



2012

NATURAL AREAS ANNUAL REPORT



naturally yours

Naturally Yours

Who We Are

The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department conserves lands you care about. There are over 40 natural areas and 100 miles of trail to explore and enjoy thanks to people like you! Fort Collins and Larimer County voters have supported five citizen-initiated sales tax ballot measures since 1992 that make land conservation, trails and visitor amenities possible. We serve a community that loves the outdoors and believes in celebrating and conserving natural areas for everyone, forever.

What We Do

Our passion is to share with everyone the irreplaceable natural and cultural treasures we manage. You are invited to treasure, explore and help us care for these special places. Each year we report our collective accomplishments to the community, we hope you enjoy reading about 2012's successes!



Nurturing Nature

Conserving land and water ensures the special places we enjoy today will be there for wildlife and future generations. The Natural Areas Department works to bring natural areas into better ecological condition so they will be self-sustaining into the future.

Caring for the Prairie

In 2012, grassland restoration at Coyote Ridge was expanded by 50 acres which adds to several hundred acres already under restoration. Grasslands adjacent to the foothills are also the focus of a comprehensive breeding bird survey that will help inform future management. This two-year effort details bird distribution and habitat usage.

Caring for the River

Along the Cache La Poudre River, eleven new populations of (previously unknown) rare plants were discovered by volunteers and staff through the Rare Plant Survey. In another concentrated effort, nearly all of the non-native Russian olive trees have been removed from natural areas along the river. Planning was also completed for a large project that includes bank and cottonwood habitat improvements along the north bank of the Poudre River at McMurry Natural Area, construction will begin in 2013.

Openings

Pelican Marsh Natural Area was opened this year featuring over 1 mile of paved and natural surface trails. It's a great place to observe grassland wildlife and a variety of wetland birds.

Udall Natural Area features a half-mile loop of natural surface trail around a series of ponds that clean runoff water from the downtown area before it enters the Poudre River. From spring through fall, look for waterbirds hiding out in the third pond which was re-vegetated about 10 years ago and now is great habitat.

You can now visit the site of the historic Strauss Cabin. Built in 1864 by George Strauss, the log construction reflects a design unique in Colorado. The Strauss Cabin site had been closed since 1999 when arsonists nearly burned down the structure. In 2011, Larimer County gave the Strauss Cabin area to City of Fort Collins and in 2012, Natural Areas cleaned up the site, installed signage, and opened a trail to the ruins.



Sustainable Operations

As part of its stewardship philosophy, the Natural Areas Department seeks out more sustainable ways of providing services. In 2012, solar panels were mounted on natural area facilities, efficient outdoor lighting was installed, and inefficient appliances and office equipment were updated. Water was saved by installing rain sensors on all facility irrigation systems. Staff reduced the overall all fuel consumption by 9% and the use of herbicides for weed control by 21%. Some of these efforts were supported with funding from the City Council's Innovation Program and City of Fort Collins Utilities. In addition to environmental benefits, sustainability projects are expected to save more than \$3,000 a year.



Happy Trails?

Did you know that the City has five major paved trails and over 30 miles of paved trail? An interdepartmental team worked to understand trail usage, visitors and improvements to inform the Paved Recreational Trail Master Plan. It was found that trails are important to residents' quality of life and there is a high level of satisfaction with the trail system. There are about 1.9 million trail visits annually. Generally the community wants more trails, and gaps in the trail system completed. The plan will be completed and presented to City Council in 2013.



Poudre Trail Extension

The City of Fort Collins and partners received a grant for over five million dollars to complete portions of the Poudre Trail between Fort Collins and Windsor and conserve open space along the trail. The funding came from Great Outdoors Colorado which uses lottery proceeds to support open space and parks. Fort Collins' portion of the project includes a trailhead parking lot and paved trail at Arapaho Bend Natural Area and an overpass over I-25 which will connect to the Town of Timnath's recently completed section of the Poudre Trail. The project will be constructed in 2014.



Mink with crawfish.

20th Anniversary

Can you believe it has been two decades since voters approved the first citizen-initiated sales tax to fund natural areas? Citizens in Fort Collins and Larimer County have voted to support natural areas sales tax ballot measures four more times! Thank you for making natural areas possible. The celebration kicked-off with a party attended by over 400 people featuring Mayor Pro Tem and longtime conservation advocate, Kelly Ohlson, as the keynote speaker. Everyone was invited to celebrate with a year of special activities from November 2012 to November 2013.

Kelly Ohlson, Mayor Pro Tem, District 5



Museum Exhibit

In November, the Natural Areas Visitor Center in the lobby of the new Fort Collins Museum of Discovery opened. It's free for everyone to learn about natural areas and why they are so dear to Fort Collins citizens. In the exhibit you'll find an interactive map, a shortgrass prairie diorama with live endangered black-footed ferrets, and videos of local residents sharing why they care about natural areas. You can pick up a map and other natural areas information too.



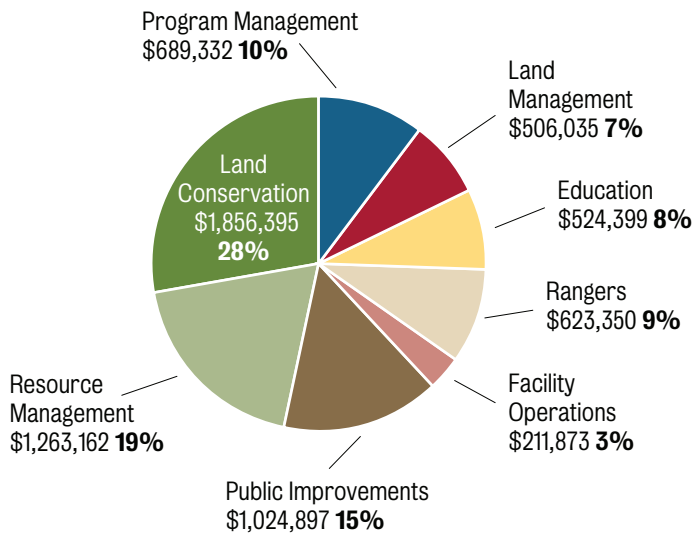
Voting With Their Time

It is very special that citizens support natural areas with sales tax funding, and it is very inspiring that some go even further by volunteering their time and talents to the Natural Areas Department. In 2012, about 1,600 volunteers donated over 13,000 hours, saving the City nearly \$300,000.

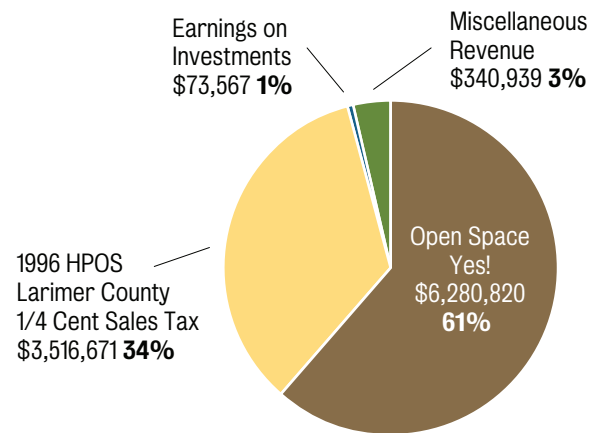
- **Master Naturalists and Assistants** educated and inspired stewardship by providing 302 classes, field trips and special events for the community. Over 130 volunteers made it possible to reach 14,735 people through natural areas activities and events.
- **Volunteer Ranger Assistants**- 150 Volunteer Ranger Assistants logged 3,000 hours greeting visitors, promoting outdoor safety and providing other support; a 22% increase. Thanks to everyone who makes this joint program with Larimer County such a success!
- **Adopt-A-Natural Area Volunteers** cleaned up natural areas once a month which benefits wildlife and fellow visitors.
- **Adopt-A-Trail Volunteers** made a three-year commitment to on-going trail maintenance; Ottercares adopted Pineridge Natural Area, Rocky Mountain Flycasters adopted Gateway Natural Area and Team Peloton adopted the Foothills Trail.
- **Nix Garden Volunteers** kept the native plant garden at the natural areas office looking beautiful.
- **Rare Plant Survey Volunteers** searched for undiscovered populations of rare plants and found 11 new populations!
- **Northern Colorado Astronomical Society** volunteers provided sky-gazing opportunities for the public at natural areas.
- **Service Learning Volunteers** helped with projects ranging from wetlands restoration to trail building. Volunteers even helped restore the historic White Pine Fire Lookout Tower at Running Deer Natural Area. Over 1,200 people volunteered in service learning projects, donating 3,800 hours!
- **Wildlife Camera Crews** at Bobcat Ridge and Pineridge natural areas visited the natural area regularly to check motion-activated wildlife cameras. They kept the community mesmerized by sharing the incredible photos captured.
- **Land Conservation and Stewardship Board** volunteers advised City Council about issues related to natural areas.

The Natural Areas Department is honored that so many residents choose to be deeply involved with natural areas, thank you.

Natural Areas Department 2012 Expenditures \$6,699,443



Natural Areas Department 2012 Revenues \$10,211,997



Why the Gap?

As the financial graphs indicate, there is a \$3,512,554 positive gap between revenues and expenditures. The gap is attributable to several factors: 1) in a bit of good news, revenues were somewhat higher than originally

projected; 2) land conservation projects are unpredictable and budgeted funds are carried forward until spent; and, 3) capital projects typically span several years and funds are carried forward during a project's term.

On The Trail

Rangers record hundreds of miles on foot and by bike patrolling natural areas and contacting visitors each year. Most of the interactions are positive; in fact, Natural Area Rangers logged 5,200 friendly or informational contacts with natural area visitors, handled over 650 phone inquiries and responded to 23 calls for medical assistance in 2012.



Energy By Design

At Soapstone Prairie Natural Area, the surface is owned by the City and the underlying minerals are owned by others who requested surface access. While the initial interest in mineral exploration was not realized, Natural Areas staff continued to work to address the possibility of oil and gas exploration and production through an Energy by Design planning process. This cooperative effort with Larimer County, The Nature Conservancy, and the State Land Board developed a common understanding of natural, cultural, scenic, agricultural and recreational resources at Soapstone Prairie. Then the partners designed a plan for mineral exploration and production intended to direct surface activities away from and conserve critical resources.





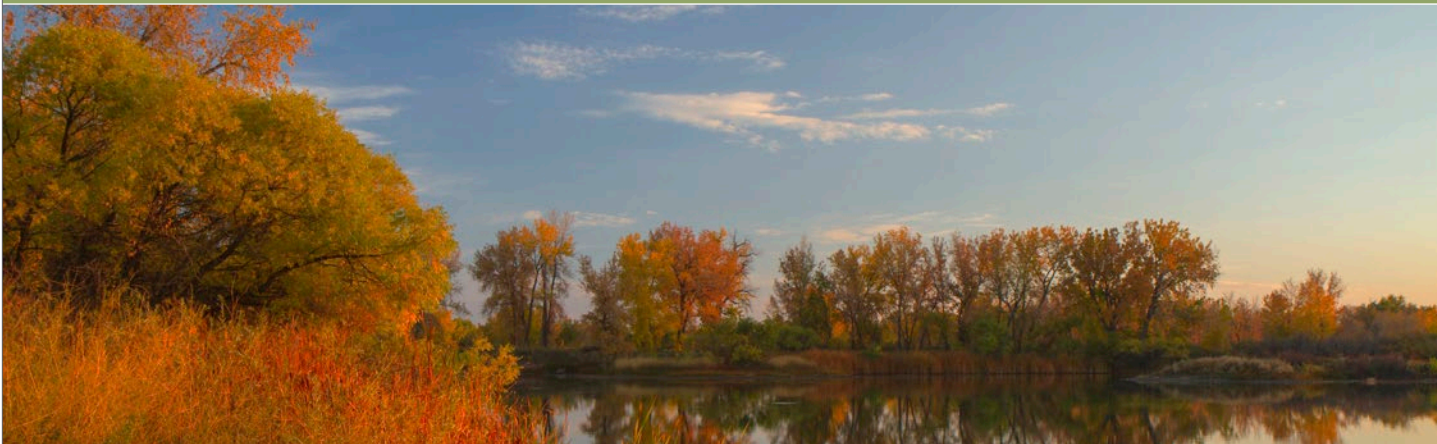
Our Lands—Our Future

The Natural Areas Department partnered with Larimer County and the municipalities within it on a regional study of land conservation, stewardship, and outdoor recreation called Our Lands—Our Future. In 2012, the project gathered feedback at several well attended public meetings, and completed a citizen survey investigating use and satisfaction with natural areas, community values for open space, and views on natural areas and trail management. When Our Lands—Our Future is completed in 2013, it will be used to inform the update of the Natural Areas Land Conservation and Stewardship Master Plan.

River Model

The Natural Areas Department improving understanding of the urban stretch of the Cache La Poudre River by creating an interdisciplinary ecological model. The Ecological Response Model (ERM) is based on a wealth of expert scientific knowledge combined with local data. Preliminary results of the ERM indicate that current flows,

which reflect withdrawals for municipal and agricultural uses, are approaching the low end of flow thresholds that matter for scouring of algae, aquatic habitat and channel maintenance. The ERM will foster a more informed dialog with a broad audience of stakeholders about the current and anticipated use and condition of the river. Moreover, the ERM will inform management and investment decisions.



CITY COUNCIL/CITY MANAGER

- Karen Weitkunat, Mayor
- Kelly Ohlson, Mayor Pro Tem, District 5
- Ben Manvel, District 1
- Lisa Poppaw, District 2
- Aislinn Kottwitz, District 3
- Wade Troxell, District 4
- Gerry Horak, District 6

- Darin Atteberry, City Manager
- Diane Jones, Deputy City Manager

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 with soy-based ink



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