



2014 | NATURAL AREAS ANNUAL REPORT

City of
Fort Collins
Natural
Areas

naturally yours

Conserving and Stewarding Treasured Lands and Waters

It was a truly outstanding year for the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department. The combination of reintroducing an endangered species, completing three major restoration projects, and a resounding vote of confidence from the community made this year one to remember. Just as important were the less headline-worthy, but still crucial efforts such as maintaining trails, conserving land and water, providing educational activities and serving natural area visitors. All this work adds up to a network of conserved land that is valued for many reasons from wildlife habitat to flood protection to recreation. It is naturally yours! We hope you enjoy reading about the accomplishments of 2014.



Serving You

Natural Areas Rangers and Visitor Services provided front-line customer service to thousands of visitors throughout the Natural Area network this year. Positive visitor contacts increased 20% and rangers communicated with over 8,600 visitors. Top violations rangers encountered this year were camping, dogs off-leash and closed trail use. Visitation at Gateway Natural Area was especially high breaking previous records. Rangers focused 40% of their patrol time on camping issues along the Poudre River in the downtown area.



Historic Designation

Have you ever noticed this unusual structure along the Poudre Trail near Timberline Road? It is the Great Western Sugar Company Beet Effluent Bridge and Flume, listed on the National Register of Historic Places by the US Department of the Interior this year. The Great Western Sugar Company factory was located on the site of the current City of Fort Collins Streets Department (625 Ninth Street). In 1926, a suspension bridge was installed to support a metal flume to carry the factory's waste slurry of mostly lime, beet pulp, and water across the river for deposition on company land. The flume was operational until the mid-1950s. Watch for an interpretive sign near the flume, on Kingfisher Point Natural Area, in 2015.



Waterway Conservation and Restoration

The community's vision for an ecologically healthy and resilient Poudre River corridor is moving forward. Natural Areas along the banks of the Cache la Poudre River are valued as a natural defense buffer against floods, an escape from the urban built environment, and a place where plants and animals thrive.

The Natural Areas Department conserved more of this ecologically important ribbon this year; a total of 246 acres in six parcels. Two of the parcels were conserved in partnership with the City of Fort Collins Utilities. One will provide a trail connection to the Poudre Trail and the other will allow for an addition of a mile section of the Poudre River Trail. Natural Areas received two gravel mine sites, 128 acres of land, FREE. (One site through a generous donation from an anonymous donor.) However the sites will cost in excess of one million dollars to restore.

Three major river and floodplain restoration projects were completed in 2014 despite the challenge of lengthy spring snowmelt runoff. The City's river restoration efforts are

rapidly becoming recognized as one of its most significant achievements.

- Restoration at McMurry Natural Area was completed in a 3-year, \$1.3 million project that reconnected the Poudre River with its historic floodplain.
- North Shields Ponds Natural Area's restoration was a \$1.2 million partnership with the Colorado Water Trust which included removing the abandoned Josh Ames diversion structure and lowering unnaturally steep riverbanks.
- Restoration at Homestead Natural Area included reconstruction of ½ mile of the Poudre River Trail.

These projects included 1.5 miles of river improvements, 11 acres of new wetlands, and 28 acres of cottonwood forest restoration. The Natural Areas Department was recognized for these projects with a prestigious award from the Colorado Open Space Alliance for Ecological Management.

Grassland restoration also made progress in 2014. In the Fort Collins/Loveland community separator, a large conserved corridor, the Natural Areas Department initiated 300 acres of new work which brings the total to 750 acres of grasslands undergoing restoration.



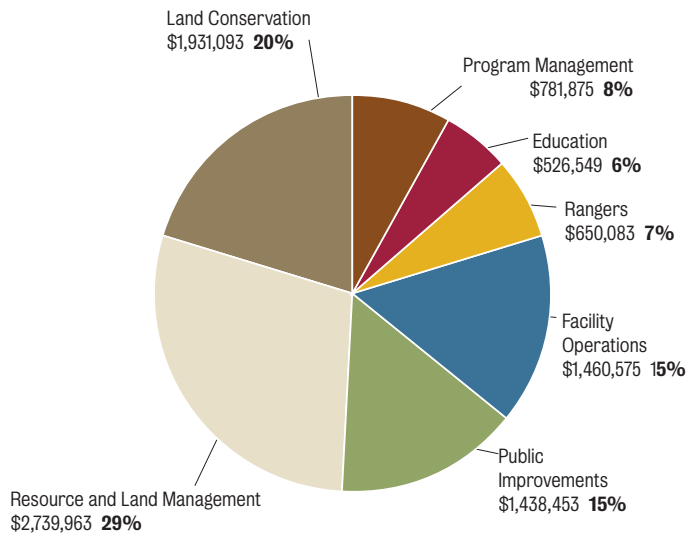
Black-footed Ferret Welcome Home

An important part of the shortgrass prairie ecosystem, endangered black-footed ferrets, were reintroduced to Soapstone Prairie Natural Area in 2014. The dream of bringing ferrets to northern Colorado is described in Soapstone Prairie's management plan (2009). The effort was led by the City and six federal, state and local partners in September. A state legislative bill in early 2014, sponsored by Representative Randy Fischer, cleared the way for Fort Collins to become the first municipality to reintroduce black-footed ferrets to its property. Soapstone

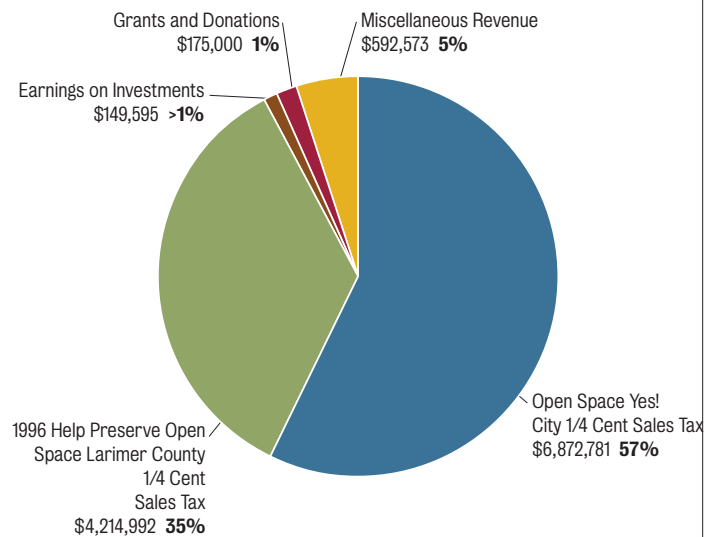
Prairie and Fort Collins Utilities' Meadow Springs Ranch served as the twenty-first reintroduction site in North America. Bringing black-footed ferrets home was recognized by the Colorado Open Space Alliance with a coveted award for Outstanding Achievement.

Black-footed ferrets were thought to be extinct until 1981 when a small population was discovered giving hope for survival of the species. From this population, a captive breeding program was started and has been successful. Soapstone Prairie is playing a role in black-footed ferrets' recovery by stewarding habitat and providing a site to test a new vaccine to control plague, which is fatal to black-footed ferrets.

Natural Areas Department 2014 Expenditures \$9,528,590



Natural Areas Department 2014 Revenues \$12,004,941



Broad Support

Thank you voters! Larimer County's Help Preserve Open Space sales tax ballot measure was approved by 82% of voters, a resounding vote of confidence and support for land conservation, recreation and stewardship. About 35% of the Natural Areas Department's operations are funded by the County-wide tax.



Connect and Learn

The Fort Collins community enjoys many opportunities for classes, outdoor activities and events celebrating nature and cultural history, all sponsored by the Natural Areas Department. It was a record-breaking year for participation! Staff and volunteers provided 381 activities and events reaching more than 17,600 people. One highlight was *Lindenmeier: Ancient Lives, Ancient Dreams*, a 4-day symposium focused on Soapstone Prairie Natural Areas' famous archeological site. The Natural Areas Department's outstanding educational program and team was recognized with an international award from the North American Alliance for Environmental Education.

Special People Helping Special Places

Over 1,500 volunteers generously shared their time and talents in support of natural areas and the community in 2014. These exceptional people donated 13,849 hours, the equivalent hours of 6.6 employees and a value of \$310,001 (\$22.55/hour, independentsector.org). Volunteers are a priceless component of the Natural Areas Department!

- **Master Naturalists and Assistants** led field trips, taught classes and staffed events for people of all ages covering topics spanning from archaeology to wildlife to native plants.
- **Volunteer Ranger Assistants** welcomed fellow trail users, shared information and served as “eyes and ears” helping to protect local and regional natural areas.
- **Natural Area Adopters** keep natural areas safe and beautiful for people and wildlife alike by picking-up litter monthly.
- **Service Learning-** Volunteers said, “We do it because it is fun and we love to help” or “I want my child to learn about volunteering and appreciate nature” or “Public lands are special and should be cared for by those that use them.” These quotes are from three of the 1,041 volunteers who participated in 73 one-day service learning projects such as trail-building, tree planting, or litter clean-up.
- **Adopt-a-Trail-** Thank you to Trout Unlimited, Ottercares Foundation, REI, Peloton Specialized Bikes, Trailcology and Colorado Addicted Trailbuilders Society who committed to three years of service and improved trails at Coyote Ridge, Gateway, Reservoir Ridge and Bobcat Ridge natural areas.

The Natural Areas Department is full of gratitude and we stand in awe of our volunteers! Thank you!



Trails

Natural area trails, roads and parking lots needed lots of attention from crews this year due to the September 2013 flood, heavy winter snow, high spring flows, and wetter than average spring rains. In addition, volunteers and staff made non-weather related trail improvements at eight natural areas. All this hard work resulted in 82% of trails being in good condition and less than 1% of trails in poor condition at the end of the year.

Renewed Signage

There are 17 natural areas along the Cache la Poudre River, and many lacked kiosks or up to date interpretive signs. New kiosk panels feature a map of the river corridor and a site map, fun photos, QR (quick response) codes that link to related websites, and information to help visitors enjoy their experience. The interpretive panels encourage visitors to engage with the plants, wildlife and interconnections of this special area. Look for the new interpretive signs and kiosks in early 2015.





Energy Leadership

The Natural Areas Department is committed to sustainability in its daily operations. In 2014, a new office building at Nix Farm was completed to bring all staff to the same location. Mario Miguel Echevarria's Art-in-Public Places mural, "The Great Sense of Passing Through" graces the entryway; it is a beautiful depiction of Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. The new building is on track to be the most efficient building in the City. Energy savings were achieved by meeting LEED Certified Gold Standards, including installing solar panels, using solartubes to increase natural lighting, and constructing a geothermal system for heating and cooling. Also in 2014, solar tubes, funded by the City's Innovation Fund, were installed in the Nix Facility Shop.



Plans Set Future Course

What do the next ten years hold? The Natural Areas Master Plan, completed this year, establishes priorities for conservation and stewardship of the City's natural areas for the next decade. The priorities are based on ballot measure language, the values and functions of the natural areas system as a whole, community input, and emerging trends and needs. The Master Plan will serve as the foundation for future site-specific management plans.

The Poudre River Downtown Master Plan was also completed this year with extensive participation, guidance, and leadership by Natural Areas Department staff. The Master Plan describes the vision for nearly 3 miles of sustainable river corridor (Shields to Mulberry Street) that provides habitat, recreation and flood mitigation benefits.

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