

BCNA Ecosystem Plan

White Rocks/Gunbarrel Hill ECA and East County ECA

This is the eighth and last 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 east part of the County. Each contains a multitude of significant plants, plant communities, and wildlife. And together they total 15,000 acres, providing an important movement corridor along Boulder Creek and between Boulder and St. Vrain creeks.

The White Rocks/Gunbarrel Hill ECA spans west to east from N75th Street to Highway 287 and north to south between Highway 52 and Valmont Road. The White Rocks and the riparian lands along Boulder Creek form the heart of this area, as does Gunbarrel Hill, which was once a dryland farming area and is now being restored to prairie. Ricky Weiser, whose family has owned the White Rocks for decades, was the primary activist involved in the preservation of these lands. The White Rocks harbor a number of imperiled plants and animals, including rare ants and ferns. There is a high concentration of nesting raptors, good quality riparian habitat and significant wetlands. Portions of Boulder Creek are being restored by the City of Boulder as meanders are being put back into portions that were straightened. One of the largest great blue heron rookeries is located in this ECA. The area contains the White Rocks State Natural Area and the Heron Rookery State Natural Area.

The East County ECA spans north to south between St. Vrain and Boulder Creek, and west to east between Highway 287 and the county line. Much of this area is irrigated farmland, which is being acquired by the County as fee title or conservation easement. The farmland provides a level of seclusion necessary for nesting Swainson's hawks. Some of the ecological gems of this ECA include Boulder Creek, Panama Reservoir, Lefthand Creek, and St. Vrain Creek. Great blue herons have a small rookery in this area. Restoration will occur along the riparian corridors, some of which will happen after sand and gravel extraction. The area provides a movement corridor for white-tailed deer between Boulder and St. Vrain Creeks.

- Dave Hallock