

2014

# Larimer County Natural Resources

STATE OF THE RESOURCE





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*The Larimer County Natural Resources Department protects and manages some of the most stunning natural areas in Colorado, including Devil's Backbone Open Space. The Department spent 2014 listening to the public and planning the future of this open space. The outcome was an update to the Devil's Backbone Management Plan that includes a new trail and public gathering areas, continued protection of the backbone feature and other critical natural resources.*

*The development of the Devil's Backbone Management Plan was one of the highest profile projects completed by the Department in 2014, but it was not the only one deserving of attention. Our work encompasses many scales, from small rock wrens, a little bird with a penchant for rock patios, to our partnership with local farmers and ranchers to increase cattle and crop production. Each of our parks and open spaces have many stories to tell and I hope you enjoy the stories we've highlighted in the 2014 State of the Resource Report.*



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## Cattle and Crops Benefit from Wet Year

Amazing what an average rainfall year will do for farmers and ranchers, especially if it is coupled with extraordinary snow pack. Historically, the Fort Collins area gets about 14 inches of rain during the growing season (March-October) and in 2014 the area got nearly 13.5 inches; pretty normal. The surplus of water came from the mountains. In May, the South Platte Basin snow pack was 55% above average. This brought more water, more quickly, than some properties could handle. Like the September 2013 flood, many of Larimer County's riverine parks and open lands were damaged from rising water.

The silver lining: cattle and crops grown on County lands excelled. As Charlie Gindler, Larimer County Natural Resources' Agricultural Specialist says, in 2014 "cattle grew fat on native grass that could brush a cowboy's stirrups." Two-hundred head of cattle were given an extra month of grazing on Larimer County Open Spaces. Areas newly seeded to grass that normally struggle to grow, flourished. The dryland wheat crop at Long View Farm Open Space was good, producing 40 bushels per acre. The new seeding of grass and alfalfa at River Bluffs Open Space made hay the first year, producing 3 ½ tons of grass hay per acre and 4 ½ tons of alfalfa hay per acre. A banner snow year in the mountains and normal precipitation means more local grass and alfalfa for healthy cattle.



## Devil's Backbone Open Space Grows Up

Devil's Backbone Open Space turned 15 years old in 2014 and like many teenagers, is going through some growing pains. This open space is one of Larimer County's most popular and more than 65,000 people visited Devil's Backbone Open Space in 2014. This rise in visitation has caused management challenges including widening trails, user conflicts and unsafe parking conditions. To reduce these threats to natural resources and the visitor experience, Larimer County completed an update to the Devil's Backbone Management Plan. The 2014 plan calls for a reconfigured trailhead to provide safer parking, a new multi-use trail through Hidden Valley to disperse visitors and the designation of the Wild Loop Trail for foot-traffic only. These are major changes; what do you expect from a 15-year old?



## A Ring Around Pinewood Reservoir

*A ring around a reservoir can be a good thing, if it is a multi-use trail. Over 100 volunteers and two days of designing and digging got the trail going. The trail will be finished in 2015.*



## Healing Scars

Not all scars have to be permanent, especially if they are fire scars targeted by Larimer County's Land Stewardship Team. Over the past two years volunteers and staff have teamed up at Hermit Park Open Space to revegetate over 200 fire scars. Fire scars are the product of burning slash, or tree limbs and small diameter wood resulting from forest thinning efforts. The piles are burned to reduce fire danger and improve forest health and scenery. By breaking up charred soils and seeding native grass within the fire scar, the forest understory at Hermit Park is now more resilient and less likely to be invaded by noxious weeds. Native seed and a normal to wet spring and summer have erased many scars from the landscape.



## Kids and Science

*Kids joined forces with biologists to complete a bioblitz at Chimney Hollow Open Space. Over 300 species were discovered.*



# Spotlight on Stewardship

## *Patty Block*

Patty Block's conservation easement can't be missed, at least for anyone that has driven from Loveland to Estes Park. The Block Conservation Easement is located between the remarkable totem pole and the mouth of the Big Thompson Canyon along Highway 34. This easement protects the last line of striking hogbacks before entering the canyon. Patty Block, owner and operator of Rock Ridge Ranch and Relics, stewards this conservation easement. Thanks to her dedication, the ranch land will remain open space, protecting the scenic approach to the canyon.

Patty Block is the epitome of a responsible land steward. She believes that quality land stewardship is important for one word: sustainability. "If you don't take care of it, it won't take care of you", she says about her land. Patty has seen her ranch suffer from drought and other natural stresses, but through responsible and sustainable land management, her property has the resilience to recover year after year. Following an invasion of Canada thistle along Cascade Creek on the south side of her easement, Patty made a point to personally control the spread of thistle. Without this dedication, the ecological integrity of that stream corridor would no doubt be compromised. If you take care of the land, the land will take care of you; so it has for Patty Block.

As an avid natural beef rancher and premium hay producer, Patty relies on her land for her livelihood. She owns, grazes and boards a wide variety of animals including Salers cattle, donkeys, sheep, goats, and even a golden pheasant. The Block Conservation Easement supports all types of native wildlife as well, including golden eagles, elk, deer, bighorn sheep, bears, and mountain lions. You can thank Patty for not only conserving the scenic approach to the Big Thompson Canyon, but for preserving critical natural habitat.

Patty is one of the many private landowners Larimer County works with to protect land and water. Larimer County holds 46 conservation easements and each easement is monitored annually. No violations to the conservation easements were observed in 2014. It's a testament to the hard work our private landowners put in to conserving open space.



Photo by Liz O'Rourke

## They're Back... And Reproducing

Larimer County's bald eagle population continues to increase, with three new chicks fledged in 2014. The Three Bell I Conservation Easement produced one fledgling in 2014, which is the first fledgling produced from this nest since 2012. The Three Bell nest has been in place since 1998 and rebuilt (by humans) twice. The private landowners of this conservation easement have done a great job to protect the nest from disturbance.

A second bald eagle nest was established not far from the Three Bell I Conservation Easement, on the north shore of Fossil Creek Reservoir. Fossil Creek Reservoir Natural Area abuts the reservoir and was acquired by Fort Collins and Larimer County to protect its extraordinary breeding, wintering and migratory bird habitat. Bald eagle nesting activity was first observed at the Fossil Creek nest in 2013 and in 2014, two chicks fledged. At this rate, bald eagles may become a more common occurrence in eastern Larimer County.



## More Than a Pile of Rocks

Patio building is for the birds. Well, at least for the rock wren, a songbird that occupies the rock outcrops of Devil's Backbone and Horsetooth Mountain open spaces. The rock wren is easily overlooked, with its pale grey plumage, small body and habit of staying near the rocks. In fact, nothing about the rock wren is particularly extraordinary, except for their implausible patios.

Rock wrens are ground nesters and build stone patios at their nest entrance. The patios can be elaborate too, including hundreds of stones that weigh more than 1 kilogram (70 times the weight of the wren). Each rock can weigh a 1/3 of the bird's body weight. And guess who does the heavy lifting...mostly females!

New research conducted at Larimer County open spaces shows that the patios could improve nesting success. The patios act as a predator alarm system and improve nest dryness. Who would have known that a pile of rocks could be so important?



Photo by Nat Warning

*Larimer County Natural Resources receives funding for the acquisition and management of County Open Spaces and Parks from the 1995 citizen initiated “Help Preserve Open Spaces Sales Tax.”*

## 2014 STATE OF THE RESOURCE REPORT

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