

Thank you Colton! Rocky Mt. High School student Colton Klemperer wrote this article for his school newspaper and shared with the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Program.

In the natural areas on the outskirts of Fort Collins, it is always possible to view numerous types of wildlife during a visit; the most frequent animal activity, however, occurs when humans aren't present.

Last June, the City of Fort Collins, along with the Rocky Mountain Cat Conservancy (RMCC) and seniors from CSU, set up eight motion-sensitive cameras in the Bobcat Ridge area, a natural area approximately one mile west of Masonville. The cameras, provided by the RMCC, are set up to take pictures whenever movement occurs. The original goal of the plan was to track the mountain lion population in the park and observe their behavior, but the city of Fort Collins became interested in learning the behavior patterns of other animals as well.

Eventually, the city contacted science teacher and Master Naturalist, Carol Seemueller, to help with the project, along with science teacher Scott Kemp, to bring high school students involvement into the program. Once a month, Seemueller and Kemp, along with biology students and other volunteers, hike to four of the eight cameras in the area and swap out the memory cards, so they can develop the pictures. The other four cameras are maintained by Master Naturalists.

Kemp stated that the main goal of this program is to gain a better grasp of the populations and behaviors of animals at Bobcat Ridge.

“We are studying the different types of animals in the area,” Kemp said. “Which species are there and when they are active.”

The hope is that the gained knowledge about the species in the area can be used in classroom discussions. When it comes to the wilderness cameras, Seemueller agrees that animal activity in specific ecosystems relates to the biology curriculum.

“We are studying how biodiversity changes with the seasons,” Seemueller said.

So far, the cameras have caught an immense amount of animal activity in the area. The first mountain lion was spotted on the cameras in December, but the amount of other animal activity on the cameras is extraordinary.

“We have seen bobcats, mule deer, elk, bighorn sheep, wild turkeys, rabbits, various birds, coyotes and black bears,” Kemp said.

Efforts have been made by many groups around Fort Collins to increase the public awareness of natural areas around the city and keep them protected. Bobcat Ridge Education Coordinator, Deborah Price, says there is great public support for projects in the natural areas of Fort Collins, and that there are many recreational opportunities in these areas.

“Natural areas are funded by citizen-initiated city and county sales taxes,” Price said. “Bobcat Ridge, for instance, has only been open for three years and we have seen visitation to the site grow remarkably during that time. Hiking, equestrian riding, biking, picnicking and wildlife viewing are all popular activities at Bobcat Ridge, as well as many other natural area sites in the city.”

Naturalists and environmental educators, like Price, agree that it is important to gain knowledge about the ecosystems that are present around us.

“If we all work together to protect and respect these beautiful places, we can continue to enjoy them and learn from them for years to come,” Price said.

Kemp and Seemueller continue to visit the cameras once a month, and anyone who wants to help volunteer is invited.