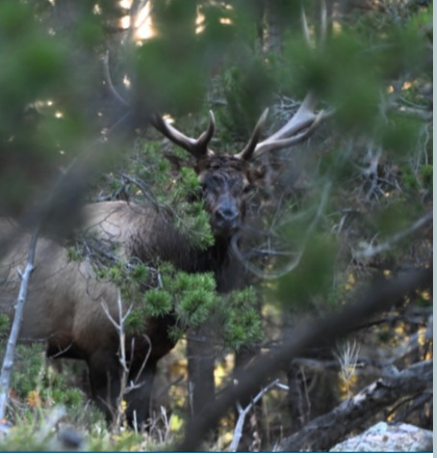
Wildlife

Boulder County | 2025 Annual Report

Highlights

- **Delivered core wildlife stewardship** across working landscapes by balancing species conservation, agricultural compatibility, and recreation—using science-based monitoring and adaptive management to guide decisions.
- **Sustained priority wildlife monitoring** (e.g., raptor nest monitoring) to inform project planning, seasonal protections, and long-term population trend tracking.
- **Modernized Species Conservation and Recovery Plans** into a more usable, web-based format to better support land managers and partners.
- Implemented **nature-based restoration through beaver habitat enhancement** and beaver mimicry to improve floodplain function, water retention, and multi-species habitat resilience.
- **Improved public safety and stewardship outcomes** by advancing wildlife-crossings coordination and supporting elk management program needs—aligning field data collection with corridor-planning priorities.
- **Strengthened high-priority species recovery readiness** by expanding plague mitigation and prairie dog habitat conservation areas mapping to support long-term feasibility for
black-footed ferret reintroduction.
- **Expanded capacity through partnerships with volunteers and partner organizations**—multiplying staff impact and stewardship outcomes without proportional increases in cost.

Boulder County
Parks & Open Space



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Overview

The wildlife group protects and enhances Boulder County's native wildlife populations and the habitats that sustain them—while supporting safe, compatible public use and working agricultural lands. Our work integrates long-term monitoring, proactive conservation planning, and on-the-ground habitat stewardship to inform decisions across parks, trails, restoration projects, and resource management programs.

In 2025, the team focused on three priorities: (1) maintaining core monitoring programs that directly inform management (e.g., raptor nesting and sensitive species protections), (2) improving access to science-based guidance by modernizing Species Conservation and Recovery Plans into a web-based format; and (3) advancing habitat resilience and restoration outcomes through targeted projects such as beaver mimicry and wetland recovery.

We also supported landscape-scale management programs that require close coordination with partners and stakeholders—such as elk management, prairie dog and plague mitigation efforts, and wildlife connectivity planning—ensuring actions are defensible, transparent, and aligned with county values and operational realities.

We leverage volunteers and partnerships to increase field capacity and improve outcomes—keeping decision-making grounded in data, safety, and service to the public—while taking an active role to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion in resource management.

Synopsis

- **Raptor nest monitoring**: Continued long-term monitoring to document trends and guide site-specific protections for projects and seasonal management needs.
- **Species conservation & recovery plans**: Transitioned SCRPs from PDF to a more accessible web format to improve usability for staff, partners, and the public.
- **Beaver habitat enhancement & restoration**: Advanced beaver mimicry (BDAs) to restore wetland function, improve water retention, and expand habitat benefits across species.
- **Elk management program**: Implemented safe, effective management actions and extended plans with board approval; aligned monitoring and operations with partner agencies.
- **Prairie dog management & plague mitigation**: Mapped and treated habitat conservation areas to support prairie dog persistence and future black-footed ferret recovery readiness.
- **Cross-program integration**: Applied monitoring and project review to reduce risk, improve compliance, and support informed land-use decisions across BCPOS properties.

Raptor Nest Monitoring

Boulder County's raptor nest monitoring program is a long-term effort to document population changes and trends over time and inform park management. In addition, monitoring is initiated for site-specific protections at less frequently observed or lesser-known sites when parks projects are implemented. A small team of trained volunteers contribute hundreds of hours to this effort, and work with and independently of staff to help monitor 10 species. In 2025, 65 known nest sites were surveyed for activity.

Bald and Golden Eagles:
Bald eagles were surveyed frequently from January–August. All eight nests monitored by Boulder County volunteers and staff were active, with 88% success in 2025. Nests fledged 1-3 young, and one newly documented nest failed. Although the average reproductive rate was slightly below the 2016–2024 average, fledgling count (13) exceeded the long-term average. Golden eagle monitoring included nine nests; three were determined inactive and three failed. The remaining three fledged five young total. Reproductive rate was higher than 2024, but below the long-term average.

Osprey, Red-tailed Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Northern Harrier:
Osprey nest monitoring included 12 active sites observed from March to August, with one failed nest; however reproductive rate increased in 2025. We included eight Red-tailed hawk nest sites in our monitoring effort, with the majority being sites that could experience short or long-term impacts from recreation developments or habitat restoration plans. Six nests fledged a total of 11 young while two failures resulted from high-wind events. Swainson's hawks had a poor season: only two of five active nests fledged three young total. Northern harrier monitoring recorded all three nest sites failed, likely due to site conditions and habitat disturbance.

Burrowing Owls:
Burrowing owls are increasingly rare in Boulder County and occur at only a small number of properties. In 2025, four nesting pairs were located and monitored, with only half producing young that survived to migrate. Habitat quality, predation, and disturbance remain concerns, prompting protective actions whenever nests are located.

Species Conservation and Recovery Plans (SCRPs)

Species Conservation and Recovery Plans (SCRPs) are long-term efforts to ensure that naturally occurring ecosystems and native species populations continue to exist and flourish in Boulder County. These plans provide science-based guidance to support balanced land management decisions for species of special concern across both public and private lands.

By identifying threats, habitat needs, and management priorities, these plans help landowners and managers protect vulnerable species while maintaining multiple land-use objectives. Species Conservation and Recovery Plans support proactive conservation, promote healthy ecosystems, and contribute to the long-term resilience of Boulder County's natural landscapes.

A New Format

SCRPs have traditionally been shared as PDFs, which can be difficult to navigate and are not always accessible to all users. To improve usability and access, we are transitioning these plans to a web-based format with support from Nik Brockman, Raquel Robles, and Nicole Baiardi. This new format will make it easier for land managers, partners, and the public to find, explore, and apply the information in real-world decision-making.

This work is a collaboration with Forestry and Plant Ecology to ensure that species, habitat, and vegetation information is current, accurate, and consistent across work groups. This project supports more effective conservation planning and on-the-ground implementation on public and private lands across Boulder County.

Beaver habitat enhancement is a long-term effort to improve stream and floodplain ecosystems and support beaver populations in historically occupied areas. These efforts focus on ensuring access to water, woody vegetation such as willow, aspen, and cottonwood, and low-gradient stream channels to support beaver survival and encourage natural wetland restoration. By improving habitat conditions, we aim to encourage beavers to return to areas they previously occupied.

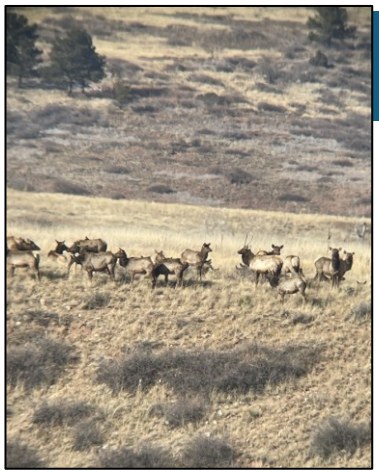
When habitat conditions are suitable, beavers naturally slow water flow, reconnect streams to floodplains, reduce erosion, trap sediment and nutrients, and maintain water in the landscape longer. These activities improve habitat quality for a wide range of wildlife and contribute to more functional, biodiverse, and resilient watersheds. Habitat enhancement provides a cost-effective and sustainable way to leverage beavers' natural behaviors to restore wetlands and support long-term ecosystem health.

Caribou Ranch Beaver Mimicry

The DeLonde Beaver Mimicry Project is a targeted restoration effort at Caribou Ranch, a historically beaver-influenced valley with high potential for wetland recovery. Although past land uses converted much of the floodplain to hayfields, aerial imagery and modeling indicate the site could again support beavers. The project uses Beaver Dam Analogs (BDAs), human-constructed structures that mimic natural dams, to slow water, spread it across the floodplain, and improve wetland conditions.

This project is a collaboration with Wildlands Restoration Volunteers and Boulder Watershed Collective, using deciduous woody material from our Boulder County Community Sort Yards. By improving habitat, the project encourages beavers to return to areas they historically occupied, increasing water retention, enhancing plant and wildlife habitat, and supporting climate resilience. The DeLonde project demonstrates how targeted restoration and community involvement can benefit beaver populations and ecosystems.

DeLonde Project video
(YouTube, BCPOS)



Elk Management Program

In 2025, Boulder County Parks & Open Space extended both the Red Hill and Rabbit Mountain Elk Management Plans for an additional five years through approval by the Boulder County Board of County Commissioners. For the first time since 2017, hunting at Rabbit Mountain was paused because the elk herd is now within the target size of 30–70 individuals. At Red Hill, the program successfully hosted another safe and effective elk management hunt, with 29 hunters participating and 13 elk harvested.

Hunters continued to assist agricultural tenants in mitigating game damage caused by elk, supporting local operations. Seasonal elk counts and annual classification surveys were conducted in partnership with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). Collaboration also continued with CPW and federal partners at Table Mountain to allow elk hunting on that property.

Prairie Dog Management

In 2025, Boulder County Parks & Open Space continues its prairie dog management and sylvatic plague mitigation efforts across Habitat Conservation Areas (HCAs) in the county. Staff mapped over 2,000 acres of HCAs on properties where prairie dog colonies are vaccinated against sylvatic plague. This included:

- Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain: Nearly 1,500 acres mapped, meeting the minimum threshold to support future black-footed ferret reintroduction, the ultimate goal of the vaccination program.
- South County Grasslands HCA: Over 500 acres mapped.

In addition to mapping, staff implemented plague prevention measures:

- Flea treatments (vectors of plague) on a rotating subset of prairie dog colonies within these HCAs.
- Sylvatic plague bait-ball distribution across 1,963 acres.

These efforts represent a critical step toward preparing for the reintroduction of the critically endangered black-footed ferret.