

Hike We Like: Red Mountain Open Space Loop

Explore one of the Front Range's most remote open space parcels.

BY

• **TERRI COOK**

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[PREVIOUS](#)[RESUME](#)[NEXT](#)

1 of 4



One leg of the Bent Rock Trail explores this beautiful canyon.

Why we love it: Seclusion, sandstone scenery, and abundant wildlife in one of the Front Range's most remote open space parcels.

When to go: Spring or fall, when temperatures are moderate. The area is open March 1 through the end of November.

This relatively flat, 5.5-mile loop explores the southern portion of Larimer County's **Red Mountain Open Space**. This parcel, along with the adjacent **Soapstone Prairie Natural Area**, preserves more than 55,000 acres of the Laramie Foothills, a striking landscape where the foothills of the Rocky Mountains meet the **Central Shortgrass Prairie**, creating an important ecological transition zone.

Grab a trail map at the parking area at the end of the road. Start your hike by following the Sinking Sun Trail through rolling grasslands dissected by small washes. Gusty winds and wide-open vistas emphasize the seclusion of this open space parcel, which is part of an even larger conservation effort to create an intact, mountains-to-plains wildlife corridor to benefit species that need large territories to roam, including mule and white-tail deer, mountain lions, and pronghorn.

After 1.3 miles, head west (left) at the junction with the Big Hole Wash Trail. Descend into this big, sandy wash and follow it 0.8 miles downstream to its junction with Ruby Wash, which may still have some water flowing in it. Both washes are crucial parts of the region's narrow riparian system upon which much of the region's wildlife depends.

At the next junction (marked as point 'D' on the stake and on the map), cross to the far side of Ruby Wash, then head south (left). After a short 0.4 miles, with spectacular views of layers of crimson-colored sandstone and mudstone so tightly folded that they're nearly standing vertically, you'll reach point 'C'. Instead of continuing to follow the smooth, wide road here, walk through the gate on the left that's marked with a hiking sign. After 0.3 miles, this path brings you to point 'B', which is the junction with the Bent Rock loop.

Here you're faced with a tough choice. You can continue straight into the beautiful canyon carved through the heart of the folded rocks. Or, if you'd rather hike this entire loop, turn right at this junction to wrap around the outside of the fold. After 2 miles, when you reach the junction with the shortcut through the canyon, you always have the option of exploring it from the eastern side. From this final junction on the Bent Rock Trail, it's barely another half mile back to your vehicle and the picnic shelters, the perfect place to pull out a cooler and reward yourself for a hike well done.

Getting there: From Denver, take I-25 North to Exit 281, Owl Canyon Road/CR70. Follow the signs to Red Mountain Open Space by turning west on CR70, then north (right) on CR15. Next turn west (left) on CR78, north (right) on CR17, west (left) on CR80, north (right) on CR19, and then left on CR21. Follow this good dirt road 7.5 miles to the open space boundary, then an additional 2.5 miles to the trailhead.

Logistics: There is no entry fee. Dogs are not allowed in Red Mountain Open Space, and bikes are not allowed on the Bent Rock Trail. No water is available at the trailhead.

Rattlesnakes spotted in Fort Collins: How to stay safe



[Stephen Meyers](#), The Coloradoan 3:09 p.m. MDT April 1, 2015



(Photo: Miles Blumhardt/Coloradoan library)

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Rattlesnake season is here, folks.

Wednesday, a Larimer County Parks ranger spotted a rattlesnake on a road near Devil's Backbone Open Space, the first known sighting of a rattlesnake this spring as they emerge from hibernation.

Read on to learn how to identify rattlesnakes, where you might find them and what to do if you've been bitten.

Where will I see rattlesnakes?

Rattlesnakes like rocky outcroppings, grasslands, rocky stream crossings and ledges. They den in prairie dog burrows, rock crevices or caves. You might see them on trails, most likely stretched across the trail to soak up warmth. It's likely they're in grasses and other vegetation beside a trail, all the more reason to stick to the designated path.

Here are common areas to see rattlesnakes near Fort Collins:

- Horsetooth Mountain Open Space
- Devil's Backbone Open Space
- Cathy Fromme Prairie Natural Area
- Coyote Ridge Natural Area

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- Pineridge Natural Area
- Reservoir Ridge Natural Area
- Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
- Greyrock Trail
- Hewlett Gulch

When am I likely to see rattlesnakes?

Rattlesnakes are active early spring through mid-fall. They hibernate in winter.

They are more active in spring, shortly after emerging from hibernation, so you might see a flurry of activity on the trails through May.

In summer, rattlesnakes are not likely to be seen in great numbers, but might be seen individually in their typical habitat, which can range up to 2 miles. Mornings and evenings are common times to see rattlesnakes out of their dens since temperatures are cooler.

In fall, you might see another flurry of activity as the rattlesnakes seek a warm place to hibernate for the winter.

What is the difference between a rattlesnake and a bull snake?

If you can't see the rattle, there are several other identifying features:

- Rattlesnakes have a chunky body with a blunt tail; bull snakes have a long, lithe body and pointed tail (with no rattle), though both snakes can make a rattle sound.
- Rattlesnakes have a white stripe pattern on the face; bull snakes have a black stripe over the eyes.
- Rattlesnakes have a wide head and narrow neck; bull snakes have heads and neck that are the same width.
- Rattlesnakes have eyes that are vertical slits; bull snakes have round pupils.

What do I do if I encounter a rattlesnake?

If you see a rattlesnake coiled and/or rattling, that means it's agitated. Keep your distance. Leave it alone. Rattlesnakes can strike at a distance of two-thirds of their total body length.

Wait for the snake to leave the trail. They are afraid of you, and prairie rattlesnakes, most commonly found in Northern Colorado, are the least aggressive rattlesnake.

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If the snake is going across the trail, stand still and wait for the snake to move away. Snakes do not see well, but they perceive sudden movement as a threat.

What do I do if I've been bitten?

If you or a member of your hiking party is bitten, look for swelling and large, bloody or dark-colored blisters forming in the bite area. Either of these symptoms means the bite was venomous. Some bites are dry, with no venom injected.

Call 911. Getting to a hospital as soon as possible is your main priority. Time is of the essence. Deaths due to snake bites often involve cases of elderly patients and delayed hospital care.

Keep the patient as calm as you can and gently immobilize the bitten limb, if possible, with an improvised splint. Don't tie it too tight, however. You don't want to reduce blood flow.

Remove all jewelry, watches and any other constricting clothing near the affected area in case of swelling.

Do not ice, use a tourniquet, try to suck out the venom (it doesn't work), or try to catch and kill the snake.

What about my pet?

Dogs are more likely to die from rattlesnake bites than humans due to difference in body weight. Keep your dog on a tight leash if you're in rattlesnake country. Dogs roaming free are more likely to be bitten by rattlesnakes than leashed dogs, and more than likely will be bitten on the nose or face from sniffing the ground. Get your dog to a vet as soon as possible if it's been bitten. Know beforehand if your vet stocks anti-venom.

Hot off the press: New wildflower guide for Larimer County

BY [NFN](#) ON MARCH 24, 2015 IN [DISPATCHES](#) · [ADD COMMENT](#)

Just in time for wildflower season, the “Wildflowers and Other Plants of the Larimer County Foothills Region” guide is here! This local field guide is geared toward the amateur and expert alike. Highlights include over 100 species of local wildflowers, grasses and woody plants, comparison pages of similar species, genus pages and a convenient size (4”x 6”).

Two programs will be held this week to discuss how best to use the guide and learn about plant families found in Northern Colorado. Guides will also be available for purchase for \$15 at these events. Cash and checks accepted.

- Wednesday, March 25 at 7 p.m. “Wildflowers of Larimer County” Join the Friends of Larimer County Parks and Open Lands at the Harmony Library in Fort Collins as they explore plant families and discuss a brand new field guide, Wildflowers and Other Plants of the Larimer County Foothills Region. Approximately 1.5 hour program.

- Thursday, March 26 at 6 p.m. “Wildflowers of Larimer County” Join Larimer County Natural Resources and the Colorado Native Plant Society at the Loveland Museum as they explore plant families and discuss a brand new field guide, Wildflowers and Other Plants of the Larimer County Foothills Region. Approximately 1 hour program.

Guides are also available for purchase at the Larimer County Natural Resources Administrative Offices, 1800 S. County Rd. 31, Loveland, CO 80537. Visit our website for office hours and directions at <http://larimer.org/naturalresources/contact.htm>

Bison coming to Soapstone Prairie Natural Area

BY [NFN](#) ON APRIL 3, 2015 IN [.QUEUE](#), [DISPATCHES](#) · [ADD COMMENT](#)

This fall, plains bison will be reintroduced to Soapstone Prairie Natural Area in a partnership between the City of Fort Collins, Colorado State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service and Larimer County Natural Resources Department.

The species conservation effort uses assisted reproductive technology to address the key challenge to bison — preserving genetic diversity and mitigating the disease brucellosis.

Bison once roamed the shortgrass prairie, and they are integral to its ecology. Soapstone's 2009 management plan calls for bison reintroduction. Preparations for the bison include re-routing the first two miles of the Cheyenne Rim Trail, installing a fence for the 880-acre pasture, and fundraising. Learn more at www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/bison.php.

Hunted to near extinction in the 1800s and later bred with cattle accidentally and intentionally, bison herds without some level of cattle ancestry are rare. A large, genetically pure herd can be found at Yellowstone National Park. But those animals are difficult to move outside of the park boundaries because they carry the brucellosis disease, which can be devastating to domestic cattle and can infect people.

Assisted reproductive technology, developed for cattle, might hold the key to re-establishing genetically important bison herds for species conservation. CSU's Animal Reproduction and Biotechnology Laboratory has implemented processes that allow genetic material from Yellowstone National Park bison to be cleansed of brucellosis and used to create embryos that are then transferred into bison in Fort Collins. The results are genetic descendants of Yellowstone bison that are disease free. These are the bison that will live at Soapstone and Larimer County's Red Mountain Open Space to found a seed herd — the Laramie Foothills Conservation Herd — for conservation efforts.

The bison pasture will be visible from Soapstone's entrance road and re-routed Cheyenne Rim Trail. A specially constructed fence will allow wildlife passage while containing the herd, about 12 animals to start. About 800 acres are within Soapstone and 80 acres are within Red Mountain Open Space. The bison are a native grazing animal in the shortgrass prairie and will play an important role in maintaining the ecology. Cattle will continue to be at Soapstone because they achieve conservation targets by mimicking native grazers. The Natural Areas Department has leased grazing rights to the Folsom Grazing Association, which has partnered with the Natural Areas Department on a number of conservation initiatives, including reintroduction of black-footed ferrets and this bison project. Larimer County has a cattle grazing lease on Red Mountain Open Space with a local rancher.

The bison project also offers a unique research opportunity, so the Natural Areas Department is partnering with CSU on studies to better understand the ecological response to bison grazing, and the Denver Zoo to better understand the social values of bison on the conserved landscape.

A ceremony welcoming the bison home will be held Nov. 1 — National Bison Day, and the first day of Native American History Month. Details will be announced in October. In the meantime, updates and information will be posted at www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/bison.php.

Volunteer naturalist assistants needed to help with guided hikes

BY [NFN](#) ON APRIL 7, 2015 IN [DISPATCHES](#) · [ADD COMMENT](#)

Interested in inspiring curiosity for the natural world in children and adults? Larimer County Natural Resources needs new Volunteer Naturalist Assistants to help with guided hikes and school field trips, and to interact with the public on Larimer County's parks and open spaces. Programs include ecology, geology, local history and more.

2015 Volunteer Naturalist Assistant Training

Tuesday, April 14, 6 p.m. – 9 p.m.

200 W. Oak St., Fort Collins

Carter Lake Room 150

For more information and to RSVP, please contact Heather Young at hyoung@larimer.org or 970-619-4489.

REPORTER-HERALD

Beware of rattlesnakes: They are emerging to enjoy warm weather

Bullsnakes are out too, and can be mistaken for rattlers

By Jessica Benes

Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

POSTED: 04/15/2015 07:43:17 PM MDT



A prairie rattlesnake basks in the sun at Devil's Backbone Open Space in Larimer County in 2014. (Steve Gibson / Special to the Reporter-Herald)

Rattlesnake Safety Tips

- Don't put hands or feet where you can't see. Look before you step over logs or rocks.
- Most snake sightings occur on summer mornings or evenings. Snakes are most active at temperatures between 50 and 80 degrees. Watch for snakes sunning on sidewalks and trails.
- Avoid places where rattlesnakes are likely to rest. During the day, snakes often seek cooler, shaded places where they are too hot. Avoid crevices, woodpiles, bushes and shrubs, and

small animal burrows.

- Leather boots may provide better protection from bites.
- If you see a snake, leave it alone. Most snake bites occur when people try to catch them. Back away slowly and give the snake an easy escape route.

—provided by Jennifer Churchill with Colorado Parks and Wildlife

This is the time of year when snakes emerge from their snake dens — or hibernaculums—to enjoy the warmer weather, according to Travis Rollins with the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources.

Rattlesnakes have already been spotted at locations such as Devil's Backbone, along the Loveland Recreation Trail west of Taft Avenue, and at Rabbit Mountain Open Space in Boulder County, where a woman was bit on Sunday and transported to Boulder Community Health.

"Rattlesnakes emerge typically mid-April to May 1. That is when we see snakes come out for spring," Rollins said. The prairie rattlesnakes are found all along the prairie lands and foothills on the Front Range in spring and summer and have shorter times outside their dens at higher elevations.

REPORTER-HERALD

Rollins said several species at a time might use the same den well below the frost line to not freeze during the winter. As it starts to warm up and the temperature rises, the snakes emerge, but don't stray far from their dens at first.

A Loveland citizen spotted a snake on the Loveland Recreation Trail in west Loveland that could have been a rattlesnake or bullsnake.

Janet Meisel-Burns, senior parks planner for Loveland, said, "I can tell you that snakes can be found anywhere in our parks, open lands and trail systems once the warm temperatures arrive and they are currently out now."

Rollins said that a rattlesnake has a diamond-shaped head and rattles on its tail. The bullsnake tends to be similar in color but has a longer length and a rounded head. The bullsnake is not venomous and has no rattles on the tail, although it can mimic the noise of a rattlesnake with its mouth.

"They will pretend to be rattlesnakes to fend off their predators," Rollins said.

While a bullsnake will squeeze its prey to kill it, the rattlesnake uses the venom in its fangs.

Rattlesnakes are generally not aggressive unless they feel threatened and bullsnakes are rarely aggressive.

"Usually the point of (rattlesnakes) coiling up and rattling gives you the opportunity to move away and not get bit. If you give it a wide berth and keep a good distance, you won't have a problem with it," Rollins said.

He knows of two people that were bit by rattlesnakes in Larimer County parks and open spaces in 2014 and several dog incidents.

"Typically it's because people don't keep them on a leash. Rattlesnakes hear the dog; the rattlesnake coils up and starts rattling; the dog passes through that safety zone and gets too close," he said. "It's a good idea to keep (dogs) on leashes."

If recreators want to be extra cautious, they should wear longer pants like jeans and high boots such as snake gators, Rollins said.

If a person gets bit, he or she should call 911 and sit down and wait, if that's possible. Moving as little as possible will keep the venom from traveling through the system as quickly.

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A bullsnake hangs out on a sidewalk at Fossil Creek Reservoir in Larimer County. Bullsnakes have similar markings to rattlesnakes but are not poisonous and do not have rattles. They can, however, mimic the sound of a rattlesnake with their mouths. (Steve Gibson / Special to the Reporter-Herald)

"If you don't have cell service and no one is around, the next best thing is to try to walk very slowly back to the point where you can make a phone call or get help," he said. "You don't want to elevate the puncture because you don't want the venom trying to get closer to the heart."

He said visitors should not be discouraged from getting out and recreating. People just need to be aware and cautious.

"Last year we had two bites and hundreds of thousands of visitors," Rollins said. "It's not very common (to be bit by a snake)."

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North Front Range Sport Shooting Partnership draws hundreds of public comments, questions

By John Fryar
Staff Writer

POSTED: 04/13/2015 08:27:29 PM MDT | UPDATED: 3 DAYS AGO



Billy Smith waits for a clay pigeon to be thrown while shooting on land along County Road 217, near Allenspark, Monday. (Lewis Geyer / Staff Photographer)

Residents of four northern Colorado counties will continue to have many opportunities to comment during a multi-jurisdictional effort to try to identify potential target shooting sites on public lands.

[Northern Front Range Recreational Sport Shooting Management Partnership](#)

Information about the multi-agency project is available at the Sport Shooting Management Partnership's website, SportShootingPartners.org. People can also contact Garry Sanfacon, the project coordinator, at info@sportshootingpartners.org or 720-564-2642

During a Monday night meeting that was streamed live via the Internet, the Northern Front Range Recreational Sport Shooting Management Partnership — a group whose members are Boulder, Larimer, Gilpin and Clear Creek counties, the U.S. Forest Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife — emphasized that public participation will continue to be sought as the partnership pursues its strategies for providing safe and accessible shooting opportunities.

The partnership is trying to identify possible sites while addressing any potential conflicts with nearby residential areas and with hikers, cyclists and other recreational users of those lands.

While Monday's meeting wasn't a public hearing, partnership members spent much of Monday's meeting discussing and responding to common themes that project coordinator Garry Sanfacon said he'd identified in the more than 270 written comments that people had submitted.

Boulder County Commissioner Deb Gardner, for example, fielded a set of questions about why other groups, such as the National Rifle Association and sport shooting clubs, haven't been included in the partnership.



A sign along Colo. 7, near Allenspark, Monday. (Lewis Geyer / Staff Photographer)

Gardner said partnership members are the public land-management entities that'll have the ultimate authority to designate lands for shooting — something she said would follow a public review process.

Shooting groups, as well as other organizations and individuals, will have opportunities to be participate in any site-selection discussions, Gardner said, and people can

continue to send their questions and comments to the partnership in the meantime.

Larimer County Commissioner Tom Donnelly noted that any target-shooting sites that result from the partnership's effort would be open to people living outside the four member counties or the federal lands within those counties.

Donnelly and others in the partnership have said they know that many residents from across Colorado want a safe place to shoot, and that many private ranges have waiting lists, so the partnership has an opportunity to create safe sites within areas where people already are shooting.

Another set of people's pre-meeting comments questioned why all four of the counties are being expected to suggest public target shooting sites. Gilpin County Commissioner Gail Watson said one reason is that experience has demonstrated that whenever one area is closed to shooting, that usually just results in the shooters moving to another area.

Some sent comments questioning whether shooting should be allowed at all on local or federal government lands within the four member counties. But several of the partnership members emphasized that they are trying to identify locations where it can be done safely, rather than prohibiting it.

Some people have expressed concerns that one of the group's primary goals is to ban or close more areas to shooting, Gardner said, "but that's not what we're about."

Said Clear Creek County Commissioner Tom Hayden: "Safety is the No. 1 criteria that we're after here" — not only the safety of the shooters themselves, but of others using or living in the mountain and foothills areas being studied.

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Billy Smith throws a clay pigeon for LeeAnna Anderson while they were shooting along County Road 217, near Allenspark, Monday. (Lewis Geyer / Staff Photographer)