

North Forty News

and archives of the Fossil Creek Current

The community newspaper for northern Larimer County, Colorado

June 2011

[News](#)

[Home Page](#)

[About Us](#)

[Advertising Info](#)

[Community Page](#)

Soapstone and Red Mountain: regional, national treasures

By Gary Raham
Nature Writer

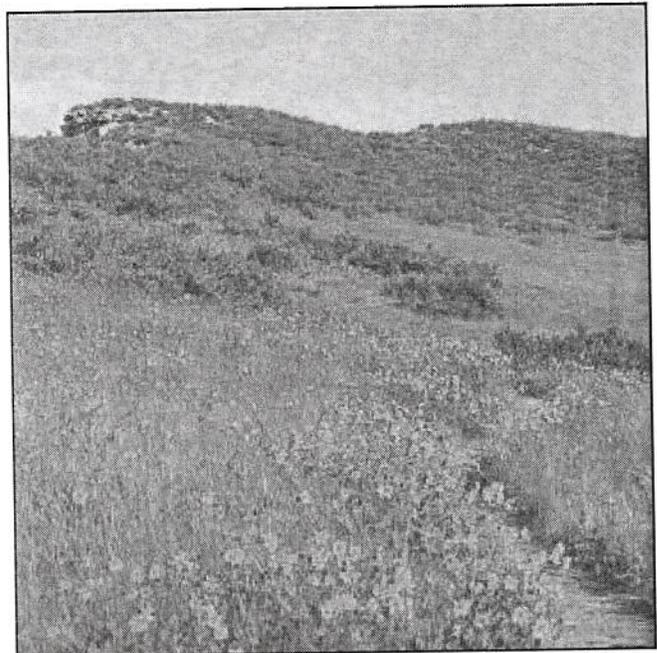
On May 8, I visited a place where the world turns upside down: Red Mountain Open Space. Contorted folds of iron-stained sediments arch across the mile-high sky, evidence of geological forces frozen in the moment. Strata buckle as mountains strain upward at the speed of a growing fingernail.

Adjacent to the county-owned Red Mountain space is the city-owned Soapstone Prairie Natural Area. I have presented programs there about the Lindenmeier site where a PaleoIndian left his spear point in a bison's backbone, mute testimony to triumph over a formidable Ice Age animal.

All Larimer County residents can enjoy these locations adjoining the Wyoming border and rightfully boast of them to others – spread across the nation and the world – who would love to have such treasures in their own back yards.

Before Soapstone Prairie Natural Area opened June 6, 2009, many people had their doubts about acquiring this 19,000-acre tract of land. Those who visit the area, however, can explore wildflower-studded trails and admire vistas their pioneer ancestors enjoyed.

"I think the public has become much more positive as they become more aware of the site, the natural



Soapstone floral splendor.

A riot of summer flowers border a short loop trail near the Lindenmeier overlook. Master naturalists will lead a wildflower biking tour of Soapstone Prairie on June 4. On June 25, the topic is "Secret Life of Plants."

–Photo by Gary Raham

and cultural resources, the recreation opportunities, and the Mountains to Plains conservation effort," said Mark Sears, natural areas program manager for Fort Collins.

The Red Mountain Open Space to the west provides additional prairie views that merge seamlessly with the rugged fractal geometry of rising mountains. This 13,500-acre property, whose acquisition was largely catalyzed by the Soapstone purchase, according to Sue Kenney, education and outreach coordinator for the Fort Collins Natural Area Program, also serves to provide a corridor for wildlife from the plains to the foothills. Many northern Colorado citizens can and do take pride in tax initiatives that allowed the preservation of a functioning fragment of the great North American prairie ecosystem encompassing some 32,500 acres. The entire Mountains to Plains conservation zone includes about 55,000 acres of public and private land.

Community pride is reflected in visits to the area as well as by the continued efforts of master naturalists with the city program and county naturalists who volunteer hundreds of hours to reveal the history and ecology of the region while hiking, biking or horseback riding.

Rachel Steeves, environmental planner with the Natural Areas Program, provided estimates of 10,500 visitors to Soapstone during its first year and 6,726 visitors in 2010. A 2009 record indicated that 60 percent of visitors hiked, 31 percent biked, and the remainder toured the area on horseback.

Travis Rollins, open space visitor service manager with Larimer County, reported that 6,031 people visited Red Mountain during its first six months of operation. "It has really become a destination property," he said, "even more than we expected."

Fort Collins recently posted the current edition of Tracks and Trails on its web site (www.fcgov.com), a guide to city-sponsored programs in natural areas. The direct line to a PDF file of the publication is www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/pdf/tracks-trails2011.pdf, but it is also available at natural area trailhead kiosks.

Most Saturdays, visitors can enjoy "9 a.m. with a Naturalist" programs at various natural areas. Soapstone Prairie, for example features a wildflower biking tour on June 4, a one-mile walk featuring the "Secret Life of Plants" on June 25, a one-half mile walk on July 9 and 30 titled "What's So Special About Soapstone," and a July 16 event, "A Morning with Thoreau."

Larimer County offers programs from its cadre of volunteers as well. Attendance may require vehicle entrance permits. Look for Current Events & News Releases at www.larimer.org/naturalresources/news.cfm.

Local amateur astronomers provide interesting experiences in night sky watching in regional natural areas. Many programs take place at Bobcat Ridge and Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space, but astronomers will provide an opportunity Oct. 22 to see the Orionid meteor shower at Soapstone. For details about Northern Colorado Astronomical Society events, visit <http://ncastro.org>. The Tracks and Trails publication also provides a schedule.

Meegan Flenniken, resource program manager with the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources, reports that scientists make use of Red Mountain Open Space as well. Denver Botanic Gardens and university herbariums have partnered to do a botanical survey this year. There is also an

ongoing insect release study on Dalmatian toadflax (an invasive weed), and Colorado State University archaeologist Jason LaBelle will be surveying an archaeological site threatened by erosion.

LaBelle has also been active working at and near the Lindenmeier site on Soapstone, continuing studies with PaleoIndian artifacts and helping to train the next generation of archaeologists. Soapstone was also the site of a BioBlitz in 2009 – a serious invasion by amateur and professional biologists during an intensive, 24-hour all-species count designed to get an overall assessment of biodiversity. The BioBlitz turned up a number of rare and new species, including a species of mushroom (*Smithiomyces crocodilinus*) whose further study may provide important insights into prairie ecology. Those master naturalists who want to participate in some continuing citizen science activities help out with rare plant surveys overseen by city botanist Crystal Strouse.

Both Soapstone and Red Mountain close in December, January and February. The property serves as important wintering range for mule deer, elk, bighorn sheep and pronghorn.

Kenney advises people to prepare properly for the trip to these sites. Expect some wind, cooler temperatures and fast-moving storms. Bring water, sunscreen and a selection of clothes to layer or shed as necessary. Cell phone coverage can be spotty. Rollins urges people to try out the Red Mountain experience, too, even though it's a bit of a jaunt and requires the same dose of preplanning.

"It's well worth the drive," he added enthusiastically.

Do you have a news tip? Do you have questions about a news story? Please contact our staff by phone (970-221-0213) or e-mail info@northfortynews.com.

[News](#)

[Home Page](#)

[About Us](#)

[Advertising Info](#)

[Community Page](#)

© North Forty News 2011

Send your comments and questions to info@northfortynews.com

Web site by S. Virginia De Herdt, Freelance Writer

Send your comments and questions about this web site to webmaster@northfortynews.com

Page updated 6/1/2011

Sylvan Dale Ranch adds to its conservation efforts

By Kevin Duggan

KevinDuggan@coloradoan.com

Another piece of the scenic Sylvan Dale Ranch west of Loveland has been preserved as open space.

Sylvan Dale general partners David and Susan Jessup have donated a conservation easement on 560 acres to Larimer County valued at \$450,000.

The donation means the land, which includes three parcels west of the main ranch near the mouth of the Big Thompson Canyon along U.S. Highway 34, will remain undeveloped beyond how it is currently used by the dude ranch.

The Cedar Creek conserva-

tion easement is the seventh donation the Jessups have made to the county since 1998. With the donation, the ranch has placed 1,720 acres under conservation easements.

The total easements are valued at \$1.9 million, said Charlie Johnson, senior land agent with county's natural resources department.

"They have donated more conservation value than anyone else in our history," Johnson said.

The land will continue to be used by the guest ranch for grazing cattle and trail rides. The parcels include the historic Cow Camp, which includes a

large rustic barn and an old homestead building.

Larimer County officials and the ranch representatives closed the deal Thursday. The conservation easement donation will allow the ranch to apply for state tax credits.

The 3,200-acre Sylvan Dale Ranch has been in the Jessup family for 65 years. Family members decided in 1995 they would use conservation easements to preserve as much of the ranch as possible while keeping it financially viable, said David Jessup.

"We wanted to keep the ranch as it is for future generations and keep it from being

developed," he said.

The Cedar Creek easement is part of the ranch's backcountry holdings, Jessup said. Cattle are driven to the area each summer to graze on the land and nearby national forest property.

Ranch guests participate in the cattle drives. The ranch raises Heart-J Pure Grassfed Natural Beef that is sold in local farmers markets, Jessup said.

The backcountry land has large meadows and ponderosa forest. It includes considerable wildlife habitat and a view of the mouth of the Big Thompson Canyon.

See EASEMENT, Page A1

Easement

Continued from Page A1

"It's beautiful up there," he said.

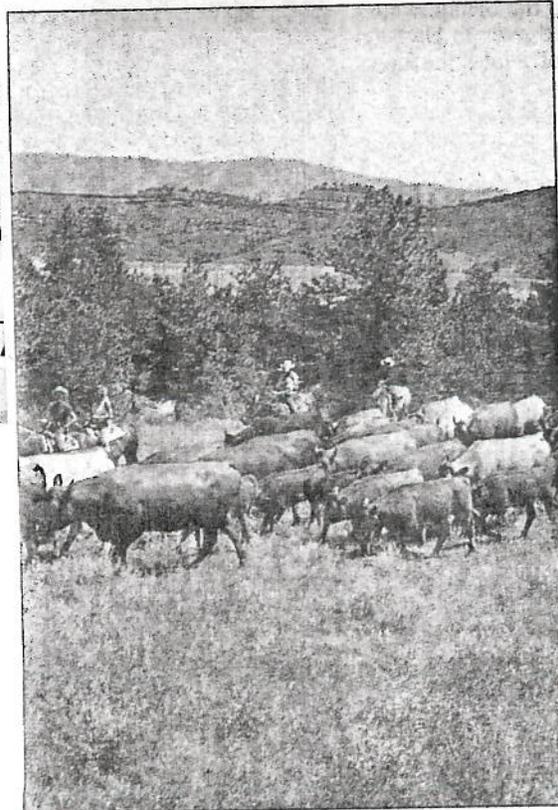
Historic structures on the easement include Cow Camp, which dates to the 1920s, the foundation of large barn and the remains of a sawmill built in the 1930s, according to

county documents.

The area likely includes part of the trail covered by Isabella Bird, who tried unsuccessfully to reach Estes Park in 1873 and wrote about her adventures in "A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains."

The ranch is likely to donate conservation easements in the future, Jessup said.

Poudre Canyon, the one with the markings on it?



Sylvan Dale Ranch guests help drive cattle through ranch property west of Loveland. The ranch has donated a conservation easement on 560 acres in the ranch's backcountry to Larimer County to keep it as open space.

COURTESY OF DAVID JESSUP