

Management Area Descriptions for the Marshall Mesa-Southern Grasslands Trail Study Area

7/29/05

West Marshall Mesa Passive Recreation Area

References: 4, 10, 13, 14, 16

Natural Resources

- This management area is the farthest extension of foothills forest into the prairie margin of any area in the Open Space and Mountain Parks system. Because of increased elevation and slightly higher moisture conditions, this management area includes patches of ponderosa pine forest, a rich diversity of shrubs, and relatively wet meadows and savannas. Riparian areas are present in the Cowdry drainage and along the ditches, and wetlands exist in low-lying areas. Located in the Boulder Mountain Park/South Boulder Environmental Conservation Area.
- While this management area was severely disturbed by mining activity in the 19th and 20th centuries, native plant communities have recovered in some areas. The management area includes xeric tallgrass communities (mostly on upper, rocky portions of slopes), which are important for rare butterflies (such as arogos skipper, two-spotted skipper, and cross-line skipper). Birdfoot violet (*Viola pedatifida*), a rare plant listed by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, is present.
- Marshall Mesa geology includes sandstone outcrops, plant fossils, and a coal seam. Evidence from historic Marshall Mesa coal mining activities is present, and interpretative signs provide highlights to visitors.

Recreational Use

- This management area has become very popular, with a large number of hikers, dog walkers, bikers, runners, and horseback riders.
- An extensive network of undesignated trails has developed here. The growth in use in recent years has been steep, paralleling the growth in the neighboring communities of Louisville and Superior.
- Dog management is on-leash or voice-and-sight control (no change).

Management Issues

- Non-compliance with voice-and-sight and dog poop pick-up regulations is still significant. Dog excrement is a major and well-documented issue in this management area.
- Trail cutting on steep slopes has caused soil erosion, as has the trail widening on both the biking-allowed and biking-prohibited trails. In particular, the multi-purpose trail has seen creation of parallel trails and severe widening and erosion in parts.
- Conflict between the different types of visitor activities has been a problem here.
- Trailhead parking frequently results in high congestion and backup parking along Marshall Drive. Vehicle egress from the parking lot can be difficult and dangerous given the high speeds and limited sight distances on Marshall Drive.

East Marshall Mesa Natural Area

References: 4, 13, 14

Natural Resources

- This management area includes both drier upland grasses (mostly Western wheat-mixed grass prairie) and shrubs and also relatively wet meadows. Diverse riparian areas are present in the Cowdry drainage and along the ditches, and wetlands exist in low-lying areas.
- While this management area was severely disturbed by mining activity in the 19th and 20th centuries, many native plant communities have recovered to varying degrees.
- Located in the Boulder Mountain Park/South Boulder Environmental Conservation Area.

Recreational Use

- This management area does not contain any designated trails, but it is becoming more popular as visitors explore off-trail areas to the east of the trailed areas. A substantial network of undesignated trails has developed here. Clearly there is a desire by visitors to travel to and from Superior and connect with existing trails on Marshall Mesa.
- A new trail connection east to Superior is planned, extending from the existing trailhead east to S. 66th St. and then east to Superior.
- Dog management is on-leash or voice-and-sight control (no change).

Management Issues

- Undesignated trails along steep slopes have caused erosion. One of the undesignated trails intrudes into the Cowdry drainage, which could negatively impact the wetland.
- Trailhead parking congestion that spills onto Marshall Drive could become worse with increases in visitation due to general growth in use and the new trail connection.

Recommended Management Actions

- Construct a trail connection from Marshall Mesa to S. 66th St. to Superior; eliminate the undesignated trails.
- Provide a solution to the trailhead parking congestion and safety concerns before the new trail is constructed.

Recommended Management Actions

- Construct the pedestrian underpass from Marshall Mesa to the Community Ditch Trail (under Highway 93).
- Address safety and parking congestion problems at the Marshall Mesa trailhead. Consider a new trailhead at the City Limits property.

Southern Grasslands Habitat Conservation Area

References: 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 13, 14, 17

Natural Resources

- This management area is the largest relatively intact block of grassland habitat in the Open Space and Mountain Parks system (a mosaic of plains riparian, mixed grass, and tallgrass habitats). It is a mixed complex of many different kinds of prairie grassland communities. The dominant shortgrass species include buffalograss and blue grama. Some of the important tallgrasses include big bluestem, little bluestem, switchgrass, needle-and-thread grass, prairie dropseed, side-oats grama, western wheatgrass, junegrass, and purple three-awn. It also includes some rare forb and shrub communities. Dwarf leadplant (*Amorpha nana*), which is listed as rare and sensitive by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, is present in this management area. Located in the Boulder Mountain Park/South Boulder Environmental Conservation Area.
- Much of this management area is open to cattle grazing. It includes important undisturbed prairie dog habitat, which is the largest Prairie Dog Habitat Conservation Area designated on Open Space and Mountain Parks. The grassland is large enough and intact enough to be a site for threatened and endangered species reintroduction (e.g., sharp-tailed grouse and pronghorn). The management area has high quality prairie and mountain vistas. It has good restoration potential as a remnant mixed grass prairie. This area includes active reclamation of historic sand and gravel mining operations.
- This management area contains several miles of Coal Creek, the longest stretch of a riparian area without trails in the Open Space and Mountain Parks system. Coal Creek is a major restoration project for Open Space and Mountain Parks, with the goals of reestablishment of functioning channel morphology and hydrology and restoration of wetland and riparian vegetation. Coal Creek has high habitat value, especially for avian species. A pair of bald eagles attempted to nest along Coal Creek in 2003, 2004, and 2005, and there has been a seasonal wildlife closure to protect the nest. It is habitat for the state-threatened Preble's meadow jumping mouse. The Terra Foundation has provided grant funding to assist the restoration of Coal Creek. The funding is based on a commitment to protect and preserve the creek after restoration work is completed.

Recreational Use

- This management area currently has no designated trails in it and is a low use area. The Greenbelt Plateau Trail forms part of its western boundary and the Coalton Trail part of the eastern boundary. Open Space and Mountain Parks has considered building a trail connector at the southern periphery of the management area (hugging State Highway 128), which would connect the Greenbelt Plateau trailhead to the Coalton Trail on the east. Unfortunately, the original proposed alignment involved partial use of the State Highway 128 right-of-way, but use of the right-of-way was denied by the Colorado Department of Transportation. The proposed trail from the East Marshall Mesa Natural Area to Superior would be located in the northeast portion of this management area--the alignment would follow the south side of Highway 170 (but not close to the Cowdry drainage) to S. 66th St., then south along S. 66th St., stopping short of Coal Creek, and connect to Coal Creek Drive in Superior.

- A recently installed stoplight at the intersection of State Highways 128 and 93 now provides a safe road crossing and connection to the Doudy Draw Trail. Open Space and Mountain Parks had proposed a trail connection using an existing underpass to connect the Greenbelt Plateau trailhead east of State Highway 93 to the Flatirons Vista trailhead west of State Highway 93, but the new pedestrian-activated stoplight with a new short connection to the Doudy Draw Trail will take its place. There are a number of existing/potential undesignated trails in this management area, but currently they do not get high visitor use.
- A launch site for beginning-level hang gliders is located off State Highway 128 on the Waneka property. The area of landing is relatively small.
- Currently, dog management in this management area is predominantly no-dogs, although dogs are allowed on leash or under voice-and-sight control on the Greenbelt Plateau Trail and on leash on the Coalton Trail.
- The Coal Creek corridor (fenced) and the Varra property are both closed to public access because of restoration activities and/or unsafe conditions. In the past, Coal Creek has been a destination for some birders and hikers to a relatively intact, un-trailed riparian area.
- A new trail was built by Boulder County in 2004 that crosses Coal Creek on the Arsenault property and provides a new trail link for Superior residents to the trails in the area.

Management Issues

- Since this management area contains such a high quality grassland and riparian corridor, and very little visitor use occurs there now, the opportunity is there to protect and preserve this unique ecosystem by minimizing future visitor use impacts.
- This large block of grassland ecosystem and the Coal Creek riparian corridor have high habitat values and also high restoration potential. This management area still has relatively low use and is un-trailed. The opportunity exists to keep this large habitat block and riparian corridor intact and free from visitor use that would penetrate the core of this management area. Keeping future visitor use at the periphery of the habitat block would support a high level of habitat effectiveness that derives from the many diverse habitat patches where prairie dogs, raptors, grassland and riparian nesters, grazers, and many other types of wildlife can be sustained.
- The undesignated trails from hikers, equestrians, and hang gliders/paragliders are mostly at the periphery of this large area. Constructing the planned trails at the periphery of the habitat block will channel visitors to low-impact areas and minimize impacts on prairie dogs, soil erosion, vegetation trampling, and weed spread.
- The off-trail landings of the hang gliders, while not deep into the habitat block, have the potential to impede cattle operations and undermine the management of this Habitat Conservation Area.

Recommended Management Actions

- Construct a new trail connection between the Coalton Trail and the Greenbelt Plateau trailhead (at the periphery of the habitat block).
- Continue formal closure of the Coal Creek corridor and the Varra property.
- In order to maximize the extent of the Habitat Conservation Area, prohibit hang gliding and paragliding at the Highway 128 site.