

BCNA Ecosystem Plan

Walker Mountain, Fourmile Creek/Bald Mountain, and Winiger Ridge ECAs

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

These three Environmental Conservation Areas (ECAs) are located in the heart of Boulder County's mineral belt. The fragmented land ownership pattern made it problematic for piecing together habitat core areas. But these three all have significant ecological qualities along with geographic importance. They are a bit smaller and more isolated than areas like the North St. Vrain and South St. Vrain/Foothills ECAs. They are a bit like islands within a sea that contains a higher degree of development and fragmentation than other montane areas to the north or subalpine lands to the west.

The Walker Mountain ECA is generally located south of Jamestown, north of Lefthand Canyon, east of the intersections of James Canyon Dr. and Lefthand Canyon, and west of Ward. It contains several roadless areas, stands of old growth ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir, an elk winter concentration area, and a high quality riparian area along Spring Gulch. This area has been a good success story for local conservation actions, most by local residents. Citizens of Jamestown, particularly through the James Creek Watershed Initiative, have been working to protect the water of James Creek and the forest ecosystems surrounding it. They helped convince the Boulder County Commissioners to close Road 102J, linking Jamestown to Gold Lake, to motorized travel due to erosion in James Creek. They have been working to control the creation of social trails by unauthorized motorized recreation in the Walker Mountain area. Several of the property owners south of Overland Road and along the Peak-to-Peak Highway have donated conservation easements to The Nature Conservancy. These easements protected an important animal movement corridor linking Walker Mountain ECA to the Indian Peaks, and effectively expanded the core area. Boulder County has been acquiring inholdings within the ECA to further reduce fragmentation.

Three ecologically significant areas anchor Fourmile Creek/Bald Mountain ECA. Bald Mountain (the one along the Switzerland Trail railroad grade road) is a Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) Element Occurrence of Foothills Ponderosa Pine Savannah, as well as several other types of montane grassland.

Todd Gulch Fen, located along the Gold Hill Road, is a CNHP Potential Conservation Area. The third area is a one-mile stretch of Fourmile Creek between Sunset and the Peak-to-Peak Highway that is roadless and trailless. This ECA has significant problems from unauthorized motorized recreation. The west flank of Bald Mountain has a social dirt-bike trail heading straight up toward the top. The Forest Service has tried to close this trail several times, but it continues to be used, causing erosion and spreading noxious weeds. The one success story for this area came with assistance from BCNA. The original Forest Plan showed a proposed trail following Fourmile Creek. During the most recent update to the plan, this trail was removed due to public comments.

Winiger Ridge ECA is another core area that is showing improvement over the past 20 years. Winiger Ridge has long been known as an important wintering area and movement corridor for elk. The area contains two important Foothill Riparian areas along South Boulder Creek (above Gross Reservoir) and Winiger Gulch, both recognized by CNHP as Potential Conservation Areas. And there is growing success in controlling unauthorized motorized recreation.

The local Preserve Unique Magnolia Association has been actively working with the Forest Service to rein in inappropriate activities. A major success occurred last year when the Forest Service gated and closed a road heading south of Winiger Gulch, making the area between Winiger Gulch and South Boulder Creek an effective core preserve. BCNA and other organizations had been pressing for this action for over a decade. Though the gate lock was destroyed by small explosives (our own local terrorists), the gate has been relocked. This area will take ongoing vigilance to protect.

-Dave Hallock