

# Naturalist Notes



## MISSION

*El Paso County Parks Nature Centers connect people to their natural and cultural resources and inspire them to become stewards for the parks and our environment.*



Volunteer Highlight	2
Volunteer Corner	3
Recreation Roundup	3
Rain Shadows	4
Fountain Creek Restoration Crew	5
Bear Creek Sightings	5
Fountain Creek Happenings	6
Fox Run Nature Center Update	7
Pikes Peak Birding	7
Rick's Cartoon	8
Summer Program Highlights	8



## Spring Break Camp *by Kylee Taylor, Interpretive Program Specialist, Bear Creek Nature Center*

“What’s a naturalist? 30 students at Bear Creek’s spring break camp, Junior Naturalist, learned all the amazing things a naturalist can be—scientists, detectives, mindful observers, artists, and stewards! Each day of the camp week, a different theme was explored.



*A camper removes mullein, an invasive plant in North America.*



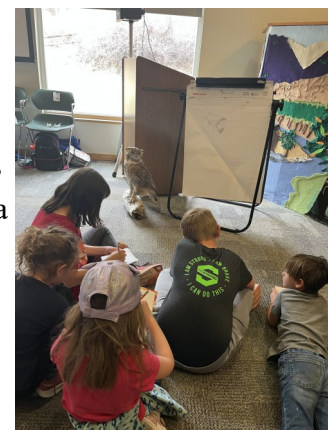
*Campers made art in nature like this stick-and-leaf butterfly.*

Campers conducted experiments on the health of Bear Creek, created sustainable nature themed artwork, practiced mindfulness by the creek with lots of tree hugging, solved mysteries with Sherlock Hemlock, and even completed a stewardship project by removing invasive mullein from a hillside at Bear Creek Nature Center. Plus, of course, fun games, crafts, and so much more! All of these great activities reinforced the stewardship mission of the El Paso County Nature Centers and culminated in one camper saying they

learned, “[You] cannot be a steward if you are not mindful of nature.” We can’t wait for more camps this summer and to teach a new group of campers all about being a Junior Naturalist.” Spring Break Nature Camp will be at Fountain Creek Nature Center in 2026. Sign up for it and summer camps in January! 🐾



*Campers practice a mindfulness milestone—hugging a tree!*



*Campers practice drawing an owl. Sketching is a great tool for connecting to nature.*



## EXECUTIVE BOARD *Friends of El Paso County Nature Centers*

### President

Risë Foster-Bruder

### Vice President

Jill Wright

### Secretary

Holly Niewinski

### Treasurer

Lynn Wilson

### At Large members

Eileen Somers

Jane Hunter-Zook

Lyn Myers

### STAFF

#### Division Manager

Theresa Odello

#### Rec. Program Specialist

Ryan Dorough

#### BCNC Supervisor

Mary Jo Lewis

#### Interp. Program Specialist

Kylee Taylor

#### Interpreter

Brenda McCreight

#### FCNC Supervisor

Jessica Miller

#### Interp. Program Specialist

Victoria Dinkel

#### Interpreter

Andy Talley

#### Volunteer Coordinator

Kelly Ann Blanchard

#### Bear Creek

#### Nature Center

245 Bear Creek Road

Colorado Springs, CO 80906

719-520-6387

#### Fountain Creek

#### Nature Center

320 Pepper Grass Lane

Fountain, CO 80817

719-520-6745

Editor: Jessica Miller

[elpasocountynaturecenters.com](http://elpasocountynaturecenters.com)



## Volunteer Highlight

*by Kelly Ann Blanchard, Volunteer Coordinator*

**M**ock-aritas, Mexican food, good friends, and a view of Pikes Peak on a beautiful day? We couldn't have asked for a better Volunteer Recognition Event this year!

On March 25th, approximately 60 volunteers, guests, and staff gathered at Fountain Creek Nature Center for our annual volunteer dinner. Volunteers enjoyed mocktails and socializing before dining on a delicious spread from a local Mexican restaurant. We were treated to live music by our very own Peppergrass band followed by an awards ceremony to recognize volunteers' achievements from last year.

Thirty-eight people volunteered 40 hours or more and received an adorable red fox pin – a nod to our favorite future nature center.

Our Top Volunteer winner, Holly Niewinski, capped out at an astonishing 350 hours!

My favorite part of the evening was awarding long-time volunteer, Theron

Jeppson, with the Exemplary Volunteer Award. Theron celebrated 20 years of service with us this year and his standing ovation was well-earned! We closed out with a silly comic of Theron and a fitting tribute by Peppergrass of "The Crawdad Song" in his honor. Thank you to all our volunteers for joining us and making the night so special! 🐦



*The sunset over the Nature Pond was a beautiful backdrop for the event.*



*Peppergrass plays music for the event.*



*Nature Center volunteers gather for an evening full of music, food, and celebrating!*



## Volunteer Corner *by Kelly Ann Blanchard, Volunteer Coordinator*

Our volunteers are the bee's knees, and wow, we are booming with new volunteers! Shoutout to our newest additions: **Jody Smith, Adrian Douglass, Veronica Myers, Rich and Barb Ingold, Aidan Wolfe, Becca Barnhart, Kathy Colligan, Leslie Wolken, and Matt and Jessi Scoletti.** Welcome to the team!



*New volunteer Aidan (left) leads the Bug Sweep station at Family Fun Day with Harley.*



*Volunteers Debbie and Mary worked at the Gnome Depot in Magic Woods during Family Fun Day.*

**Valiant Volunteers:** Last year, our volunteers contributed 4,762 hours to helping with programs and day-to-day goings-on at the nature centers. That's over 197 days' worth of time spent serving their community! We had 80 active volunteers last year, and 21 of those were brand new volunteers in 2024. We have already welcomed 13 new volunteers this year!

**Upcoming Fun:** I'm thrilled to roll out Flora/Fauna Fridays this summer at our nature centers. On June 13 at FCNC and June 20 at BCNC, I will lead volunteers on a nature walk to identify native plants and animals. It's a great opportunity to meet other volunteers and enjoy nature together!

**Become a Volunteer** – Interested in joining our volunteer team with El Paso County Nature Centers? Please contact the Volunteer Coordinator, Kelly Ann Blanchard, at [bcfcvolunteers@gmail.com](mailto:bcfcvolunteers@gmail.com). 🐾



## Recreation Roundup *by Ryan Dorough, Recreation Program Specialist*



*Players gather at Fountain Creek Nature Center for a night of Bunco!*

If you love puzzles, games, and outdoor fun, there's been plenty happening at our nature centers and parks this past season. On February 8, Bear Creek Nature Center hosted a puzzle competition with four 4-player teams and eight 2-player teams. The fastest 2-player team to finish their 500-piece puzzle was just 51 minutes and 39 seconds, while the top 4-player team completed a 1,000-piece puzzle in 1 hour, 24 minutes, and 3 seconds. Spring Bunco Night was also a hit at Fountain Creek Nature Center on March 28 with 16 players. Don't miss the next Bunco Night on August 29 at Bear Creek. Hiking season at the Paint Mines is in full swing, with one new and one returning interpreter leading guided hikes through October. Be sure to catch one this summer. Mark your calendar for June 14, the 4th Annual El Paso County Kite Festival at Falcon Regional Park is coming up. It's a free, family-friendly event with kites, vendors, and plenty of fun. Come join the excitement in your county parks this season! 🐾

Players gather at Fountain Creek Nature Center for a night of Bunco!



*Players gather at Fountain Creek Nature Center for a night of Bunco!*

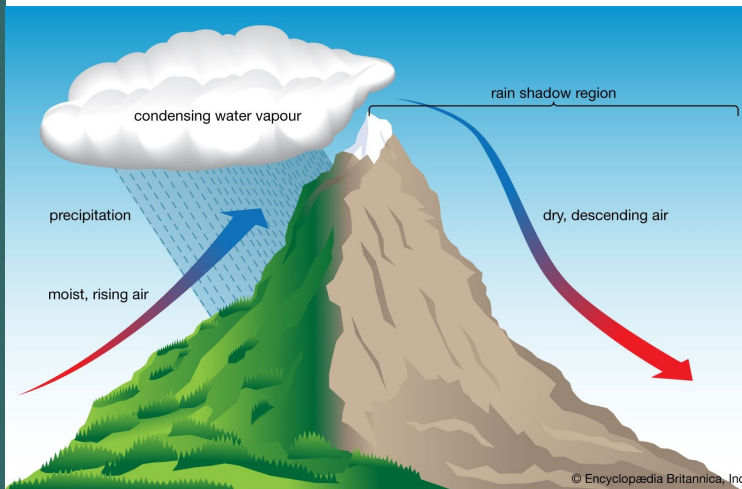




## Rain Shadows

by Kylee Taylor, Interpretive Program Specialist, Bear Creek Nature Center

My Nebraska-born self is constantly torn between my love for the prairies and my love for the mountains. Throughout my quest to learn more about the prairie ecosystem, I learned quickly how connected prairies are to the mountains! I often thought of them as two distinct ecosystems but without the Rocky Mountain range, we wouldn't have prairies.



*Schematic diagram of a typical rain shadow. Courtesy of Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

Slicing down through North America, the Rockies create a natural border that blocks the damp air of the Pacific Ocean and prevents it from crossing onto the eastern half of the continent. This significant lack of precipitation on the eastern side of the Rockies creates a drier climate that's perfect for the shortgrass prairies to thrive. These plants are often no taller than 2 feet but have extensive root systems to capture as much water as



*Colorado Springs is a special place where the flat prairies meet the mighty mountains. El Paso County before development, courtesy Colorado Springs Pioneer's Museum.*

possible when it arrives. The further east you go, the more precipitation is received, and prairie flora grows taller into mixed and tallgrass prairies. We also have the added benefit of Pikes Peak, a 14,000-foot peak right on the edge of the eastern side of the Rockies, that adds its own unique flair to our weather and climate. On the edge of the Great Plains and tucked in by the foothills, El Paso County and the Front Range is in a unique hot spot of biodiversity that should be continuously stewarded and cared for by all. 🐾



*Blooming in the meadows below the mountains, beloved plants big and small thrive. From left to right, Pasqueflower, Mountain Mahogany, Yucca, and Common Beehive Cactus.*



## Fountain Creek's New Restoration Crew!

by Andy Talley, Interpretive Program Coordinator, Fountain Creek Nature Center



Thomas and Harley use hands and tools to dig up invasive plants.

This group is all about the stewardship of Fountain Creek Regional Park. We will coordinate at least one volunteer workday per quarter to tackle restoration and conservation projects near the nature center. These projects will include removal of invasive species, landscaping with native species, trail maintenance projects, site cleanup projects, and perhaps even working with our resident beaver family to make sure that we can continue to coexist without undo damage to our site and trails.

Our first workday was on Saturday, April 5<sup>th</sup>, when our small group went to work on removing some very invasive

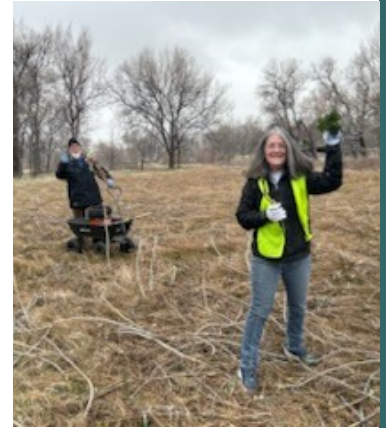
teasel from our Milkweed Meadow. This was an important step toward saving and

preserving our milkweed for the monarch butterflies that depend on it.

Our next workday will be on Saturday, July 5<sup>th</sup>. If you are interested in joining this group, contact Andy Talley by email;

[andytalley@elpasoco.com](mailto:andytalley@elpasoco.com). 🐦

*Left: Free of teasel this spring growing season, Milkweed Meadow is clean, open, and ready for white-tailed deer to forage, milkweed to grow tall, and trail explorers to admire. More teasel will grow, but Restoration Crew will tackle it!*



Andy and Debbie celebrate their win against the teasel.



## Bear Creek Sightings

by Brenda McCreight, Interpretive Program Coordinator, Bear Creek Nature Center

In mid-March, joy came to Bear Creek in the form of our earliest butterflies, the Mourning Cloaks. Most butterflies spend the winter as caterpillars or pupae, but the Mourning Cloaks overwinter as adults. This allows them to come out in early Spring, even when there's still snow on the ground. Their name comes from their dark brown wings, with a blue and yellow pattern on the



Visit Bear Creek Nature Center to explore their pollinator garden with a pollinator hotel bugs may hide and sleep in!

edges, that make a beautiful cloak for them. The undersides of their wings are completely brown so when they close their wings, they're camouflaged from predators such as ants, beetles, spiders, birds, and reptiles. Mourning Cloaks can also "play dead" by closing their wings and tucking their legs to avoid being eaten.

Their larvae live in webs and feed in groups on the leaves of hardwood trees such as willows and cottonwoods. The adults love tree sap and decaying fruit but rarely drink nectar from flowers as many other butterflies do. They flit from tree to tree and often rest awhile, which allows the folks at Bear Creek to observe them up close very easily when enjoying an early spring walk. 🐾



Sitting still on a leaf of branch, Mourning Cloaks are nearly impossible to spot.





## Fountain Creek Happenings

by Andy Talley, Interpretive Program Coordinator, Fountain Creek Nature Center

**R**ed-winged Black Birds are a common sight here at Fountain Creek Nature Center, and they are one of the few species that we can almost guarantee that you will see on every visit to the Nature Center. While they can be found here year-round, in the spring the males can be seen and heard in their flamboyant courtship displays. Puffing up the red and yellow patches on their wings, they repeatedly emit a loud “Oh-ka-lee” call; usually while perched atop a cattail in the marsh. They are trying their best to impress a nearby female.



*A Female Red-winged Blackbird perches high in the marsh, still blending in with her brown streaky feathers. Photo by Mike Pach.*

The female is far more muted in both color and behavior. They are plain brown in color with subtle streaks that make them perfectly camouflaged among the dried cattail leaves. She is probably well-hidden below her singing mate as she busily weaves an intricate nest out of the cattail leaves and stems.

A female will lay 2 to 4 eggs which they will incubate for about 12 days. The young nestlings then remain in the nest for about two more weeks. The males will aggressively defend a nest with babies in it, sometimes even dive-bombing an intruder. While they are not likely to actually hurt you, they may chase you away from a nest that you did not even know was there.



*Which each song belted across the wetland, the Red-winged Blackbird puffs his shoulders and fans his tail.*



*This Red-winged Blackbird nest is exposed mid-winter as the cattails that hid it die and fall away.*



## Andy's Spring Poetry Corner

### March Music

Wing patch on display  
Raucous and proud, Oh-ka-lee  
Red-winged Blackbird sings

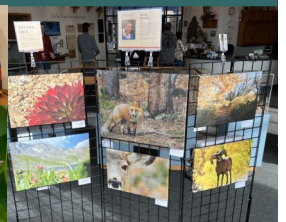
### Unmasked

A raccoon who lives in a tree  
Was peeking out a me  
She said “I must ask  
Sir, where is your mask?  
Your face looks naked to me!”



## Artist Exhibition at Fountain Creek Nature Center

Visit each month to enjoy new pieces from local artists.  
Purchase a piece to benefit the Nature Centers!





## Fox Run Nature Center Updates!

by Theresa Odello, Recreation & Cultural Services Manager

Exciting news for nature enthusiasts! Fox Run Nature Center has secured a \$1.25 million grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, administered by Colorado Parks and Wildlife. This brings our fundraising total to \$5.3 million—an incredible milestone toward creating a world-class nature center in northern El Paso County.

Community enthusiasm continues to grow, with 843 petition signatures and 35 letters of support received so far. The planned center will feature a canopy walk through the Ponderosa Pine forest, nature exhibits, and educational programs that inspire curiosity and stewardship.

This community-driven project is gaining momentum—but we're not done yet. We're actively pursuing additional grants and donations to reach our goal. You can help, too! Besides donating, you can show your support by writing a letter of support or signing the community support sheet - available at Bear Creek and Fountain Creek Nature Centers. Let's build something lasting together. Learn more or contribute by scanning or clicking the QR code. 🦊



*The Fox Run Nature Center is designed to connect people to the Black Forest ecosystem.*



*Programming that inspires can expand with the new facility.*



## Pikes Peak Birding & Nature Festival

by Jessica Miller, Festival Co-chair and Fountain Creek Nature Center Supervisor

The 10th Pikes Peak Birding & Nature Festival was May 15-18, 2025, and we had an amazing time! **298 people** from **16 states** and **1 Canadian province** birded across the region to see **204 species** in just **3.5 days**. From the summit of Pikes Peak to our low prairies to the east, the festival offered **88 field trips, workshops, and seminars**, plus a few **virtual** opportunities that connected



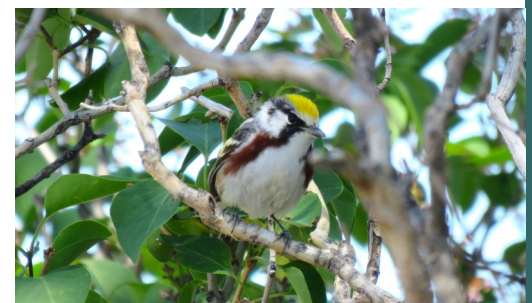
*A Lark Bunting, our state bird, sits on a cholla cactus.*

participants to the natural resources of the area and helped them be better birders. Festival Committee member Mel Goff reports that our festival, which has seen at least **273 species** through the years, compares favorably with more well-known festivals elsewhere in the country.

Numbers only tell part of the story. We are proud to offer this wonderful weekend that brings us together annually all for the love of birds, and to share these experiences with those new to birding and to Colorado. We hope you join us next May! [www.pikespeakbirdingandnaturefestival.org](http://www.pikespeakbirdingandnaturefestival.org) 🦋



*Participants look for birds along Fountain Creek, with Pikes Peak beyond.*



*The third weekend of May is often peak migration, resulting in surprising visitors like this Chesnut-sided Warbler.*





*Partners in the Parks  
for EPC Nature Centers*



## Summer Recreation Highlights

### **El Paso County Kite Festival at Falcon Regional Park**

Saturday, June 14, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

### **Paint Mines Guided Hikes**

Saturdays, June-October, 9:30-11:30 a.m.  
June 7 & 21, July 5 & 26, August 9 & 23,  
September 13 & 27, and October 11 & 18

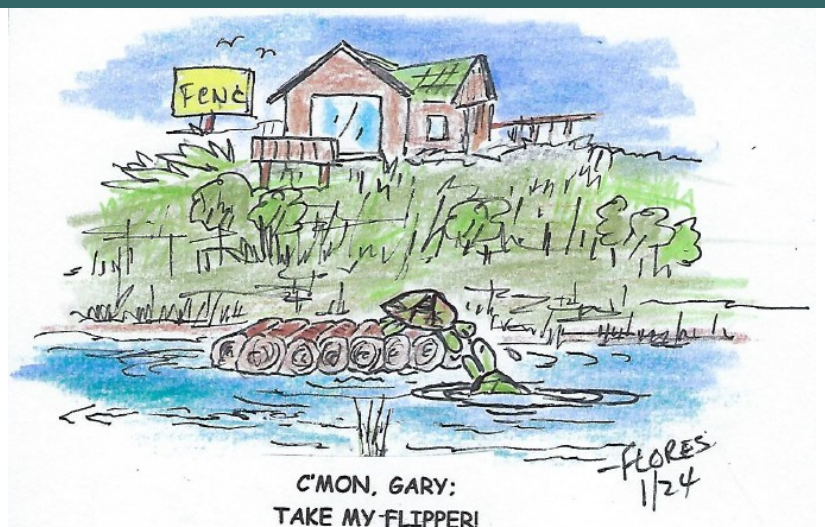
### **El Paso County Fair**

July 12-19

### **Bunco! At Bear Creek Nature Center**

Friday, August 29, Doors open at  
5:00 p.m., Dice roll at 5:30 p.m.

## Rick's Cartoon



*Rick Flores is a nature center volunteer who keeps us laughing  
with his nature observations.*

## Summer Nature Program Highlights



### **Verdant Watercolor Landscapes**

Saturday, June 7, 10:00am-12:00pm

### **The Buzz on Bumble Bees of the Front Range**

Saturday, June 21, 9:00 - 10:15 a.m. and  
10:45 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

### **Bugs of Bear Creek Walk About**

Saturday, July 12, 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. and  
10:30 - 11:30 a.m.

### **Kids' Night Out - Creekside Summer Celebration**

Friday, August 8, 5:30 - 9:00 p.m.

### **Flying Pig Farm- Natural Dyes**

Wednesday, August 13, 5:30 - 7:00 p.m. and  
Saturday, August 16, 9:00 - 11:00 a.m.

### **Honey Harvest & Pollinator Celebration Day**

Saturday, August 23, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.



### **Painting With a Purpose**

Saturday, June 21, 11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

### **Firefly Night Hike & Celebration**

Friday, July 18 & Saturday, July 19, 8:00 - 9:30 p.m.

### **Shutter & Strum Photography Workshop**

Saturday, July 26, 9:00 - 11:00 a.m.

### **Nature After Dark**

Thursday, August 7, 7:30 - 9:30 p.m.

### **Crazy for Cattails**

Saturday, August 9, 10:00 a.m. - 11:30 p.m.

### **Fountain Creek—A Pathway of History**

Saturday, August 23, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

### **Monarch Magic**

Saturday, August 20, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

[www.elpasocountynaturecenters.com](http://www.elpasocountynaturecenters.com)