

NATURE DETECTIVES

Fall 2006



Farming for Food and Wildlife

After a successful hunt for dinner along the irrigation ditch, the coyote trotted across the field, sat down and lifted his snout to sniff the sweet smell of freshly cut hay. Then he let out a long yipping call. Who knows what the song said in coyote language, but part of an old song by Cole Porter might come close. The song has been sung by many artists over the years. See if your parents or grandparents remember the tune.

“O give me land, lots of land, under starry skies above, don’t fence me in.
O let me be by myself in the evening breeze,
And listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees, don’t fence me in.”



Like that coyote, most wild critters prefer to live where there are big chunks of land without a lot of people around. In a populated area such as Boulder County, how can wildlife find such places? Here is a hint; do you like to eat? Thanks to farmers and ranchers, you have food at your house. Well, farms and ranches also provide wildlife habitat. Habitat is where animals find food, water, shelter and space to live.

Farmers and Ranchers Are Our Friends

Boulder County Parks and Open Space properties include farms and ranches. Most of them are in the eastern part of the County, some are in the foothills. Many of them are off bumpy dirt roads that few people travel. This means the wild animals can go about their lives without a lot a human activity to disturb them.

Parts of farmland not used to grow crops, such as the edges of fields, have a variety of plants, which make great shelter for animals to hide dens, nests or burrows and to find food. Water in ditches and stock ponds brings in more animals. Farm and ranch lands also provide safe corridors for animals to move from one area to another. So, if you like to eat and if you like wildlife, thank the farmers and ranchers!



Small Bits of Habitat— ... Along Irrigation Ditches and Dirt Roads

A little food, a little water, a little shelter; it doesn't always take a lot of space to make a habitat for some wildlife. Cottonwood trees along an irrigation ditch provide a nest site for a red-tailed hawk. The bird cruises the fields in hopes of catching a few of the many mice and voles and ground squirrels living among the corn stalks. A great-horned owl pair occupies an old hollow tree and hunts during the night shift when the hawks are sleeping. A pair of tree swallows take turns flitting in and out of their nest hole in another tree trunk. A garter snake slithers out of the water in the irrigation ditch. His belly is full of earthworms and tadpoles, and he is heading for the sun-warmed dirt road to rest and digest his food. A trio of white-tailed deer wander under the branches to enjoy the shade while they nibble on young willow shoots. Mourning doves coo above their heads.



... In the Corners of Fields

Sulfur butterflies and monarchs flutter above sunflowers and milkweed plants growing at the corner of another field. The corner is a wedge of habitat where farm equipment doesn't enter. The tangle of shrubbery holds the nests of sparrows, juncos, and other little birds. Insects buzz and a dragonfly searches for lunch.

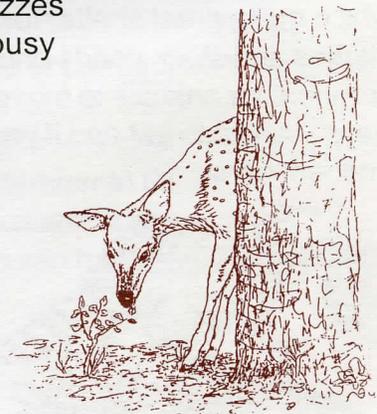


Atop a fence post, a male meadowlark sings his territory song. The ring-necked pheasant that runs along the fence line knows the territory is also hers. She crouches down as a northern harrier swoops low over the field hunting for dinner. High overhead a flock of Canada geese fly by. Blackbirds keep up a noisy conversation from the telephone lines along the road.

... At the Edges

At the bottom of a newly plowed field, the farmer has left a barrier of green plants along the creek. This is a filter that keeps smothering soil from washing into the stream. It also filters out fertilizer and other chemicals before field run-off water reaches the stream. A raccoon peeks out from the vegetation to watch a bobcat cross the field. A bat whizzes over the water to grab a mosquito. Nearby, a striped skunk is too busy digging bugs to look up.

Another farmer has planted a hedgerow to slow the winds that blow across his field. This row of trees and shrubs along the field's edge will soon become a new habitat for many critters, a place to find food, water, shelter and space. For some animals, it will be a safe route along the way to other habitats.



People Like Farms and Ranches— ... Because They're Interesting, Even Beautiful



Do you feel happy when you see a bald eagle soaring in big circles in the sky? Most people say they like seeing wildlife. People say they like seeing crops growing in a field, watching horses and cattle grazing in pastures, and even viewing farmers working their land. People like variety; they don't like looking at buildings all the time. People like to see space between towns.



Farmers and ranchers like having wildlife around, too. Despite the fact that some animals can destroy crops (think of deer in the pumpkin patch and raccoons in the corn) most farmers/ranchers are protective of "their" wildlife and value a healthy habitat.

... Because They Grow Us Tasty Food

Corn, wheat, oats, barley, pumpkins, alfalfa, sugar beets, pinto beans, sunflowers, organic vegetables and more are grown on Boulder County Farms. Some of the vegetables are sold at local stores and farmers markets. Other crops, such as the grains and sugar beets are shipped to distant processors to be made into foods such as flour, cereals, sugar and many other foodstuffs. Those foods are then shipped back to local stores.



If you own a horse, you are glad that area farmers grow hay for your horse to eat, too.



... Because We Treasure Our Farming/Ranching Culture

Some of the first settlers to our area had plans to strike it rich by mining. Many found a more reliable and satisfying future in growing food for the expanding local population. That is how farming and ranching became part of our cultural history, part of what gives us our local identity. Preserving farms and ranches lets us see that farm and ranch culture continue.

Visit a Farm

You can't stroll across most Boulder County Open Space farm and ranch land because it wouldn't be safe for you or for the crops and animals raised on the land. Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm is different. At this farm, located at the junction of US Highway 287 and Dillon Road, visitors are welcome on the trails, sunrise to sunset. For more information: http://www.co.boulder.co.us/openspace/recreating/public_parks/rock_creek.htm



The farmers/ranchers who lease this farm grow pumpkins, hay, corn, oats and wheat. They also have cows and calves. Did you know that cows like pumpkins? If you visit in November, you might see them munching on Halloween leftovers.



Relive History

L o h r / M c I n t o s h F a r m

The Agricultural Heritage Center at the Lohr/McIntosh Farm is located at 8348 Ute Highway 66 west of Longmont. It is open to the public from May 1st through October 1st from 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Winter hours are from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm on the first Saturday of every month, November through April.

You are welcome to wander around on your own using a self-guided brochure or you can join a guided tour. Guided tours start at 11:00 A.M. Groups may make special arrangements for tours year-round, any day of the week. To set up a tour or for more information, contact Tom McMichen at tmcmichen@co.boulder.co.us or 303-776-8848.

Pantry Pursuit

How many of the foods in your house could have been grown on a Boulder County Farm?



Look in your cupboard or pantry, and check the ingredients list on the labels. Look for local food crops, such as corn, that are listed on the page before this one. Remember to think of ingredients like corn oil and corn syrup too. Write them down and see how many local crops you find.