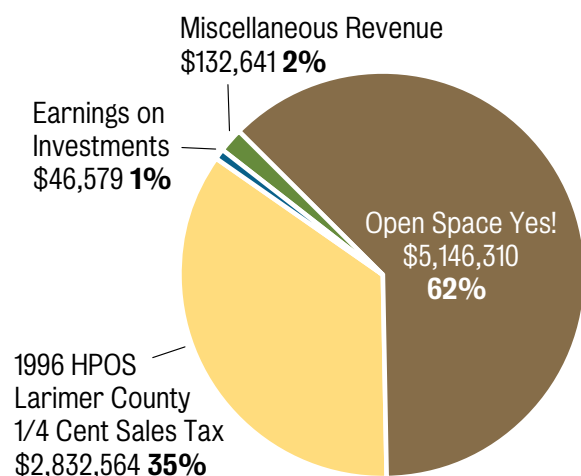
Program's work to conserve and manage these important community assets in 2009.

Thank you voters!

You make it possible. Several citizen-initiated sales tax measures fund land conservation and provide visitor amenities and services.

Natural Areas Program 2009 Expenditures \$11,023,878

Natural Areas Program 2009 Revenues \$8,158,094



2009 expenditures included funds carried over from prior years revenues.

Land Conservation

Efforts focused on the conservation of local and community separator properties in 2009. Purchases included:

- 160 acres in the Poudre Canyon adjacent to Picnic Rock
- 144 acre farmland in the Wellington Community Separator
- 1 acre parcel along Spring Creek
- 960 acres just south of Soapstone Prairie Natural Area

The Natural Areas Program received a \$560,000 Federal Farm Land Protection Grant to acquire conservation easements on prime farm land in the Wellington Community Separator.

The Natural Areas Program is partnering with Utilities to purchase 128 acres along I-25, south of Harmony Road, to provide: a water storage reservoir; regional trail right of way; a natural area; and protect the viewshed along I-25. Negotiation efforts will continue in 2010.

The Natural Areas Program also partnered with Larimer County, Timnath and Windsor on a Great Outdoors Colorado grant application to conserve 160 acres along the Poudre River between Timnath and Windsor. The grant would also fund trail right-of-ways to allow the extension of the Poudre River Trail towards Fort Collins from Windsor.

Wildlife Candid Camera

Do you know what type of wildlife you share trails with? How do people impact wildlife movement? These are a couple of the questions that the Cameras Communities and Conservation project seeks to answer. Using motion-activated cameras placed on and off-trail at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area, over 465 photos of wildlife have been taken. Species documented include bear, wild turkey, bobcat, bighorn sheep, elk, rabbit, western spotted skunk, Abert's squirrel, hummingbird, raven, deer, coyote, fox and even a mountain lion. The animals are often on the same trails used by visitors! Volunteer Master Naturalists help by checking cameras weekly and downloading photos. High school students from Rocky Mountain High are using the data in a science project. Check out some of the photos at fcgov.com/naturalareas/finder/bobcat. The photos demonstrate the importance of natural areas to wildlife even if we don't always see the animals that are sharing our trails.



Appreciate, Enjoy, Give Back

Education, outreach and volunteer coordination efforts were a focus in 2009. Over 400 programs were presented to over 11,000 people with generous Master Naturalist volunteers leading most of the classes and activities. Offerings included a month of celebration events for the opening of Soapstone Prairie, the publication of a Program and Activity Guide, listing over 200 activities; and a virtual geocache course along the Poudre River. Volunteer Ranger Assistants assisted visitors and monitored trails and volunteer citizen scientists helped with projects focusing on plants, birds and frogs. Volunteers contributed 10,749 hours to the Natural Areas Program, a value of \$217,667 (volunteer time is valued at \$20.25/hour nationally). *Thank you!*

Calculating our Carbon Footprint

In cooperation with the City's Climate Wise Program, the Natural Areas Program developed an annual greenhouse gas (GHG) baseline or "carbon footprint" for day-to-day operations. Intern Paige Colton gathered 2008 records on utility use, fuel use, vehicle miles traveled, volume of trash generated, and other practices that generate GHG emissions. In 2008, the NAP generated 267 tons of carbon emissions, the equivalent of either 50 vehicles driving 12,000 miles per year or the amount of energy used by 25 homes per year. Primary sources of emissions: transportation (41.5%), utilities (44%), and solid waste (14.5%). The Natural Areas Program is now actively devising strategies to reduce these emissions in an effort to help meet the city's goal of reducing community-wide emissions 20% below 2005 levels by 2020.



Local Natural Areas News

Two projects focused on improving access to natural areas. Two picnic shelters were installed at Pineridge Natural Area and 1 picnic shelter at North Shields Ponds Natural Area. Handicap parking and accessible trails to the shelters were added at both sites.

In other local news, the Robert Benson Reservoir Dam Replacement Project was completed in 2009 and plans are on track to open Pelican Marsh Natural Area, which includes Benson Reservoir, in 2010.

Progress was also made on a multi-year collaborative project, Canal Importation Ponds and Outfall (CIPO). The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Program is working with the City of Fort Collins Utilities on the construction of stormwater detention ponds at Red Fox Meadows Natural Area. In 2009, construction of the natural-shaped detention ponds and restoration of Red Fox Meadows were well underway.

Nature nearby —yours to explore

At Reservoir Ridge Natural Area in 2009 restoring a natural area meant removing buildings, showcasing sustainable practices and creating learning opportunities at the same time. The Andrijeski farm house and some of the out buildings were deconstructed by the National Center for Craftsmanship, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation, enhancement and sustainability of quality craftspeople. They used the Andrijeski project as a teaching experience, providing hands-on, real-world learning opportunities for area students interested in the building trades. The project was quite successful: 442 cubic yards of material were diverted from the Larimer County Landfill. The project achieved a 77% reuse and recycle rate. The Discovery Channel filmed the deconstruction as part of their Renovation Nation series.



Regional Natural Area News

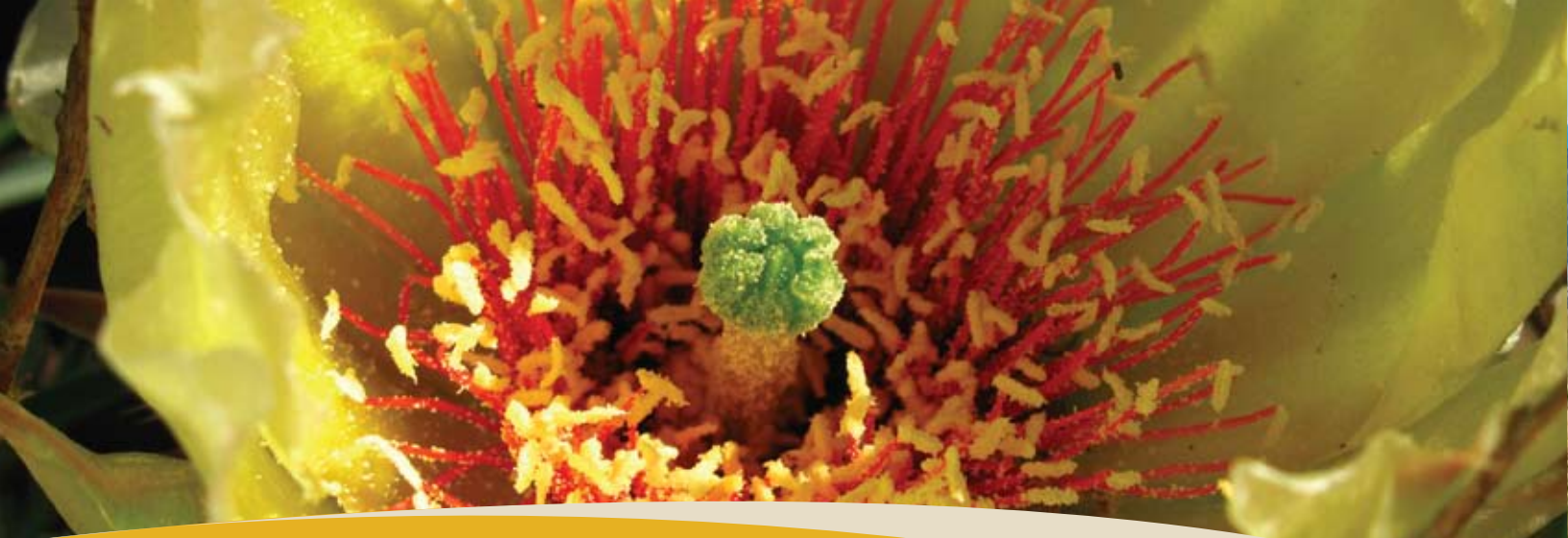
Regional natural areas include Soapstone Prairie, Bobcat Ridge and Gateway. While opening Soapstone Prairie was a major focus, enhancements were made at all regional sites. At Gateway Natural Area, new interpretive signs were installed and accessible parking and shelter access was constructed. A new trail at Bobcat Ridge takes visitors from the parking lot through the historic hayshed and calving barn area. Two interpretive signs and a booklet share the ranching history of this special area. An accessible horse mounting ramp was constructed at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area to help physically-challenged equestrians mount-up and ride.



Stewardship for the Future

Ecological habitat restoration continues to be a major focus for the Natural Areas Program. Improving the habitat value of the land includes activities such as site cleanups and landscape re-grading to wetland creation and native grass seeding. In 2009, Natural Areas Program crews initiated the conversion of agricultural fields and eroded lands to native short and mixed grass prairie by planting 340 new acres with native grasses. Semi-annual monitoring of restoration projects showed that efforts are paying off! Staff has noticed an impressive positive improvement in habitat conditions since 2005.

Additionally, some important new findings were made in 2009! Staff and a team of volunteer botanists discovered 5 new state-listed rare plants in natural areas. This discovery underscores the importance of conserving and restoring Fort Collins' natural heritage. Who knows what might be found next!



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