



# State of the Resource

**Larimer County Department of Natural Resources - 2012**

## 2012 - State of the Resource

Welcome to the “State of the Resource” - an overview of land stewardship activities completed by the Larimer County Natural Resources Department. The Department partners with landowners and agencies to manage more than 47,000 acres of land. These areas are some of Larimer County’s most beautiful, productive and ecologically important landscapes.

The year 2012 was defined by broad planning projects like Energy by Design, a project aimed to protect resource values at Red Mountain Open Space in light of severed mineral rights. The Poudre River was also a priority and multiple restoration projects were implemented along its banks to reduce erosion and non-native plants. Rare and endangered species were even discovered on some of your open spaces.

This was a very exciting and busy year to say the least and I think you will be impressed at the breadth and depth of projects noted in the report. Please contact us with any additional questions it may conjure, and most importantly, please continue to enjoy your Larimer County parks and open spaces.

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*Support for stewardship of Larimer County’s open spaces comes from the 1/4-cent Help Preserve Open Spaces Sales Tax. Since citizens initiated the tax in 1995, the Department of Natural Resources has protected and manages over 47,000 acres of land for conservation and recreation.*



### Conservation Easement Monitoring

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Photo credit: Charlie Johnson



### Poudre River Restoration Projects

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Photo credit: Grant Gurnee



### Mountains to Plains Energy by Design

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Photo credit: John Fielder



### Russian Olive Removal

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Photo credit: Jamie Dahl



### New Rare Plant Discovered

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Photo credit: Jeffrey Boring



### Raptor Report

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Photo credit: Lou Hegedus



### Ecological Report Card

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Photo credit: Jeffrey Boring



### Teaming Up For Trails

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Photo credit: John Bender



### Weed Be Gone

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Photo credit: Steve Priest



## 0 Is a Big Number

All 42 conservation easements held by the Natural Resources Department, including Heron Lakes, the newest conservation easement, were monitored in 2012. In addition, Larimer County owns and manages 10 properties protected with conservation easements, such as River Bluffs Open Space and Red Mountain Open Space. In total, over 33,000 acres of protected land were monitored in 2012 and 0 violations were observed. Now, that's big!

## Focus on the Poudre

Two major restoration projects focused on the Poudre River in 2012, at River Bluffs and Lions' open spaces. Through a grant provided by Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) and a partnership with the Larimer County Conservation Corps, over 700 exotic Siberian elm trees were removed along the Poudre River at River Bluffs Open Space. At Lions' Open Space, the focus was planting trees and shrubs to restore a native riparian corridor along the Poudre River. A formerly eroding and barren riverbank was bioengineered and over 15,000 native plants were installed through a unique partnership, at no cost to the Department.



## Safeguarding Red Mountain Open Space

The Natural Resources Department partnered with the City of Fort Collins, State Land Board and The Nature Conservancy to develop a plan that will ensure the natural and cultural resources on Red Mountain Open Space, Soapstone Prairie Natural Area and Meadow Springs Ranch are protected if oil and gas development occurs. The mineral rights are severed and owned by other parties, so neither Larimer County nor Fort Collins can prevent oil and gas development. The plan, known as Mountains to Plains Energy by Design, is a cutting edge, science-based approach to avoiding, minimizing and mitigating impacts to natural, cultural and recreational resources from mineral development. A comprehensive set of best management practices, reclamation standards and compensatory mitigation requirements will ensure the conservation values that define this protected landscape will remain preserved, while allowing mineral owners reasonable access.



## 2 Public Agencies + 2 Private Landowners + 14 Volunteers = Restoration Success

The formula for restoration success at the Three Bell Conservation Easement has been proven. The Natural Resources Department partnered with the Colorado State Forest Service, private landowners and volunteers to remove more than 30 exotic Russian olive trees from the site. These aggressive trees displace native cottonwoods and willows and convert open riparian forests to a dense stand of thorny shrubs. These volunteers, tougher than the KGB, took care of the Russian olive trees at Three Bell CE.

## New Rare Plant Discovered at Eagle's Nest Open Space

A new occurrence of a rare species, jeweled blazingstar (*Nuttallia speciosa*), was discovered at Eagle's Nest Open Space. Like many imperiled plant species, this small inconspicuous plant is a habitat specialist and requires uncommon soils or ecosystem processes to survive. Studying rare plants provides a greater understanding (and appreciation) of the open spaces we manage. Additionally, two rare plants, Bell's twinpod (*Physaria bellii*), pictured to the right, and Rocky Mountain cinquefoil (*Potentilla rupincola*), were resurveyed and are stable or improving. These plants may be rare, but they're doing well at your open spaces.



## Big Birds Return to Larimer County

Raptors, some of the largest birds observed in Colorado, nested at Larimer County parks and open spaces in 2012. Five species of raptors including red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, bald eagles, great-horned owls and osprey nested and 12 new fledglings were documented this year. Raptors often use a nest repeatedly and a single nest may produce offspring year after year. For example, the osprey platform at Pinewood Reservoir County Park has produced eight chicks over the last seven years.



## Report Cards Are In – Ecosystems Get High Marks

With volunteer help, an assessment tool was employed at three open spaces in 2012, to better understand the ecological status of various plant communities on County open lands. The stream corridors at Chimney Hollow Open Space and the shrublands at Eagle's Nest Open Space got the highest marks due to little sign of human disturbance such as weeds or overgrazing. No additional management actions were prescribed. The shrublands at River Bluffs Open Space are much smaller and surrounded by developed land, so this plant community did not score as well. Few weeds and no signs of excessive erosion were observed though, and only minor weed control was prescribed in the drainages. Volunteers served as valuable citizen scientists by measuring the condition of these biologically rich ecosystems.

## Teaming Up for Trails

Trails are shared by many and, thankfully, maintained by many. An eroding section of the Sawmill Trail at Horsetooth Mountain Open Space was rerouted with the help of the Overland Mountain Bike Club and a partnership with Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO). Now, the new sustainable trail can be enjoyed by hikers, bikers and equestrians alike...nothing builds bridges like trail work!



## On the Verge of Eradication

An infamous weed with a thorny disposition is nearly gone from Larimer County, and not a minute too soon. Yellow starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*), an extremely prolific noxious weed, was first discovered west of Berthoud in 2003. It is believed seed was transferred via construction equipment from California, and an infestation spread across 500 acres before being reported. This prolific invader infests an estimated 20 million acres of rangeland and forests across California, Oregon and Idaho. The Colorado Department of Agriculture labeled this species one of the most noxious in Colorado and funded an eradication effort in Larimer County. Thanks to diligent monitoring, tracking, spraying and pulling efforts, the species is now almost non-existent in the county. Ninety-nine percent of the yellow starthistle plants found in Larimer County have been treated and are dead; only two plants survived in 2012 and their days are numbered.



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