

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.



Spring Interns	2
Volunteer Corner	3
Volunteer Highlight	3
2025 Donors	4
Partners in the Park, Sponsors & Allies	5
2025 Annual Snapshot	6-7
BCNC Staff Update	8
Pinecone's Pics	8
Friends Board Update	9
Andy's Poetry Corner	9
Nature Camper Profile	10
FC Happenings	11
BC Sightings	11
Upcoming Programs	12



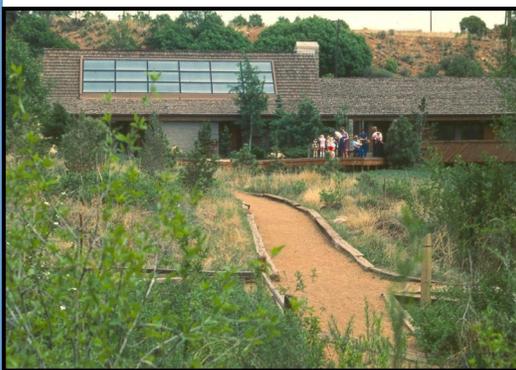
Bear Creek's 50th Bear-thday

by Mary Jo Lewis, Bear Creek Nature Center Supervisor

2026 is a special year for the El Paso County Nature Centers as we celebrate a momentous part of our story. Fifty years ago, in 1976, the very first nature center in Colorado opened its doors. Called the Solar Trails Center, it was the precursor to what we now know as Bear Creek Nature Center. While the Solar Trails Center possessed a different name and a different physical building, it bore the same heart and vision of our present-day Bear Creek Nature Center- serving the community and connecting people more deeply to the natural world through engagement and programming.

From the get-go, the community embraced this hub for connection and learning, leading to several renovations and additions over the years to serve the increasing visitation. One beloved community event was the annual Spring Hike. On May 20, 2000, staff arrived to prepare for this well-attended tradition and found the Nature Center in flames. What turned out to be an arson fire destroyed the original building, but not the spirit and mission that has steered the Nature Center through all its chapters into the present day.

Staff moved into a modular building on the property, where they salvaged what they could of the building's remains. They continued to let the heart of the Nature



The Solar Trails Center was the first Nature center in Colorado

Center beat strong by hosting field trips and other public programs from their modest structure, even doing puppet shows right in the parking lot. The community responded to the fire with an upswell of support and the modern-day Bear Creek Nature Center, dedicated to the citizens of El Paso County, opened in May of 2002, two years after the fire destroyed the original building.

Continued on Page 2...



Pikes Peak Birding and Nature Festival

May 14 - 17, 2026

Registration Opens April 11

pikespeakbirdingandnaturefestival.org

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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



Continued from the Front Cover: Bear Creek's 50th Bear-thday

by Mary Jo Lewis, Bear Creek Nature Center Supervisor

This year, we acknowledge and celebrate the challenges, growth, and evolution of Bear Creek Nature Center. The Nature Center has expanded its programs over the past five decades, with a current focus on programs and endeavors that make the natural world accessible to more of the community. Most of all, we celebrate the ever-beating heart of Bear Creek Nature Center, which could not be destroyed by fire and continues to inspire us with the vision and motivation to serve the community and engage them through programming.

Mark your calendars for August 22, when we will host an "Over-the-(Foot)hills Bear-thday Party!" 🐾



Mary Daniels' class field trip in 1976. The children in this photograph might be bringing their grandchildren to Bear Creek Nature Center, now!



The newly completed exhibit room in 1994. Generations have visited to learn about our local scrub-oak foothills over the years.



Spring Interns at Fountain Creek

by Jessica Miller, Fountain Creek Nature Center Supervisor



Chloe Cosgrove (left) grew up right by the Nature Center, with a trail behind her house that led straight to it. "I spent a lot of time walking these paths as a kid, and now I'm fortunate enough to intern here as an adult! I have a special love for the animals people usually shy away from such as spiders, centipedes, and snakes. I like showing people that they really aren't so bad, and advocating for their importance in our ecosystems." When she's not outdoors, she

spends her free time playing various instruments and reading.

Janna Coleman (right) is passionate about nature, wildlife, the environment, and helping the public understand and safely experience nature. "I have been an outdoorsman since I was young

and can remember spending many days of my youth experiencing the natural world around me with my outdoor skills further refined by my military service with the US Marine Corps." Janna has a strong background in animal care as well as native wildlife, conservation, observation, tracking, and botany. "I am very excited to intern with Fountain Creek and help pass on this kind of knowledge in our programs." 🐦





Volunteer Corner *by Kelly Ann Blanchard, Volunteer Coordinator*



Kelly Ann is excited for volunteers to help with spring programs, events, front desk reception, and Trailability!

It may be slow season but we're still bringing in new faces! Shoutout to our newest additions: **Jamie Mutti, Brenda McCreight, Bianca Miller, Katie Myers, and Nick Marts.** Welcome to the team!

We had 30 new volunteers join our ranks last year. In total, our incredible volunteers gave 4,679 hours of their time in 2025 and learned an entire new online system for logging their volunteer hours. We are so lucky to have such tenacious people at our side!

Volunteer Recognition Night: We are gearing up for our biggest volunteer event of the year! Our volunteer awards night will be March 31st from 5:00-7:30pm at Bear Creek Nature Center. We look forward to lavishing our volunteers in live music, good food, prizes, camaraderie, and a new surprise pin!



The annual pin rewards volunteers for their service and adorns many hats and shirts!

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. 



Volunteer Highlight *by Kelly Ann Blanchard, Volunteer Coordinator*

On a brisk but sunny day in January, twenty-five nature center staff and volunteers gathered together at Fountain Creek Nature Center to share homemade soups, breads, desserts, and stories. This was a rare opportunity for us to take a collective breath and bond over laughter and warm food.



The view at Fountain Creek Nature Center is phenomenal year-round!

This was our third annual January Jubilee, an event born from the staff's desire to get to better know our volunteers and take advantage of a slower time of year when we are not slammed with back-to-back programs, summer camp, and field trips. Staff provided the main course, three different hot soups, and volunteers brought side dishes. This year, our volunteers went all out! Fresh salads, warm homemade breads, delicious desserts – we even had to bring out an extra table to fit everything! For entertainment, we played a fun game that involved decoding clues about a person's interests until we finally determined who it was. We learned that we were all nature lovers (who would've thought?), but there were also scuba divers, square dancers, coffee roasters, former tap dancers, and Native American flute players in our ranks!

Our jubilee culminated with an optional hike led by our new Accessibility Programs Coordinator, Nanette. I look forward to our fourth jubilee with great gumbo... I mean, gusto! 

Our jubilee culminated with an optional hike led by our new Accessibility Programs Coordinator, Nanette. I look forward to our fourth jubilee with great gumbo... I mean, gusto! 

Thank you to our 2025 Donors!

Steward: \$1,000 - \$5,000+

Jim Mariner
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in Memory of Paula Megorden
Betty & Bob Odello
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Champion: \$500 - \$999

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Anonymous
Anonymous
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Today!**

Partners in the Parks

Partners in the Parks was created fourteen years ago to provide financial support for El Paso County Parks, Trails, Open Spaces, and Nature Centers. Partners donate a gift of **\$5,000 annually** for three years to provide essential operating and maintenance support.

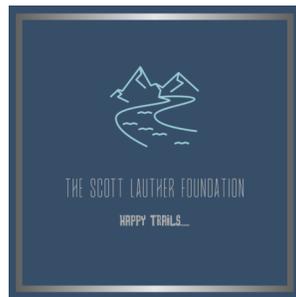
Contact Dana Nordstrom at dananordstrom@elpasoco.com to become a partner.

Partners in the Parks for Bear Creek Nature Center

Gold Hill Mesa
The Scott Lauther Foundation

Partner in the Parks for Fountain Creek Nature Center

Olson Plumbing & Heating Co.



Program Sponsors and Allies

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
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| Aiken Audubon Society | Flying Pig Farm | Patsy's Candy |
| Animal ER Care | Fossil Craft Beer Company | Peaceful Warriors Yoga |
| ASEZ WAO | Fountain Creek Watershed District | Peraton |
| Aravaipa | Fountain Farmers 4-H Club | Pet Pantry |
| Bear Creek Garden Association | Fountain Valley School | Phantom Canyon Brewing Company |
| Bear Creek Senior Living | Friends of El Paso County Nature Centers | Pikes Peak Library District |
| Bird Conservancy of the Rockies | Friends of Garen of the Gods | Pikes Peak Beekeeping Association |
| Black Bear Coffee | Garden of the Gods Visitor & Nature Center | Pikes Peak State College |
| Broadmoor Garden Club | Girl Scouts of Colorado | Poor Richards |
| Black Bear Diner | Gold Hill Mesa | Revolution Rehab |
| Bumblebee Atlas | Harding Nursery | Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory |
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| Buffalo Gals/ Picnic Basket | The Honey Cottage | Rocky Mountain Women's Film Festival |
| Broadmoor Garden Club | House of Dog | Scott Lauther Foundation |
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| Colorado Wolf & Wildlife Center | Mountain View Electric Association | Toyota of Colorado Springs |
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| El Pomar Foundation | Ormao Dance Company | Xerces Society |
| Element Hotel & Lumen8 | Painting with a Twist | YMCA of the Pikes Peak Region |

Thank You!



El Paso County Nature Centers 2025 SNAPSHOT



MISSION

To connect people to their natural and cultural resources and inspire them to become stewards of our parks and the environment.

IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS:

- 1,114 Nature Center & Recreation Programs
 - 30,197 Participants
- 4,679 Volunteer Hours
 - Valued at \$155,764*
 - *Based on national average \$33.29/hr
- 477 Environmental Ed. Field Trips
 - 7,673 Students Reached
- 16 Nature Camps
 - 404 Campers
- 88 Trailability Program Participants
- 61,571 Non-Program Visitor Contacts*
 - *Including Rainbow Falls & Paint Mines
- Offered 95 programs for low income schools (Title I), serving 1453 students
- Programs were offered on 85% of the days the nature centers were open
- 4.9 Average rating out of 5.0
- Staff and Volunteers
 - 6 Full Time Staff
 - 2 Part Time Staff
 - 4 Seasonal Staff
 - 91 Volunteer Naturalists

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

In 2025, the El Paso County Nature Centers continued to grow in impact, capacity, and community reach. Staff delivered six health and safety trainings for employees, volunteers, community partners, and the public, including First Aid, CPR, AED, Disability Etiquette, and Youth Mental Health First Aid. At Bear Creek Nature Center, the Restoration Crew expanded to include trail maintenance, and planning began for a new exhibit, A Closer Peek at Bear Creek, with an RFP issued for installation in Spring 2026. Fountain Creek Nature Center coordinated one volunteer workday each quarter, established its own Restoration Crew, and updated the introduction kiosk signage. FCNC also partnered with community organizations to create, market, and schedule four programs designed to engage individuals from an underserved community. Financially, the Nature Centers exceeded expectations, surpassing the 2025 revenue goal of \$160,000 by generating \$260,166 in program fees and contributions, marking a standout year of growth and sustainability.

**AWARDS RECEIVED
IN 2025:
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
COUNTIES, ACHIEVEMENT
AWARD FOR RESTORATION
CREW, VISIT COLORADO
SPRINGS SUSTAINABILITY IN
ACTION AWARD FOR
FOUNTAIN CREEK NATURE
CENTER**



INNOVATIVE NEW PROGRAMS

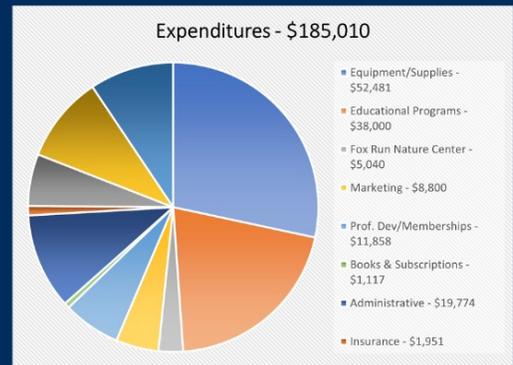
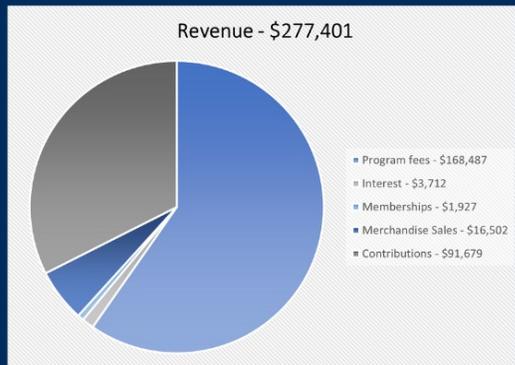
A Date with Nature - Snow Day Preppers - Who Dung it? - Birding for Tots - Beneficial Beavers - Happy Bird-day! - Scutes, Scales, and Polywog Tails - Let's Go Birding Together - Birds & Beans - Bird Banding - World Water Day Walk - Kids Entomology with Cronk - Toddling Along - Theater Across Borders Adventures with Peter Rabbit - Bumblebee Atlas Training - Kids' Morning Out Cosmic Quest - Painting with a Purpose - Coping Skills with TESSA - Adult Day Camp Seeing Stars - Drawing the Winter Landscape - Bugs of Bear Creek Walkabout - Watercolor Landscapes - The Buzz on Bumblebees - Diners, Drive-ins, and Detritivores - Bye Bye Birdy - Predators in the Park - Amazing Acorns - Wonderful Weasels - Whitetail Games

"This program was so educational and fun for the kids. I learned as an adult as well :)." *From a program participant*

LOOKING AHEAD

In 2026, El Paso County Nature Centers will continue building momentum through focused projects and meaningful investments. "A Closer Peek at Bear Creek" exhibit is scheduled for installation in Spring 2026, and a goal is in place to train 50% of staff and volunteers in Leave No Trace principles to strengthen stewardship efforts. At Fountain Creek Nature Center, plans include planting native landscaping at the newly rebuilt ADA accessible entrance with Restoration Crew volunteers and support from the Broadmoor Garden Club Grant, installing trail wayfinding signage, and creating a permanent Tiger Salamander exhibit. Bear Creek Nature Center will also celebrate its 50th Anniversary as the oldest nature center in Colorado with a year-long celebration and a special "Bear-thday" party in August. Together, these efforts support our mission to connect people with nature and inspire stewardship of our shared environment.

FINANCIAL REPORT





Bear Creek Nature Center Staff Update

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

After 4 amazing years, Ms. Brenda retired from her role as our part-time interpreter at Bear Creek Nature Center. During this



Adrian returns after two seasons to Bear Creek as the new Interpretive Program Coordinator.

time, she has been a mentor, our storytelling aficionado, the premier Sherlock Hemlock, created the VIP trail, led programs, and been an all-around amazing team member. We will miss her dearly but can't wait to have her back as a volunteer! Please welcome our new part-time interpreter, Adrian Douglass! Adrian has spent the past 2 seasons at Bear Creek Nature Center as a seasonal employee and is leveling up to be year-round.

Adrian is looking forward to furthering connections made and making new ones along with creating fun and innovative programs for all ages. He also said, "Most importantly, I have a lot of corny jokes yet to share." 🐾



Brenda's talents as a nature interpreter have been invaluable to the Nature centers for many years. You'll still see her as a volunteer!



Pinecone's Pics

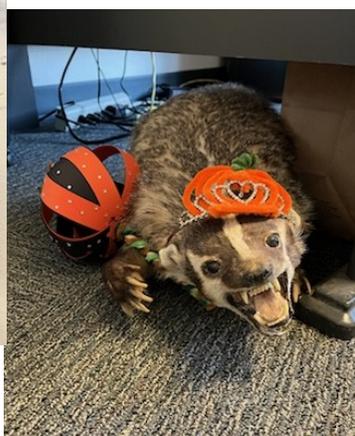
by Victoria Dinkel, Interpretive Program Specialist, Fountain Creek Nature Center

Oops, our editor did not assign enough articles to staff and this space was left blank. Victoria, who's nature name is Pinecone, saves the day by sharing pictures of staff office decor. 🐦



Glamorous Goose: Last seen flyin' first class, up in the sky.

Pumpkin Princess: Someone has to make sure we remember to pick 200 pumpkins each Fall.



Worms: A reminder to make more time for doodles and dancing.

Gnomie: Someone please build this gnome a home at the next Family Fun Day.





Say Hello to the Friends Board!

by Theresa Odello, Recreation & Cultural Services Division Manager

We are pleased to welcome new and returning members to the Friends Executive Board and to thank those whose service is concluding. Joining the board as Treasurer is Ellen Polyard, a long time volunteer with deep experience in financial stewardship, including 30 years in IT for an agricultural lender, 25 years with 4-H, and a decade as treasurer for the Colorado State 4-H Horse Advisory Committee, driven by a strong belief in giving back to the community. Judy Felder joins the board as an at large member, bringing a background in banking, school board leadership, and a passion for staying active, learning new things, and supporting nature center staff and visitors, especially youth. Returning board member Diane French has been connected to the nature centers since Fountain Creek Nature Center opened in 1992 and has supported countless programs and events over the years, from festivals and camps to Trailability, proudly continuing that legacy with both children and grandchildren. We also extend heartfelt thanks to outgoing board members, including Lynn Wilson, whose dedication as Treasurer and memorable characters, especially at Boo at Bear Creek, left a lasting impact and who will continue volunteering; Lyn Myers, a beloved volunteer known for masterful hot cocoa at Bear Creek by Candlelight and Winter Fun at Fox Run; and Jill Wright, our former Vice President and Trailability champion who has moved to Fort Collins. Continuing their service on the board are Risë Foster-Bruder, Holly Niewinski, Eileen Somers, and Jane Zook, who steps into the role of Vice President. Thank you to those who have served, and welcome to those beginning this new chapter! 🐾



From Left to Right: Diane French, Holly Niewinski, Risë Foster-Bruder, Judy Felder, Ellen Polyard, Eileen Somers, and honorary volunteer, Guide Dog in Training Gertie.



Andy's Poetry Corner by Andy Talley, Interpretive Program Coordinator

When ice covers the ponds, the quietness helps us observe and admire, think and reflect. Cold, silent days inspired Andy's haiku and limerick. What words might nature inspire you to share? 🐦



Turkey Courtship

Hen walking down trail
Tom follows fanning his tail
Gobble Gobble Strut

The Chickadee

Cuteness, Curiosity, Energy
Black, white, grey, with buffy sides
Back and forth he flits and flies
Chicka dee-dee-dee



Mike Pach



Nature Camper Profile

by Victoria Dinkel, Interpretive Program Specialist, Fountain Creek Nature Center

Name: Sydney Regan
Age & Grade: 10yo, 5th grade
Years in Nature Camp: 3 (5 camps)

Sydney's first (ever) camp experience was at Fountain Creek Nature Center in the summer of 2023. Over the years, we've enjoyed getting to know Sydney while watching her confidence grow outdoors, and her creativity flow in Magic Woods. When she isn't crafting homes for roly pollies or smearing mud across her face at camp,



Sydney is thoughtful and caring, finding and respecting bugs during Magic Woods time.



Sydney holds Ferdy the Bullsnake during Camp.

Sydney has no trouble finding ways to fill her free time. Some of her favorite activities include doing gymnastics, playing soccer or Nintendo switch, and writing adventure stories about talking animals. She may one day become famous for the story she is currently working on about their two-year-old, red-footed tortoise, Chewy. If not though, Sydney hopes to turn her passion of helping animals into a career as a veterinarian. We're grateful to have been part of Sydney's first camp experience and look forward to making more memories with her this summer. One thing she



Sydney cools down during a game of Drip, Drip, Splash!

Chewy, Sydney's Red-footed Tortoise, is one lucky pet!

and look forward to making more memories with her this summer. One thing she wants to make sure everyone knows about camp is to, "wear bug spray. You're going to have a lot of fun stuff to do outside." 

TEEN VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

Build leadership skills, spend days outside, and help connect kids to nature by helping us with Summer Nature Camps!

Volunteer opportunities continue year-round.

Applications, interviews, and training required.

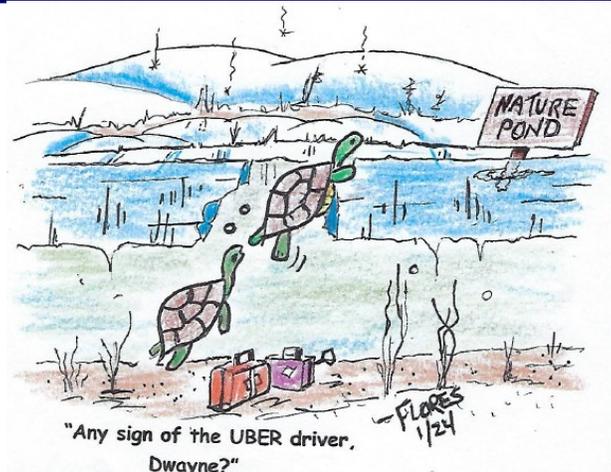
Fountain Creek Nature Center
Jessica Miller, Supervisor
jessicamiller@elpasoco.com

Bear Creek Nature Center
Mary Jo Lewis, Supervisor
maryjolewis@elpasoco.com

Apply by May 9, 2026



Rick's Cartoon



"Any sign of the UBER driver, Dwayne?"

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



Fountain Creek Happenings

by Andy Talley, Interpretive Program Coordinator

While hiking in the woods, day or night, one of my favorite sounds is the haunting hoot of a Great Horned Owl. The owls here at Fountain Creek have graced me with their calls during several hikes this month. This time of year, daytime sightings are not unusual. Although they are usually nocturnal hunters, Great Horned Owls sometimes hunt in broad daylight.



A Great Horned Owl surveys its territory at Fountain Creek Nature Center. Photo by Kristin Mae Photography.

We can hear them most effectively now because the beginning of our calendar year is courting and territory setting time for Great Horned Owls. Mated pairs are monogamous and defend their territories with vigorous hooting, especially in the winter before egg-laying. During a duet, females will reply to a male with a raspy hoot in a higher pitch.

Great Horned Owls typically nest in large trees. They often adopt a nest that was built by another species, such as Red-tailed Hawks or Coopers Hawks. The large Cottonwood and Siberian Elm trees along our trails provide an ideal habitat for both the hawks and owls. Owl pairs may roost together near the future nest site for several months before laying eggs. Come take a hike along our Cattail Marsh Nature Trail. You never know Whoooo you might meet along the way. 🦉



Bear Creek Sightings

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

We're celebrating 50 years of Bear Creek Nature Center in 2026 but there's so much history that happened in the canyon before our beloved Nature Center



An fruit tree blooms at Bear Creek.

opened in 1976. In fact, we can still see evidence of history around the Nature Center today!

One such bit of history is the ranch and orchard owned by the Liebig/Stuart families in the late 1800s. Imagine walking around Bear Creek Nature Center just to stumble upon a cow chewing their cud! And the whole place likely smelled like lilacs, Mrs. Ann Mary Steuart Leibig Smith's favorite flower. Today, we can still see the irrigation ditches near the creek used to water the crops and animals. If you have a keen eye, you might even find apple and plum trees scattered around- remnants of the orchard that have been distributed by the bears and deer eating the fruits.



An old irrigation ditch is hidden in grass near the Regional Trail.

But in 1899, the Liebig/Stuart Ranch was sold to El Paso County- eventually becoming part of the Poor Farm and later on, Bear Creek Regional Park/Bear Creek Nature Center. But we can dive into that next time! Until then, keep your eyes peeled for apples, plums, lilacs, and even irrigation ditches near the trails of Bear Creek Nature Center. 🐾

El Paso County Nature Centers
245 Bear Creek Rd.
Colorado Springs, CO 80906

Spring Program Highlights



Beginner's Introduction to Painting Snowy Landscapes

Saturday, March 7, 1:00 - 4:00 p.m.

Build a Coyote with Bricks & Minifigs

Saturday, March 14, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

Pi Day Hike- Math in Nature

Saturday, March 14, 1:00 - 2:45 p.m.

Birding 102- Intermediate Birding

Thursday, April 9, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.

Saturday, April 11, 8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Bird Banding - Saturday, April 18, 7:00 ~ 8:00 ~ 9:00

Kids' Morning Out- Friends of the Feather

Saturday, April 18, 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.



Building for the Birds

Saturday, March 7, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Chocolate Bunny Egg Hunt

Saturday, April 4, 9:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., and 1:00 p.m.

Theatres Across Borders Presents - Winnie the Pooh

Saturdays, April 11 & 18, 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Fountain Creek Restoration Crew

Saturday, April 18, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Grandfather Cottonwood's B-earth-day Celebration!

Saturday, April 25, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Family Fun Day - Saturday, May 2, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Miller Moth Mayhem - Saturday, May 23, 10:00a.m.-12:00p.m.

Spring Recreation Highlight

Free Archery Day

Saturday, May 9, 10am-3:30pm

Make a free appointment to try your hand at archery, one of the fastest growing outdoor sports!

USA certified archery coaches from the Archery School of the Rockies (ASR) will walk you through the basics and test your skills; all equipment is provided.

www.elpasocountynaturecenters.com