



Background:

Management planning is guided by the mission of the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department, which is to conserve and enhance lands with natural resource, agricultural, and scenic values, while providing meaningful education and appropriate recreation opportunities.

Bobcat Ridge Natural Area is conserved because of its diversity of wildlife, ecosystems, and natural processes. It is treasured for its unique recreational opportunities, and connection to the past. Thus, it will be managed to provide high-quality visitor experiences without sacrificing conservation priorities.

Over the years, Natural Areas has heard some interest to modify trail regulations or add trail extensions to create more loops. As part of the management plan process, Natural Areas examined opportunities to modify the trails and trail regulations.

Existing Condition and Research:

- There are 18.6 mile of trails:
 - Valley Loop and Eden Spur 6.7 miles of multi-use trails (hike/bike/horse).
 - Ginny Trail 5.4 miles of separate-use trail (hike/bike only).
 - DR Trail 3.2 miles of separate-use trail (hike/horse only).
 - Power Line Road 2.3 miles of multi-use road (bikes uphill only, hike/horse).
 - 1.4 miles of accessible ADA trail.
 - Off trail hiking is allowed.
- The trails at Bobcat Ridge were constructed to minimize habitat fragmentation, use existing roads where possible, and provide separated-use access to desirable destinations.
- Ten years ago, public feedback indicated a strong preference for separate-use trails (77%) over multi-use trails (23%).
- Trails are constrained by steep slopes, deep canyons, and rock outcrops, which make sustainable trail alignments challenging.
- Natural Areas has found that the Valley Loop gets the most visitation, as evidenced by trail maintenance needs. Short distance loop hikes (around three miles) are most popular and hikes of five miles or more tend to get fewer visitors.
- According to the 2016 Natural Areas Resident Survey:
 - 41% of visitors feel that natural areas are “slightly crowded”
 - 90% of visitors are very satisfied/satisfied with their natural areas experiences
 - Bobcat Ridge was the second most frequently visited natural area, second only to Coyote Ridge Natural Area.
- Bobcat Ridge is becoming a popular destination: visitation has steadily increased from an estimated 44,000 people in 2013 to 75,000 in 2016.
- Natural Areas did a scientific literature review focused on trail-use impacts to wildlife. A 390-foot “area of influence” was determined to be appropriate for habitat and wildlife similar to Bobcat Ridge (areas of influence ranged from 100 feet to 1/4 mile/1,320 feet).
- Using the 390-foot “area of influence,” Bobcat Ridge’s 18.6 miles of trail yield 1,265 acres of influence (or 67%) of Bobcat Ridge (including trails that cross US Forest Service lands).

- Analysis of wildlife camera data in 2009 found that wildlife use trails when humans are not present (for example, at night). These results further suggest that recreational use of Bobcat Ridge Natural Area may be adversely influencing wildlife to a limited extent.

Trail Options Considered:

1. No changes to current trail system.

Pros

- Maintain high visitor satisfaction and high visitation
- Minimizes need to increase parking
- No additional investment required

Cons

- No additional recreational opportunity

2. Add a new trail to replace Powerline Road and keep separate-use trail designations on Ginny and DR trails.

Pros

- Addresses concerns about visitor experience on Powerline Road
- Provides cyclists with an additional loop option
- Could reduce enforcement needs by eliminating “uphill only for bikes” regulation.

Cons

- Powerline Road needs to be maintained for Poudre Valley Rural Electric Authority access, which means it could not be restored. A new trail would result in additional habitat fragmentation in a sensitive area (drainage).
- Steep topography makes a sustainable trail alignment challenging.
- Investment required to build over 3 miles of trail.
- New trail may not be visited if shorter, more direct Powerline Road remained open.

3. Change designation of Ginny and DR trails from separate-use to multi-use.
4. Change separate-use trails (Ginny and DR) to multi-use on certain days of the week.

Pros

- Provide cyclists and equestrians with more trail options.
- No increase in habitat fragmentation.

Cons

- Potential increased visitor conflict.
- Increased investment in enforcement and communication would be required to ensure compliance.
- Removes uniquely attractive aspect of Bobcat Ridge that was requested by public in initial management plan.
- Removes the only opportunity for equestrians to have a bike-free experience in the City of Fort Collins natural area network.
- Other Front Range open space agencies that have tried trail directional changes have had mixed results.

5. Increase educational outreach efforts about trail difficulty.

Pros

- Assists visitors in choosing a trail that matches their ability.

Cons

- Increased investment in communications.
- May be confusing if visitors are not familiar with rating system.

6. Create new trails

- a. *On the Rocks* proposal ~0.5 mile trail connecting existing trails to form a loop in Mahoney Park to Ginny Trail.

Pros

- Provides expert mountain bikers a “lollipop” experience

Cons

- Increased habitat fragmentation.
- Appeals to a small segment of visitors.
- Could increase visitation creating additional parking issues.
- Rock outcrops and steep terrain make constructing a sustainable trail challenging.

- b. *Eden Valley Loop* proposal ~0.5 mile trail connecting existing trails to form a loop at the south end of the Valley Trail from the Ginny to the Eden Valley Spur.

Pros

- Provides an additional short loop to relieve pressure on Valley Loop.
- Would be valuable for educational field trips.

Cons

- Increased habitat fragmentation in an elk wintering area.
- Steep terrain and a deep canyon make constructing a sustainable trail nearly impossible.
- Alignment that avoids steep terrain is less than 0.3 miles, not adding much to the existing trail network.

Draft Recommendation:

Although several trail proposals were explored, no changes to trails are being proposed. Overall visitor satisfaction is high with the current situation, and there is concern about new trails attracting more visitors, making parking issues worse.

Natural Areas is also recommending increased outreach about trail difficulty using the International Mountain Bike Association’s rating system.

Existing plans call for regional trail connections within this region of Larimer County. Natural Areas will continue to be open to discussions about regional trail connections as opportunities arise.