

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.*



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Volunteer Highlight: The Inspiring Eli Wright *by Kelly Ann Blanchard*

While volunteering at Fountain Creek middle school camp in the summer of 2022, I met a camper named Eli Wright perched in a tree in Magic Woods. I enjoyed watching him interact with fellow campers with a kindness and quiet leadership that set him apart from his peers. It didn't take long for me to discover that, even at his young age, Eli already had a long history of generosity with our nature centers that prevails to this day.

Our history with Eli began when he attended Bear Creek nature camp when he was 6 years old. We first witnessed his heart for service in January 2019, when during a new exhibit unveiling at Bear Creek, Eli donated his birthday money to El Paso County Nature Centers. Since then, he has donated allowance money as well as hosted a bake sale in support of our cause.

In the years following, Eli has volunteered his time as a Camp Ambassador at Happy Trails, Restoration Crew member, Teen Camp Assistant, and as a general steward of nature. He leads with positivity and kindness, and he is encouraging and welcoming to all he meets.

On July 31, 2025, we had the privilege of recognizing Eli with a special proclamation to honor his passion, generosity, and leadership as a young volunteer and acknowledge the lasting impact he has made on our nature centers and the community we serve. Executive Director, Todd Marts, presented the proclamation to Eli, followed by



Nature Center staff and volunteers gathered to honor Eli and his family with a proclamation.

comments from staff and executive board members. We are so thankful for you, Eli! 🐾



Eli donates his birthday money to Bear Creek.



Eli has hosted a bake sale and sold hot apple cider to benefit the Nature Centers



Eli's volunteering has gotten more intense over the years with Restoration Crew and Summer Nature Camp!

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Brenda McCreight

FCNC Supervisor

Jessica Miller

Interpretive Program Specialist

Victoria Dinkel

Interpretive Program

Coordinator - Part-time

Andy Talley

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



Bear Creek Nature Center Summer Interns *by Brenda McCreight and Kylee Taylor*



Kamryn has been assisting programs and developing skills at BCNC all spring and summer.

Bear Creek Nature Center was Kamryn's internship home for 7 months - through field trips, camps, outreach, and special events - as she completed two internships. A highlight of Kamryn's internship was "getting to put my own spin on things and being given the creative freedom to learn and teach." Throughout her internship, Kamryn grew in many ways saying that the biggest challenge she overcame was "being able to do outreach and confidently talk to

people." We knew Kamryn was a good fit when she was given a scat program to lead and her first question was, "How gross can I make this?" We loved Kamryn's humor, can do attitude, and willingness to take on every project. 🐾



Mars has been a delight to have on the BCNC team!

In just 2.5 months, Mars made a big impact at Bear Creek Nature Center throughout their internship. They connected with each and every camper this summer- sharing their artwork, making up stories, and teaching about nature through it all. They said their favorite parts of their internship included the El Paso County Kite Festival and being at day camps. Mars' love of art was well utilized- adding coloring pages to rainy day camp activities and creating marketing material such as posters and social media posts for programs and events. We wish the best for Mars going into the field of zoology and hopefully getting to work with their favorite animal- birds! 🐾



Brooke has learned Naturalist Interpretation skills at Bear Creek this summer.

Brooke's story starts with falling in love with the movie "Dolphin Tale" as a child. Inspired by the rescue and rehabilitation of the dolphin, Brooke became interested in marine animals. This became a dream of one day rescuing and rehabilitating marine animals herself. Bear Creek was her first internship in the PPSC Zookeeping Technology Program. We enjoyed watching her learn and grow. She's also an aerial gymnast, performing and competing in the area. Rock climbing is another hobby. In quiet moments, she loves to draw.

Best wishes to Brooke. We know she'll continue to be amazing! 🐾

Familiar Faces on Staff

All four amazing seasonal staff from 2024 returned this summer! From top to bottom, Harley Hale, Keegan Calnan, Sylas Nichols, and Adrian Douglass



Fountain Creek Nature Center Summer Interns

by Andy Talley & Victoria Dinkel

Saniyah Johnson was born in Florida. She moved with her family to Colorado Springs when her father was stationed at Fort Carson, about 8 years ago. Saniyah has always had a love for animals so after graduating from high school, she registered at Pikes Peak Community College in their Zoo Keeping program. She enjoys learning about animals and sharing that knowledge with others. When it came time for an internship, she chose Fountain Creek Nature Center to get more experience working with children. When she is not working, Saniyah likes to read, draw and look for insects. At home, she is the designated bug and spider catcher of the household. 🐸



Saniyah has been a fun member of the heron flock this summer!

As a student in Pikes Peak State College's Zoo Keeping Technology program, Raven Miller has brought a wealth of knowledge about reptiles and amphibians to our camps and helped us take on the care of our own tiger salamander, Jorgeous. Raven has a tiger salamander at home named Milo, along with a lizard, a cat, and two dogs. She clearly loves animals and hopes to continue working with reptiles after graduation. Even in their free time, Raven is continually reading and learning; recently finishing *Still Alive* by Forrest Galante, 'The Indiana Jones of Biology'. Good luck with whatever you slither into after school! 🐸



Raven poses with education reptile and accessory, Ferdy.

Tahji Duran is a Colorado native. Growing up in Pueblo, she always enjoyed spending time outdoors. She loved exploring Pueblo reservoir looking for fossils and watching wildlife. She is currently enrolled in the Zoo Keeping program at Pikes Peak State College. She chose Fountain Creek Nature Center for her internship because she is a strong believer in educating children about nature and conservation. She's also a volunteer for the Friends of El Paso County Nature Centers, and was no stranger to us! Outside of work she enjoys what she calls "old lady hobbies" including embroidery, gardening, baking and reading. She also has a propensity towards the "vulture culture" as she has a large collection of dead things including bones, skulls, taxidermy, and pinned bugs. 🐸



Tahji and her pet rosy-boa, Calypso, educate nature campers on Reptile Day.

Nature Camp Memories



"Just being out in nature is an inspiration to do better for our world."

- Parent



"Classic camp vibes, but small enough to be personable."

- Parent

"Feeling connected to a local park fosters connection to the community."

- Parent



"Love the Fountain Creek Nature Center and all the staff! One of the best camps around." - Parent

"VERY cost effective and we appreciate a program centered around a beautiful community space, we also appreciate our daughter having other stewards of nature being such influential role models in her life." - Parent



Nature Camp Memories



"There is more time outdoors – no electronics and my boys LOVE it!"

- Parent



"This is the only area camp that both of our boys (who are very different from each other) love."

- Parent

"My child does not typically care about nature, this has shifted that and he is more interested now."

- Parent



"[My favorite part of camp was] learning about animals, it helps me decide what to do when I grow up."

- Camper



Recreation Round-Up *by Ryan Dorough*

Summer was packed with fun and adventure across El Paso County Parks! The highlight of the season was the 4th Annual Kite Festival at Falcon Regional Park on July 14. With perfect weather and over 550 attendees, the event was a soaring success. Be sure to catch it again next summer! Archery Camp returned for another great year, with full sessions and a popular Free Archery Day giving



The sky at Falcon Regional Park filled with kites!

newcomers a chance to try the sport. Our natural sites were also bustling. Paint Mines staff averaged 200 interactions daily. Staff also guided over 110 climbers off fragile formations in the months of June and July to help protect this unique site. Rainbow Falls saw an impressive 6,450 visitors in June and July alone! The partnership with Adventures Out West continues to support access and education, providing shuttles and park info to guests. Looking

ahead, we're excited for Paint Mines hikes, Rainbow Falls photography workshops, seasonal Bunco nights at Bear Creek and Fountain Creek Nature Centers, and Take a Kid Mountain Biking Day. Stay tuned for more fall fun! 🐾



Above & Below: Kite Fest attendees make kites to fly.



Volunteer Corner *by Kelly Ann Blanchard*

Our summer bloomed with new volunteers! Shoutout to our newest additions: **Annette Megneys, Susan Sheahan, Jeanette Lamb, Peg Lewandowski, Tom McCormick, Charles Motley, Melodie Heaps, Jean Neal, Kaedon Kostelic, and Nan Drobnick.** Welcome to the team!

Summer Fun: Thank you to the volunteers who joined me for my **summer nature walk series!** At Flora Fauna Fridays, we

saw a plethora of wildlife and plants at both nature centers. We also met at Fox Run Regional Park for a wildflower walk and to tour the grounds of the future nature center. It was fun to learn and hike together!

Volunteer Board: We have a new **Volunteer Bulletin Board** at Bear Creek Nature Center. Staff or volunteers can share coupons, pictures, cards, or anything to benefit other volunteers. I know for a fact there are freebies and photos on it right now, so come check it out!

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. 🐾



Volunteers, check out the Volunteer Board next time you're at BCNC!



Volunteers socialize and admire the nature of Fox Run Regional Park.



Fountain Creek Happenings *by Keegan Calnan*



FCNC staff has been watching the rock squirrel kits grow bigger and roam farther from their rock den.

One of the highlights of the summer for the Fountain Creek Nature Center staff was being able to watch a mother rock squirrel raise her litter of at least seven babies right outside of the office windows. From just poking their heads out of the rocks waiting for mom, to now being off on their own looking for food, we have gone nuts for these babies.

These lesser-known *Sciuridae* family members can be differentiated from their cousin, the fox squirrel, which is also found at the park, by their speckled fur that starts gray near their shoulders and changes to a brown further down the back and have tails which are usually less bushy than their cousins'. Rock squirrels will often have two litters per year, one in April to June and their second in August or September, so we are hoping to see a new batch of babies soon!

Rock squirrels can be found across the American southwest in—surprise—rocky habitats. While they are good climbers, they mostly stay on the ground. They eat nuts, seeds, buds, and arthropods. Some people consider them pests, but one person's pest is the Nature Center's treasure. 🐿



Bear Creek Sightings *by Adrian Douglass*

Bear Creek Nature Center approaches its semicentennial, starting as Solar Trails Nature Center in 1976. There has never been a confirmed sighting of a rattlesnake in the park in that time. People often misidentify the humble bullsnake, whose patterning can resemble a rattlesnake's to the untrained eye, and can even mimic the rattle by wiggling the end of their tail in leaves or other brush to make a rattle sound. That was until July, when a rattlesnake was spotted in the low meadow on the north end of the Creek Bottom Loop. Now, rattlesnakes often live in burrows, but here's the thing, they can't dig, so they will crawl into an already existing burrow, and have any existing tenant as a snack. This snake chose a hole right on the trail.

This is a nature center, so we don't want to kill it, nor do we particularly want to fully relocate it. So, we waited till it was out of its hole, then filled in the burrow, so it had to choose another hole. It has not been spotted since... 🐾



Left: Non-venomous Bullsnares are found in most of El Paso County. They are yellow-gold with dark brown patterns. Photo by Jeffery Heizer **Right:** Prairie Rattlesnakes range in shades of dusty yellow, olive, and gray with darker gray-brown patterns on their back. Photo by Jessica Miller (not in a EPC Park).



*Partners in the Parks
for EPC Nature Centers*



Fall Recreation Highlights

Rick's Cartoon

Guided Hikes

at Paint Mines Interpretive Park

September 13 & 27, 9:30-11:30am

October 11 & 18, 9:30-11:30am

Take a Kid Mountain Biking Day

at Fox Run Regional Park

October 4, 9:00-11:00am

Photography Workshops

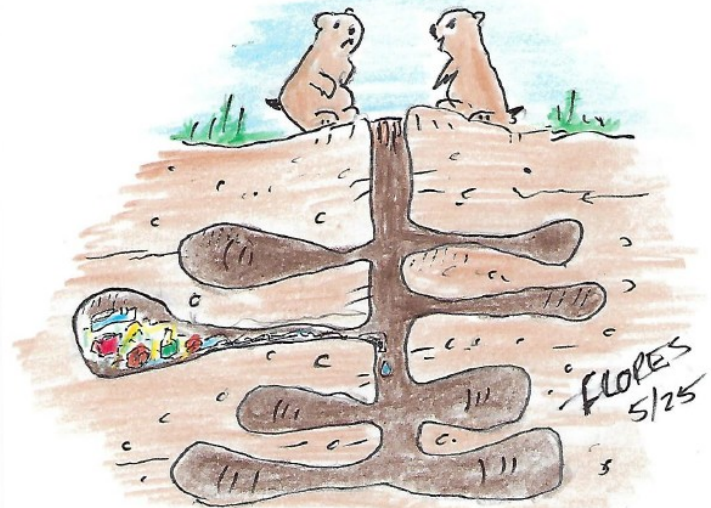
at Rainbow Falls Historic Site

October 10, 10:00am-12:30pm & 1:00-3:30pm

Bunco

at Fountain Creek Nature Center

November 7, 5:00-8:30pm



"I want your room cleaned up today, Young man"

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

Fall Nature Program Highlights



Fall Harvest Festival at Gold Hill Mesa

Saturday, September 20, 11:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.

Birds & Beans- Beginner Birding Class

Saturday, September 27, 7:30-9:00 a.m.

Kids' Morning Nature Journaling Quest

Saturday, October 11, 9:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Bird Banding

Saturday, October 25, 7:00, 8:00, & 9:00 a.m.

Bear Creek Nature Center's 11th Annual

Bear Run; Fun Run & Walk Fundraiser

Saturday, November 8, 10:00 a.m.



Sustainability Fair

Saturday, September 20, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Late Bloomers

Saturday, October 4, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Pumpkin Carving Party

Saturday, October 25, 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Jack-o-Lantern Trail

Saturday, October 25, 5:30 - 7:30 p.m.

Full Beaver Moon

Wednesday, November 5, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.

Holiday Craft & Artisan Fair

Saturday, November 22, 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

www.elpasocountynaturecenters.com