

BCNA Ecosystem Plan – Indian Peaks ECA

This is the second in a series of articles that explores the evolution of the BCNA Ecosystem Plan and the current status of the core preserves and habitat connectors.

The largest of the Environmental Conservation Areas (ECAs) is centered on the Indian Peaks Wilderness and Rocky Mountain National Park. At 100,000 acres, it represents just over 20% of Boulder County. It is our connection to the Continental Divide, the spine of the Southern Rocky Mountains, and the greater Rocky Mountain National Park ecosystem. If lynx and wolves make it back into the county, they will come from this direction. This is the summer home of most of our elk herds and bighorn sheep. Old growth forests, willow carrs, boreal toads, black swifts, twayblades, ice grass, and several species of moonwort are present. For some animals, this is probably their population source area. A study of black bears in Rocky Mountain National Park indicated a higher probability of mortality once they left the park and went to lower elevations.

Conservation efforts over the past twenty years have focused on protecting some key ecological components at the lower edge of the ECA: montane parklands and habitat connectors to lower elevations. In the mid-1980s, Lee and Virginia Evans donated a conservation easement on the 650-acre Arapaho Ranch, a montane parkland with important wetlands, grasslands, and transitional elk range, to Colorado Open Lands. BCNA worked with the City of Longmont and Rocky Mountain National Park to help secure greater protection of the Copeland Willow Carr (at 77 acres, it is the largest montane willow carr in the Front Range). The site became designated as a State Natural Area. Boulder County, City of Boulder, and GOCO funds were used to acquire easements or fee title to much of Caribou Ranch, another significant montane parkland. Near where the South St. Vrain Creek crosses the peak-to-Peak Highway, a group of property owners (Benedict, Welch, Goodnow, McKenna, Schmoll, and others) have donated conservation easements to the Nature Conservancy and Boulder County to protect this important parkland and habitat connectors between the Indian Peaks, South St. Vrain, and Walker Mountain ECAs.

In the late 1980s, BCNA supported, both financially and with volunteers, a study of the movements of the Winiger Ridge elk herd. One of the outcomes of the study was the recognition of the importance of Reynolds Ranch and surrounding lands along Magnolia Road to animal movement between Winiger Ridge and the Arapaho Ranch and Indian Peaks. Boulder County Open Space eventually purchased Reynolds Ranch and some of the surrounding lands in order to protect this wildlife movement corridor.

Caribou Flats and Park have long been recognized as significant sites for a number of rare plants and butterflies. It also contains some large subalpine willow carrs. A cooperative management effort between the Forest Service, Calais Resources, City of Boulder Utilities, and several 4-wheel Clubs has helped reduce damage from off-road vehicles.

-Dave Hallock