

BCNA Ecosystem Plan

Rabbit Mountain ECA

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

This Environmental Conservation Area in the north-central portion of the county is one that was built from scratch. There were no public lands to begin with, but there were some large ranches and other land holdings that possessed important ecological attributes.

The formal protection of the Rabbit Mountain ECA began in 1984, when the County acquired the old Moomaw Ranch on top of the mountain. BCNA member Mike Figgs saw the “for sale” signs and contacted the County about acquiring the property. This became one of the more contentious open space acquisitions of its time. Many felt that this property was “too far out there” and there was little threat of it being subdivided. Others, particularly hunters that had used the property for years, feared the loss of their sport. I vividly remember the testimony at the public hearing of one 12-year-old boy whose father and grandfather had hunted on Rabbit Mountain, and the boy wondered if he would ever get that opportunity. And there were fears of the mule deer herd overpopulating the area if hunting ceased. But the Commissioners did not buckle under to the sentiment and approved the acquisition. Commissioner Jack Murphy said it best, that some may criticize them for purchasing Rabbit Mountain that day, but many more people would praise the decision in the years to come.

The protection did not stop there. The County has acquired land and easements on almost 6,000 acres, spanning from the St. Vrain River, across Dowe Flats, and north to the Little Thompson River. So, not only was the mountaintop saved, but also the surrounding lowlands and habitat connections to riparian corridors. The golden eagles that nest on the east side of the mountain not only have their nest site protected, but their feeding grounds as well.

Rabbit Mountain is a unique eastward extension of the foothills. It contains several imperiled plant communities that include ponderosa pine, mountain mahogany and several prairie grasses. A population of the rare Bell’s twinpod is found there. The ECA is a concentration area for raptors during the winter due to the presence of prairie dogs on Dowe Flats (between occurrences of plague) and many other small mammal species on Rabbit Mountain. Several herds of mule deer use the property, some for winter range, as do white-tailed deer and occasionally elk.

The piecing together of this ECA has been an ecological success story. Commissioner Jack Murphy was right!

-Dave Hallock