County gives nod to local artist

BY KEVIN DUGGAN
kevin@duggan@coloradoan.com

Diane Findley loves to have fun.
Her natural exuberance carries over to her art work, especially when she paints a portrait or landscape. Her paintings explode with bold colors and familiar settings are transformed with natural shapes and hues giving way to artistic license.

"For me, painting is just a wild thing," Findley said. "It's almost out of control!"

Findley is the visual artist of the year for the Larimer County Open Lands Program. The designation gave her guided access to all of the program's properties with the understanding she would produce a piece of art and donate it to the county.

But Findley, who is prolific and works fast, produced 12 landscape paintings of scenes from several locations, including Red Mountain Open Space, which is north of Fort Collins, and the Devil's Backbone Open Space west of Loveland.

Findley said she was thrilled to receive the designation and felt highly motivated to "kick out the jams." "Plus, in painting, one thing leads to another," she said.

"Once I got going, I just wanted to do more."

With so many pieces to choose from, residents were invited to vote on which painting should be donated to the county and hang in the county courthouse. Balloting was conducted online and at a show at Cache Bank and Trust in downtown Fort Collins.

The winner with 561 votes was "The Poudre," which shows the Poudre River as it courses by Lions Park near LaPorte. Findley rode a bike to the park and sketched the scene in April.

The painting shows the low-flowing river with many exposed rocks. But vegetation along the riverbank and in the foothills in the background is

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Fort Collins artist Diane Findley is the 2009 artist of the year for the Larimer County Open Lands Program. Findley is awarded Thursday at her studio with the acrylic painting titled "The Poudre."

Berthoud Recorder.com Nov. 5, 2009

LARIMER COUNTY OUTDOORS

Guided Hikes and Programs
Saturday, Nov. 21

"What Would the Pilgrims Eat?" 9 a.m.
Join naturalists Caroline and Jay for a holiday walk around the Wild Loop at the Devil's Backbone in search of wild edibles worthy of the pilgrims' table. Please wear sturdy shoes and bring water for the trail. Approximately three-hour program. For questions please call Rob at 970-679-4561.

2009 Bald Eagles Watch
Tuesday, Nov. 17, at 4:30 p.m.
Saturday, Nov. 21, at 9 a.m.
Wednesday, Nov. 25, at 4:30 p.m.

Each year Bald Eagles from the Yukon and beyond migrate south to Fort Collins to roost at Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space, located off Highway 392, just west of the Windsor-Fort Collins interchange. The Larimer County Department of Natural Resources will be offering multiple opportunities for the public to view the eagles and hear a Naturalist-led talk about the majestic birds. All eagle watches are completely free and involve only a short walk along a paved trail to get to the viewing area. Eagle watches will be cancelled because of snow, high winds, or poor visibility due to fog.

To learn more about Larimer County's parks and open spaces, visit our Web site at www.Larimer.org/NaturalResources.
Jeffrey Boring

Open space.

Now for the less apparent. First, there are plant communities located at Red Mountain that are extremely rare. Narrowleaf cottonwood, a somewhat common tree located along streams in Larimer County, cohabitates with chokecherry to form a community found in fewer than five places in the entire state of Colorado. Another rare plant community seldom seen in Colorado but located at Red Mountain is the mountain mahogany/mountain mahogany shrubland. This upland plant community is imperiled and has been observed in less than 20 places globally. That's right, globally. Although it sounds like a riddle, there are other living things at Red Mountain that are extremely common but are never seen. In fact, one of the highest and most diverse ecosystems at Red Mountain may not even be visible, unless you look underground. Hundreds of thousands of single-celled organisms, including fungi, bacteria, algae and protozoans, live in the soil of Red Mountain. A single teaspoon of prairie soil can contain more than 5 billion of these fascinating creatures. The creatures are bizarre, too. Some are luminescent, eight-legged creatures with sharp claws known affectionately as waterbear. Others are small critters with spring-loaded tails that allow them to hop into action, aptly named springtails. Mites, pseudoscorpions and nematodes also inhabit Red Mountain. They all help provide healthy and nutritious soil that feeds the diverse plant community above ground.

So, next time you hear the catch phrase "more than meets the eye," don't think about the plastic toys or blockbuster summer-action flick. Think about the ecology of Red Mountain Open Space. And, plan a trip for next spring when it reopens to see it for yourself.

Jeffrey Boring is a research specialist with the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources.
Artists gives county color

BY KEVIN DUGGAN
For Loveland Connection

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The painting shows the low-flowing river with many exposed rocks. But vegetation along the riverbank and in the footsteps in the background is starting to come to life.

The painting was the first in the series Findley produced. All of the 30-by-40-inch landscapes were done with acrylic paint on canvas.

The open lands program typically receives 15 to 20 applications a year for its visual artist program, said Justin Scharton, open lands technician.

The artist is chosen by a committee made up of county staff, open lands board members and residents with backgrounds in the arts.

The designation carries no financial award, but it looks good on an artist's resume and is considered to be an honor, he said.

Recruiting for next year's artist will begin in February.

Three years into the program the selected artists have all dedicated a lot of time to their projects, Scharton said.

"It takes a pretty generous artist to put so much work into a piece of art and then donate it to the county," he said.

Findley said her favorite spots were Red Mountain and Horsetooth Open Space, which is near Estes Park.

Artist Diane Findley is the 2009 artist of the year for the Larimer County Open Lands Program. Findley is pictured Thursday at her studio with the acrylic painting 'The Poudre.'

INTERESTED?
For information on Larimer County Open Lands and its visual artist program, see www.larimer.org/openlands

The open lands program offers a wide array of landscapes to the public, she said.

"All these places just make you pinch yourself and say, 'I live here,'" she said. "You think, 'This is all for me and my grandchildren.'"

Findley arrived in Larimer County in 1972 to attend CSU and study art. She fell in love with the area and decided to stay.

She has worked in pottery for 30 years and is well known for her Japanese-influenced style.

She's a longtime member of the Trimble Court Artisans co-op and is the organization's current president.

The county "took a chance" choosing her as artist of the year given her style of painting, she said.

After so many years of producing bowls, plates and goblets, her pottery work has become somewhat mechanical, she said. But painting is another story.

Painting is like "going to the grocery store naked — you really put yourself out there," she said.

"Clay is the calm, paint is the storm," she said.
TAKE A HIKE

Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space

> Distance: Cattail Flats is a 1.6-mile loop, Sandpiper Trail, 1 mile roundtrip and Heron Loop one-quarter of a mile.

> Difficulty: All rated as easy with little elevation gain. Cattail and Sandpiper trails are made of crushed rock, refills and Heron Loop paved, wheelchair accessible and plowed.

> Trailhead: Entrance to open space is along Carpenter Road (Larimer County Road 32) one mile west of Interstate 25.

> Fees: Free

> Facilities: Restrooms, kiosk, picnic shelters, wheelchair-accessible bird viewing pier

> Hours: Sunsets to sunset daily

> Pets: No

> Maps: None needed

> Information: www.larimer.org/naturalsources or (970) 679-4570

> Why go: Don't wait to hike the Cattail Flats Trail, which is the longest and allows for the most views, as it closes Sunday and won't reopen until March 1, 2010, to allow for eagle roosting. Go this weekend and you'll likely have the best views of the migrating bald eagles, which have already this year. There are bird viewing blinds off this trail. Even after the trail is closed, there is still reason to come here. The bird viewing pier along the Heron Loop Trail is an excellent place from which to watch birds. The Sandpiper Trail, which closes March 1 to June 15 annually for shorebirds and waterfowl nesting, is a pleasant hike that takes you to the western part of the property and to more bird viewing bluffs. A coyote family has been making its presence known in the grasslands just off the trail.

> More trails: To see details of 30 area trails, check out the Coloradoan Trail Guide at www.coloradoan.com/trailguide

County to allow camping during holiday periods

Larimer County will allow camping at Herman Park Open Space on Nov. 23-26, Thanksgiving eve and day, Christmas Eve Dec. 24 and New Year's Eve on Dec. 31.

Ordinarily, the cabins at the campground are reservable only for Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays during November through March.

Off-season rates are $50 per night.

The 15 cabins can hold a maximum of eight people.

They have no electricity but use propane for heat and light. Portable toilets are also available on-site.

To see details about the cabins and get information about Herman Park Open Space, visit www.larimer.org/naturalsources/hermanpark.htm.

To make reservations, call 900-977-7785 or visit www.larimercamping.com.

— Reporter-Herald staff

The People Have Spoken! Artist of Year painting picked

In an overwhelming response, the citizens of Larimer County have chosen the painting to represent the 2009 Open Lands Visual Artist of the Year, Diane Findley.

The winning painting, entitled The Poudre River, is a vibrant landscape piece that captures our beloved local river meandering through the area where the Pleasant Valley Trail parallels the river corridor in the Laporte area.

The painting was chosen from a dozen pieces created by Findley during her tenure as this year's Open Lands Visual Artist of the Year. Findley had the idea to let the public choose which of her paintings would hang prominently in the County Courthouse for the next year. Voting took place during the month of October online and at a recent reception in Fort Collins featuring the paintings. There were over 550 votes cast during the campaign.

The painting will be dedicated at a reception with the County Commissioners in January 2010.

The Open Lands Visual Artist of the Year program is an effort by the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources' Open Lands Program to connect our local protected natural areas and the art community to inspire the creation of art and to educate the public about art and nature.

To learn more about Larimer County's parks and open spaces, go to www.larimer.org/naturalsources
**COUNTY**

**Photographer to share latest project at CSU**

Famed Colorado nature photographer John Fielder will present his latest project and book, "Ranches of Colorado," at 7 p.m. Friday in the North Ballroom of the Lory Student Center, at Laurel and Meldrum streets on the Colorado State University campus.

A portion of proceeds from the event will support the work of the Legacy Land Trust, a nonprofit land conservation organization in northern Colorado.

"Ranches of Colorado" is a collaboration between Fielder, Colorado Open Lands and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust to feature the landscapes of 50 working ranches across Colorado.

Fielder is one of Colorado's most famous and well-respected nature photographers and has produced dozens of books, calendars and other media.

For more information, visit www.larimer.org.

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**WHAT'S GOING ON**

**FORT COLLINS**

**Photographer to discuss latest nature works**

Famed Colorado nature photographer John Fielder will present his latest project and book, "Ranches of Colorado," at 7 p.m. Friday, Nov. 20, in the North Ballroom of the Lory Student Center, at Laurel and Meldrum streets on the Colorado State University campus.

A portion of proceeds from the event will support the work of the Legacy Land Trust, a nonprofit land conservation organization in northern Colorado.

A suggested donation of $7.50 for adults and $5 for students is requested.

For details, call 679-4489.

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**Photographer to present works**

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City hosts eagle encounters, astronomy nights

Fort Collins Regional Open Space now under eagle management

By Marcy Mirkland - MARCY.MIRKLAND@COLORADAN.COM - JANUARY 3, 2010

Beyond the snow-covered trails and frozen waters at Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space, bald eagles that migrated from central Canada for the winter sat perched on tree limbs, looking for fish Saturday morning.

"We're their winter runway," said Carl Sommer, a volunteer master naturalist with the city of Fort Collins. The city of Fort Collins is hosting eagle watching sessions and astronomy nights at Fossil Creek this winter as its Nature Access Program taken over the land from management. A network of trails across the area was previously shared by the city and county until this year.

Larimer County rangers will still provide enforcement at Fossil Creek and offices for the rangers with the Open Lands program will stay there, said David Oly, a county ranger.

On Saturday, about 20 people stood on the shore of Fossil Creek, watching for bald eagles through binoculars. As they looked on, Sommer talked about the eagles and helped visitors get a closer look at the predators.

Despite having a full set of feathers on their heads, bald eagles were bald, a fact Sommer said because in old English, bald refers to the color white. Sommer said it could cause problems for their nests. Several of their nests would be in the lake, Sommer said. "When it's all frozen over, you gotta bailing ducks, prairie dogs, whatever they can," Sommer said.

Sommer said that when he's been out in the field, he's seen some bald eagles reading books, looking for food. He said the eagles are looking for other food sources.

"Every movie always shows the bald eagle in the red-tailed hawk," he said, using a book with 236 bird sounds to produce the bald eagle's actual sound shortcut, high-pitched squawks.

Tony and Leslie DuChes, of Windsor, returned to Fossil Creek with their two daughters on Saturday. The family had spent part of Friday afternoon at the lake, spotting bald eagles, coyotes and other animals. Hearing great things about Sommer, the family chose to spend back a day later and witnessed a few bald eagles perched on tree limbs.

Sophie DuChes, 8, and her sister Isabella, 6, said they learned that bald eagles don't eat the white feathers. "They eat the fish," Isabella said.

Put your phone.  
Isabella DuChes, 8, of Windsor, swallows as she watches a bald eagle fly through a grove Saturday at Fossil Creek Regional Open Space. The city of Fort Collins is now operating the original open space area after years of joint management with the county. (Clayton Whitlock/The Coloradoan)
on their heads until they’re about five years old.

"I thought they always had white heads," Sophi said.

Having lived in Windsor, which has a resident herd of bald eagles, Tony told he hadn't seen any eagles until he visited Fossil Creek. After the success of their first viewing, he said he and his family had just discovered a new hobby.

"We've been interested to learn more about nature," he said.

**In Your Voice** | READ REACTIONS TO THIS STORY

**Newest first**

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**Warmest wishes from**

[Sue]
Renowned photographer hopes his book will show why state’s ranches must be preserved

BY PAMELA DREXLER
REPORTER-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Photographer John Fielder has always promoted protecting public lands for future generations.

His new book transfers the same message to private lands — 50 working ranches across Colorado.

“We’re losing ranches to development more quickly than we’re saving them,” said Fielder.

“I wanted people to clearly see what is at stake.”

By capturing in vivid colors a lifestyle steeped in history and unique landscapes, the renowned photographer preserves a clear image of the land, the history and, he hopes, the future.

Through his photos and essays by writer James Meadow, Fielder’s book shows how Colorado’s history of ranching and of land preservation mesh.

“This was not about boots, buckles and cowboys,” Fielder said. “This project was about these families’ relationship with the land. “I found 50 out of 50 ranch families are environmentalists, which might strike people as odd. They all understand they cannot have a profitable cattle operation unless they respect and use the laws of nature.”

The families that care for the land featured in “Ranches of Colorado” have been taking care of the same acres for decades.

In nearby Weld County, Benjamin Franklin Ketcham discovered rolling fields and chalk bluffs the color of sunset while searching for cattle in a snowstorm, according to the book. He apparently liked what he saw and homesteaded there in 1870.

Ketcham’s great-granddaughter, Beverly Cox Black, and her family still run the ranch, which Fielder described as “extraordinary.”

“Eagle Rock sits just below the Wyoming border east of I-25 amidst ancient sedimentary bluffs created by the seas from long ago,” the photographer described.

SEE PHOTOS, PAGE 82.

If You Go

What: Photographer John Fielder will present 256 slides from his latest project, a book called “Ranches of Colorado.” Through photos and essays, the book underscores the importance of saving historic family ranches from development. Fielder also will sign books.

When: 7 p.m. Friday in the North Ballroom of the Lory Student Center on the Colorado State University campus in Fort Collins.

How much: Suggested donations for admission are $5 for non-students and $5 for students; however, any donation is appreciated.
Snakes apparently holding reunion at open space

Nature has a way of making natural areas a challenge to manage.

Our friends over at the Larimer County Open Lands Program know this well but recently have run into a particularly slippery situation at Red Mountain Open Space, which is near the Wyoming border.

Red Mountain is one of my favorite areas, with its variable landscape and red rock canyons. It has a wild feel even

The county opened the property to the public this summer. To accommodate visitors, a trailhead and parking lot were built off County Road 21.

But a potential problem revealed itself this fall when visitors and open lands staffers noticed a lot of rattlesnakes seemed to be hanging out near the trailhead.

I saw two snakes a few weeks ago when up there for a family hike on a Sunday afternoon. Both called as we approached and sent a clear message—"Back off"—with their rattles. Naturally, we left them alone.

Thinking the parking lot may be near a den where snakes gather to hibernate over the winter, the county hired a local Roto-Rooter company to run a camera typically used on sewer lines down holes near the parking lot to see what's going on underground.

It was a good idea that didn't quite pan out. The camera line couldn't negotiate the sharp corners of some burrows, and the generator brought to power the equipment ran out of gas. No one thought to bring extra fuel.

So there's no telling how many snakes may be hibernating in the same place near the parking lot, said Stephen Mackevey, a professor of biology at the University of Northern Colorado.

Mackevey is an expert on rattlesnakes and their venom. He told me the terrain around the trailhead didn't

See SNakes/Page A4

600 awards projects

to Larimer projects

at full slate of open
lands regulations

Commissioners told to look
TAKE A HIKE

Wild Loop Interpretive Trail

- Distance: 2.5-mile loop
- Difficulty: Easy
- Elevation range: 5,100 to 5,325 feet
- Trailhead: Devil's Backbone Open Space. Take Toll Hill Road south to U.S. Highway 34 in Loveland. Turn right and head west for 4 miles to just past mile marker No. 88. Turn right onto Hidden Valley Drive just east of the old water tank. The trailhead is on your left.
- Fees: Free
- Facilities: Restrooms, water and information available at the trailhead.
- Pets: Yes, on leash
- Map: None needed, but you can pick one up at the trailhead.

Information: Larimer County Natural Resources, 679-4570 or www.larimer.com/naturalresources/brown.cfm

Why go: If looking for an excuse to get out of the house over the holidays and give your guests a taste of the area, this hike through the 2,600-acre Devil's Backbone Open Space is your hike. It's a short drive and short hike with little elevation gain yet includes cool rock formations and a good chance to see wildlife, including raptors, mule deer, fox, coyotes and the occasional bighorn and mountain lion. Doing this time of year allows you to hike to the Keyhole, which frames a spectacular view to the west.

During spring, this trail is closed to protect rye grass nesting. Make sure to pick up an interpretive map at the trailhead and stop and read about the area's past and present.

More trails: To see details of all area trails, check out the Colorado Trail Guide at www.coloradoan.com/trailguide.

Winter a welcome respite after growth, harvest seasons

Go outside, close your eyes and take a deep breath. Can you smell it? It is that time of year again when the Earth recedes, preparing for winter. Leaves have fallen and plants are carefully pulling back into themselves so as to survive. The colors of spring and summer have dulled to safe and energy-efficient tones of brown. People are huddled up against the cold and wind.

In today's busy world, it is a rare opportunity to stop even for just a moment and notice all these details. But what a wonderful and unexpected gift. In these last few months, the Earth around us has gone from a season of growth to that of a good harvest. Falling into winter allows Northern Colorado a small respite following this busy season of growth and harvest. During this time, a lot of groups enjoy team-building activities that often include volunteer service projects. This is a great opportunity for natural resources agencies throughout Larimer County to add capacity to a dwindling off-season staff.

Throughout October, Larimer County Department of Natural Resources staff worked with more than 100 volunteers in major capacity-building projects. These volunteers planted trees and implemented healthy forest initiatives throughout our parks and open space system. Scout groups earned service patches with the help of some awesome ranger staff and Hewlett-Packard engineers streamlined slash-piling processes. Local church and youth support groups donated sweat labor to improve the camping experience at Horsetooth Reservoir. Even the Navy got involved and donated its time and energy during a drill weekend to remove fencing at the Devil's Backbone.

So the next time you're in a park or open space managed by Larimer County Natural Resources, stop, take a deep breath and remember all of the hard work, sore backs and blistered hands that helped to improve your experience.

You, too, can be a part of creating these special places while you help build new monarchs or strengthen your team with a volunteer service project. For information about group volunteer projects, contact CJ Collins at ccollins@larimer.org.

CJ Collins is the volunteer coordinator at Larimer County Department of Natural Resources. Send's email to ccollins@larimer.org.

Parks board plans meeting

The Larimer County Parks Advisory Board will meet at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 8, in the Boyd Lake Room at the Larimer County Courthouse Office Building, 200 W. Oak St.

Topics to be discussed include: proposed changes to park regulations, the Hess Valley Campground Partnership's final contract recommendation and a property status update on Big Thompson Canyon public access.

For details, call Garyufflington, Natural Resources director, 679-4566.

Big game hunting permits to be sold

Big game hunting will be sanctioned at Red Mountain Open Space during the 2010 hunting season.

A Larimer County Special Access Hunting Permit will be required. Permits can be obtained through the application process in January 2010.

Low Speed Connection Staff
A volunteer naturalist shares his knowledge of eagles with area residents last December during an eagle watch at Fossil Creek Reservoir.

Eagle Eyes

Locals looking up for national symbol
While snowbirds are flocking out of the state to warmer climes, bald eagles are migrating into Larimer County. December and January are prime months to see the nation's symbol around Loveland and Fort Collins.

At Fossil Creek Reservoir, located between the two cities, the raptors can easily be spotted early and late in the day. A record 65 bald eagles were spotted in one viewing in 2005. Last December and January, 45 bald eagles were the most sighted in a day.

Once again, the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources is offering residents a chance to see and learn about these majestic creatures. Instead of the typical two programs per month, volunteer naturalists will set up scopes and talk about eagles seven times in December.

The viewing area is a short, easy walk from the Fossil Creek Reservoir parking lot, but the evenings can be cold, so dress warmly and bring layers. Bald eagles are fish eaters, they stay around reservoirs to catch their meals or to steal already captured prey from other, smaller predators.

Young bald eagles may be confused for golden eagles because their brown heads do not turn white until they reach 4 to 5 years old, according to Rob Novak, education specialist with the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources.

Their white heads earned them the name "bald."

"Bald" used to be a name for people with white hair back in the colonial times," Novak said. Seen from a distance, or even up close through a scope, bald eagles look huge. That's because they are. The raptor can weigh from 8 to 14 pounds and have a wingspan longer than most people are tall — 6 feet to 8 feet, according to the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Like all birds, bald eagles have hollow bones, which allows them to soar through the sky, Novak said.

If humans were to fly like an eagle, with non-hollow bones, they would need a 19-foot wingspan, Novak said. While we cannot fly now, is the time to watch the eagles soar.
agency manages more than 4,000 camp sites and 87 cabins and yurts.

**Hermit Park open for holiday**

Reservations have been expanded for the camper cabins at Hermit Park Open Space, two miles south of Estes Park, to include New Year’s Eve.

To make reservations, visit www.larimerco.com or call (800) 397-7796. For information about Hermit Park Open Space, visit www.larimerco.org/naturalresources/hermitpark.htm.

Loveland Connection staff
**TODAY**

**Art exhibits**
Three Artists on Paper
9 a.m., Lloyd's Art Center, 216 N. College Ave. Works by Colorado artists hornblower, Leyendecker, Randy Pixon and Gene Schilling.

**Salvador Dali**
FREE 10 a.m., Loveland Museum/Gallery, 500 N. Lincoln Ave., Loveland. Salvador Dali's illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy and other books and portraits of Dali by Philipus Holman. www.ci.loveland.co.us/Cultural_Services/cultural_services_museum.htm

**Art openings**
Creative Spaces
FREE 8 a.m., Lincoln Center, 417 W. Magnolia St. Unique artist-made home decorating items. www.lcox.com

**Birding**
Eagle Watching
FREE 4 p.m., Fossil Creek Regional Open Space, on Carpenter Road, 1 mile west of Interstate 25-Colorado Highway 392 Windsor exit. Highlights a short walk along a paved trail to the viewing area. Weather permitting. www.fortcollins.gov/naturalresources

**Children's activities**
**Peek-A-Boo Time**
FREE 10:15 a.m., Council Tree Library, 2733 Council Tree Ave. Interactive program with stories, songs, rhymes, fingerplays and more. Recommended for children from birth to age 24 months by a parent or other caregiver. www.fortcollins libraries.org

**Storytime for children 4 and older**
FREE 10:30 a.m. Harmony Library, 4616 S. Shields St. For children age 4 and older who are ready for a group experience on their own as they have fun with engaging books, songs and activities to build their early literacy skills. www.fortcollins libraries.org

**Storytime for ages 2 and 3**
FREE 10:35 a.m., Harmony Library, 4616 S. Shields St. Interactive stories, songs and games that encourage emerging literacy skills. For children ages 2 and 3 with a caring adult. www.fortcollins libraries.org

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**Santa Claus visit**
FREE Noon to 6 p.m., Old Town Square. Santa will listen to children's holiday wishes. He speaks English and Spanish and knows sign language. A professional photographer will be on duty.

**Clubs and meetings**
**Mountain View Rotary Club Meeting**
Noon, Best Western Crossroads Inn Conference Center, 5542 E. U.S. Highway 34, Loveland.
Pet Blennquist, right, and Suzanne Stratford walk Sunday at Devil's Backbone Open Space with Stratford's dog Lucy. Blennquist remembers accessing the park from a different trailhead farther west on U.S. 34. Within the last decade a new trailhead was built that offers parking and restroom facilities for those about to embark on a quick, inside-the-park loop, or heading farther north to connect with the Blue Sky Trail that ends at Horsetooth Reservoir.

Rocky road

Open space stewards cut teeth on Devil’s Backbone

Editor’s note: As the first decade of the 21st century winds down, The Reporter-Herald is taking a look at the people and issues that captured the public’s attention locally.

By Pamela Dickman
Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

The jagged sandstone cuts the sky west of Loveland, nearly glowing at sunrise.

Once an ocean shore, the Devil’s Backbone is now one of the most popular hiking areas in Larimer County.

Though the unique landform has persevered centuries longer than Loveland has been a city, the past decade has been rock-solid in protecting the landscape for future generations.

“It’s a special place,” said Loveland resident Kathy Hartman, one of hundreds who banded together mid-decade to prevent development in the valley around the Backbone.

“It’s special, pure and simple.”

The first 2.1 miles of trail at the Devil’s Backbone, located west of town off U.S. 34, opened in 1999 — the first open space purchased with a voter-approved open space sales tax on which residents could actually set foot.

A shared vision turned the Backbone from a beautiful but off-limits landmark to a hiking destination.

Now, 2,242.7 acres are protected, 1.3 miles of trail link the Backbone all the way to Lory State Park west of Fort Collins, and developers’ visions of hundreds of homes and a

The year to come

Another mile of trail will be built at the Devil’s Backbone in 2010 on a portion near the trailhead that was donated to Larimer County in 2009. The area is behind an old water tower that was torn down earlier this year — a landmark many used when heading west of Loveland.

The county will use a $23,465 state grant to build the trail and a $5,000 donation from friends of Larimer County Parks and Open Lands to install educational signs.

Hikers walk along the Wild Loop trail Sunday at Devil’s Backbone Open Space.

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golf course filling the valley are only a memory.
It took millions of dollars, countless hours, cooperation and imagination to protect the Devil’s Backbone.

FROM COURTROOM TO LIVING ROOM
Throughout the decade, the trial to protecting the Devil’s Backbone took unexpected hopes and turns.
Residents found themselves front and center at meetings after meeting trying to save the valley around the Backbone, devoting time to a cause and proving that masses really can bring change.
Land conservationists ended up in bankruptcy court, and county commissioners found themselves in the unusual circumstance of reversing an annexation.

Indian Creeks A developer wanted to expand a gated community and chop up the valley into homes.
Instead, he lost the 1,545 acres to bankruptcy.
Together, Larimer County and Fort Collins officials found themselves in bankruptcy court, being against private developers for the land.
"That was something we’d never done before,” said K-Lynn Cameron, recently retired Larimer County open lands director and one of the key players in protecting the Backbone. "It was exciting."
What turned the tide in favor of conservation was cold, hard cash.
Larimer County, pitched in a total of $850,000, Great Outdoors Colorado offered $500,000 and Fort Collins stepped up with $4 million.
"We were able to tell the bankruptcy court that we could give them cash,” said Cameron. "They are looking for the way to pay off the debt as quickly as possible."
Hidden Valley: Another key piece of the valley east of the Backbone was threatened earlier this decade by a proposal for hundreds of homes and a golf course.
Years of negotiations and public meetings ended with the Larimer County commissioners reversing an annexation, taking that land back into the rural area, and the developer reducing his proposal to 12 homes.
"That valley could have been totally full of houses and a golf course,” said Cameron.
Instead, the city of Loveland and Larimer County bought 11 development sites, protecting much of the land and approving only 12 homes in that particular development.
But it wasn’t all the work of officials.

Integral in that process was the Backbone Valley, a grass-roots group of hundreds of area residents who devoted time to doing just that.
They studied, they worked, they spread the word, and they showed up in force at public meetings.
The group disbanded after the Backbone Valley deal was completed.
"It was a bittersweet victory,” said Hartman, who stepped forward as spokeswoman for the group.
"We protected something.
Yet, Hartman’s expression turns sad when she remembers visiting the Backbone shortly after building began on the homes the sounds of construction hurt her ears and her heart.
"They were pounding nails in the roofs, the workers’ country/western music was blaring, just echoing across the landscape,” she said.
"I really haven’t talked there more than a half a dozen times since.
But thousands of others have.

HOME TO HIKERS, CYCLISTS AND RAPTORS
In 2001, Larimer County logged 44,300 visitors to the Devil’s Backbone.
That rose to 72,900 in 2008, the last year for which numbers are available.
For many, the destination just outside Loveland is a respite, a wild area home to wildlife and nesting raptors and the start of trails that wind all the way from U.S. 34 to Lory State Park, connecting along the way to 75 total miles of hiking opportunities.
"It really does have it all,” said Kerri Collins, Larimer County’s interim open lands manager.
"And it is close to home still."
The first true example of what the open space tax would do — a place where people could literally connect to the land and set foot, mountain bike or horse hooves to dirt — spurred county residents to vote in 1999 to extend the open space tax, said Cameron.
That, she said, led to thousands of acres of protected land in Loveland, Fort Collins and unincorporated Larimer County.
The county alone now boasts more than 40,000 acres of protected land.
Last summer, its largest open space, 15,000-acre Red Mountain, debuted near the Wyoming border, connecting with Fort Collins’ new 20,000-acre Soapstone Prairie Natural Area.
Although different from the Devil’s Backbone, those lands are majestic in their own right and, like the Backbone, historic, cultural and now protected.
"It’s a huge sense of pride with what the community was able to do, what we were able to pull together,” Cameron said.

The end result comes from hard work, including more than 10 years of working to save the Devil’s Backbone.
"We all looked at it and said, ‘This is worth working hard on,” said County Commissioner Kathy Remmel.
"This is going to be exhausting but it’s worth every minute.”
And, according to many, it was.
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Market watch
Dec. 29, 2009

Dow Jones industrials 10,545.41
-2.08

Nasdaq composite 2,298.90

Standard & Poor’s 500 1,126.20
-13.88

Russell 2000 533.17

For more financial data, go to www.reporterherald.com
Not so fast, 2009

There's still more to squeeze in this year

**Wednesday**

**View bald eagles at Fossil Creek Open Space**

Larimer County Parks and Open Lands will have a bald eagle viewing at Fossil Creek Reservoir Open Space, one mile west of Interstate 25 on Carpenter Road, at 4 p.m. Wednesday.

Eagles come from the Yukon and beyond to roost at Fossil Creek every year.

A naturalist will be onsite to talk about the birds that are typically here from mid-November to...