

BCNA Ecosystem Plan

Hawkin Gulch/Walker Ranch/Upper Eldorado Canyon ECA and Boulder Mountain Parks/South Boulder ECA

(This is the fifth 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 two Environmental Conservation Areas (ECAs) are side-by-side and work together to protect critical resources in the south-central part of the County. Each contains a multitude of significant plants, plant communities, and wildlife. And together they total 38,000 acres, providing an important mountain to prairie link.

The protection of the Boulder Mountain Parks/South Boulder ECA began with the creation of the Boulder Mountain Parks. The canyons and peaks of the Mountain Parks are very diverse floristically, harboring a number of rare plants, including dwarf wild indigo, paper birch, Rocky Mountain sedge, broad-leafed twayblade, white adder's-mouth, pictureleaf wintergreen, and Weatherby's spike-moss. Through the work of the City of Boulder and Boulder County's open space programs, this ECA has expanded east all the way to McCaslin Blvd. The ecosystem is now more complete: not only are the nesting sites of golden eagles, prairie falcons, and peregrine falcons protected in the flatirons and canyons, but also their feeding grounds on the grasslands to the east. These grasslands periodically contain one of the largest prairie dog colonies in Boulder County. Ute ladies' tresses orchid and Preble's meadow jumping mouse are some of the significant biological elements present. Marshall Mesa, Eldorado Springs Canyon, and Tallgrass Prairie are designated Natural Areas. This ECA is now adjacent to the 4,000-acre Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge to the south. And the City of Boulder has been working to protect lands across the border in Jefferson County, such as the recent purchase of a conservation easement on the 464-acre Hogan Ranch.

Walker Ranch is the heart of the Hawkin Gulch/Walker Ranch/Upper Eldorado Canyon ECA. It was one of the earliest Boulder County Open Space acquisitions. It provides important winter range for elk. The western portion of this ECA, centered on Twin Sisters, is a critical migration corridor for elk and other large mammals; this site became an important habitat connector due to the creation of Gross Reservoir in the 1950s, which is an effective block to east-west movement of animals in this part of the county. The canyons and gulches between Flagstaff Drive, Boulder Canyon and Magnolia Road, including Hawkin, Keystone, and Calhoun Gulches, are wild and rugged areas. Upper Eldorado Canyon is another wild and rugged gem. Ownership is mixed between Eldorado Canyon State Park and Boulder County Open Space. Running through this area is South Boulder Creek. It is one of the few roadless foothill creeks in the county, the others being Fourmile Canyon Creek and the North St. Vrain Creek. All of the others, including Boulder Creek, Fourmile Creek (the Fourmile Creek that heads to Sunset), Lefthand Creek, James Creek, and South St. Vrain Creek, are impacted by adjacent roads.

- Dave Hallock