

My

# Prairie Ridge

# Nature Journal

Tour Guide version - with Notes



*Red-tailed Hawk*

*Today's Adventure:* A tour of Prairie Ridge natural Area. Even though there are 785 acres to this site, the plan is to walk from the parking lot on Wilson Ave to the western "T" trail connection. Then what? South to see the old cattle handling barns? Or North to see the connection to Coyote Ridge Trail? We'll just have to see.

*Date and Time of Visit:* April 21, 2020 7AM

*Weather:* Sunny, cool, clear skies with a few puffy clouds

*First Impressions:* Glad I'm walking west, the low sun in the east would be blinding. The light does shine nicely on the hills and mountains, pictures will look good with this lighting!

## Beginning of the Trail:

Prairie Ridge Trail is 1.2 miles to the intersection of the trail to Coyote Ridge. At first glance, there doesn't seem to be much to look for, but nature enthusiasts know there's more out there if you look and listen.



**Bird Song:** The Meadowlarks are warbling all around in the early morning.

There are Red-winged blackbirds too. By following your ears to the wetland areas, you can see males defending their nesting sites and hear their trilling song.



Bird Sketch

There is also another bird, I see pairs of them flying today. Taking a picture to help with looking up the name later.

*Taking in the Big Picture*    *The view west is beautiful.*

*Long's Peak: popping up from behind the ridgeline, bold and shining with snow*



*Meeker Mountain: a clear day, Meeker looks great in white.*



*The Hogback: Still mostly shades of grey and brown, with only a little green from a few hardy ponderosa pine trees.*

*Along the Trail: The trail is very new, graded shoulders and farmland on either side. The winter wheat is only a few inches tall, stretching in rows to the north and south.*



Beer Walking a Bit: and when people start watching their feet, guess what you can see? Coyote Tracks! The claw marks are clearly showing.



Since dogs are not allowed on this trail, the coyotes should stick around hunting small mammals like mice and larger ones like prairie dogs.

If you have some coins in your pocket, you can measure track size. Two quarters equals 1.75 inches, a dime equals 0.75 in.; these tracks were about 2 inches long.

A quick sketch at life size and let's keep an eye out for scat (poop) to confirm.



Yep! Found Coyote scat about a quarter of a mile farther. Fuzzy with fur, kind of pointy on one end (like fox scat), and grey. Also saw some blacker scat with grass in it - dogs sometimes eat grass.



Wow! There's Bobcat tracks too! No claw marks, smaller, in the soft edges of the trail.

Coming up on the Curry part of the trail:

The drainage area is easier to see now. More native plants to see; cattails down low, grasses nearby, and a couple of trees.



There are also some old railroad tie fence braces from when this area held cattle, grazing after the wheat was harvested.

The ties should last a long time as bird perches. Here is our mystery bird, the Vesper Sparrow.



The Prairie Ridge Bird Bingo sheet from the Open Lands and Trails website; [cityofloveland.org/prairieridge](http://cityofloveland.org/prairieridge) says to look for:



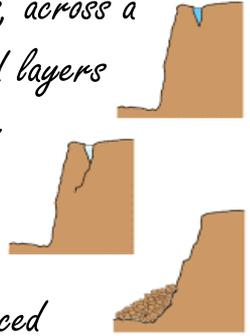
Black-billed Magpie  
Lark Sparrow



American Goldfinch  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
and many others, too.



**A Little About Rocks:** near a set of fence braces, across a ditch, is a curious set of exposed rock. Layers and layers of sedimentary sandstone, with some classic erosion happening. There's a rock fall, where melting snow must have filled cracks and then frozen overnight. The water expanded as it froze and forced the cracks wider until the rock broke off and fell.



Looking north

is a good view of the uplifted slopes and morning shadows will make a nice sketch - of rock that is 95 to 140 million years old! The Dakota Ridge & Niobrara Shale



There are other rocks on the trail, small ones. They are not native to the area but brought in with the trail surfacing. Small quartz bits are cool to look at (☺ha ha, quartz is igneous, from molten rock, and they're "cool").



At the "T", where trails intersect:

The boulders marking the trail junction have some cool lichen on the surface.

A lichen is not a single organism; it is fungi combined with a photosynthetic partner, an algae.

One theory about the colors of lichens; the algae cannot withstand our bright sunlight, so chemicals produced together with the fungus act as sunscreen. Some can even be bright yellow or red.



Now, to turn north, or south?

**North first.** The hillsides have mountain mahogany, a foothills indicator shrub whose fuzzy-tailed seeds will turn the slopes to shining silver in the fall sun.



**Fun Fact:** Mountain Mahogany wood is so dense that it will sink in water, it does not float!

## First Wildflower!



east facing slopes, Ridge to Ridge Trail

Size: smaller than a dime, low, 3-4" tall

Petal #: 5

Petal Color: true pink

Leaves: like a small "frond", soft, low to the ground and spreading

Prairie Ridge's many plants & flowers include rare Bell's Twinpod, found only in Larimer and Boulder counties on shale and limestone soil (Niobrara & Pierre formations).



This plant needs our protection,  
PICTURES ONLY if found!

## My plant and flower list for today:

- |                                     |                               |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <u>✓</u> Fringed Sage (1)           | <u>old</u> Mullein Stalks (2) |
| <u>✓</u> Yucca (3)                  | <u>✓</u> Rabbitbrush (4)      |
| <u>✓</u> Common Storksbill..★flower | <u>old</u> Evening Primrose   |
| <u>✓</u> Mountain Mahogany          | <u>✓</u> Prickly-pear Cactus  |
| <u>maybe?</u> Skunkbrush Sumac      | <u>✓</u> Ponderosa Pine       |
| <u>✓</u> Cattail                    |                               |



More Evidence of Wildlife: while walking to the north  
Found a deer crossing just past the Prairie Dog town. The  
prairie dog den mounds are just north of the set of railroad  
ties (could this be an unfinished cattle corral?)  
Saw one prairie dog, seems they wait for it  
to warm up quite a bit.



The deer crossing was interesting, coming down-slope mostly,  
but to what? Almost all of the  
toes pointed east.



Above, in the sky,  
were 5 Turkey Vultures catching the warm air flowing up  
from the east-facing hillsides. These big birds have black and  
silver under-wings, and red heads. Also looked for other  
raptors: Red-tailed Hawks, Kestrels and Burrowing Owls.

Now it is time to head South: past the "T" with the boulders. Staying on the trail, there are great views to the south and east. To the south, there are farms and old ranch buildings. The big stack of hay is where this trail ends.



To the east, you can see so far! The 130' elevation gain lets you see water towers, sugar silos, and distribution centers.

Ute camp 1900



Looking west of the trail, there are places you can imagine Native Americans setting up camp. One could see newcomers coming from the east; the hogbacks and valleys provided water and food. But by 1878, all Indians in Colorado: \*Ute, Arapaho, Kiowa, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Apache were required to leave and go to designated reservations. \*The Ute were placed on 2 reservations in southwestern Colorado. Today, past and present Native American culture can be observed and experienced throughout Colorado.



Farming here at Prairie Ridge Natural Area began in 1900.



You can see an old tractor-drawn disk from more recent years along the south Prairie Ridge Trail.

It should be relaxing, sketching farmland rolling off into the distance....

Working on perspective,

Trying this view....



Thinking about adding color...and deciding to take a picture to work on while in my comfy chair back home.

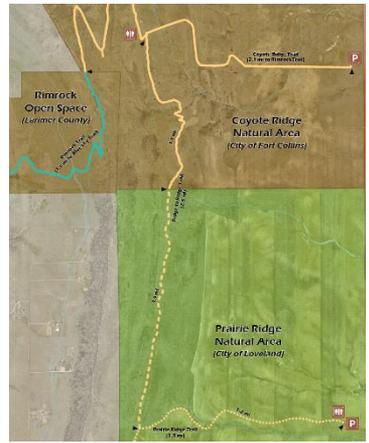


With a cold drink,

Much of the surrounding land is privately owned, including west of the trail.

Please respect signs and please stay on the trails.

What a wonderful trail – and connected to miles of trails to the north! Will have to make another visit, and another journal, when the weather warms and more plants start growing and blooming.



### Notes to Self:

Wear: good supportive shoes, hat, and sunscreen

Bring: sunglasses, WATER, and walking stick (early morning is fairly cool for snakes, but better to be prepared)

Wish I remembered: to check the kiosk map for mileage, to bring a snack, binoculars, and coins for size reference.

Next time: Print and bring the Bird Bingo sheet from [cityofloveland.org/prairieridge](http://cityofloveland.org/prairieridge) and bring some blank Journal B personal pages to make my own new notes and sketches.

Reminder: Be aware of weather hidden by the hogback.



This journal was created for the grand opening of Prairie Ridge Natural Area. For more information about this and other natural areas, please visit: [www.cityofloveland.org/openlands](http://www.cityofloveland.org/openlands)

