

Outdoor enthusiasts have enjoyed 20 years of the Devil's Backbone

The first tax-supported open space opened to the public in 1999



Big Thompson District Manager Chris Fleming talks Thursday, Dec. 19, 2019, about how the Devil's Backbone has changed over the past 20 years since it became the first Larimer County open space that is open to public use. (Jenny Sparks/Loveland Reporter-Herald)

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Just over 20 years ago, the Devil's Backbone became the first Larimer County Open Space that was preserved by sales tax dollars to open to the public.

Dedicated on Sept. 11, 1999, the Devil's Backbone opened with a 15-car parking lot and one 2.1-mile soft surface trail, now known as the Wild Loop.

"It was one of the best kept secrets for a long time," said Chris Fleming, the Big Thompson District manager for the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources.

Then popularity of the open space with its unique geologic formations and natural wonders, with its recreation opportunities just minutes west of Loveland, grew. And grew. And grew.

Now it is one of the most popular of many open spaces managed by Larimer County, estimated by many to be in second place for visitation behind Horsetooth Mountain Open Space.

“We’re getting between 150,000 and 200,000 visitors at the Devil’s Backbone every year,” said Fleming. “It’s just an interesting landscape and the proximity to town.”

While the Devil’s Backbone is popular among Loveland residents, it also draws hikers and mountain bikers from around Larimer County as well as from around Colorado and even other states. Bri Wold, a seasonal ranger supervisor, said studies show 25% to 40% of visitors are from out of Colorado.

Studies also show that about 85% are hikers, dog walkers or trail runners, less than 1 percent horseback riders, and about 15% mountain bikers, according to information from the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources.

Larimer County has continued to preserve land around the backbone and to add on to its offerings over the years, to handle the increased usage. In 2000, the county built the existing parking lot with a capacity for 40 cars and then, in 2014, expanded it to handle 100 vehicles.



David Slater, Larimer County trails employee, uses a walk-behind bobcat to fix a dip on the trail Friday, Dec. 19, 2019, at the Devil’s Backbone open space in Loveland. (Jenny Sparks/Loveland Reporter-Herald)

The county also has added trails, including a new loop to separate mountain bikers from hikers, and has connected the backbone to other trails including Blue Sky and Rimrock. Now, there are a total of 3,100 acres in the Devil's Backbone system with 17.3 miles of trail.

"From right here, you can hike, you can ride a horse, you can ride a bike all the way to Lory State Park," Fleming said recently from the Devil's Backbone trailhead west of Loveland. Lory State Park is located northwest of Fort Collins.

The increased usage led to a debate over whether the Backbone was being loved to death and whether the county should change how it manages the area. Late last year, from September through December, county and land management officials were debating whether to start charging an entrance fee to visit the Backbone, which had always been free.

The proposal stressed that, because of the amount of usage, the county had to manage the open space more like a county park, all of which do assess fees. Land managers said they needed the funding to maintain the open space and the current levels of service.

However, after hearing from many different people, including those upset at the prospect, the Larimer County Commissioners, on Dec. 20, 2018, rejected the idea of charging a fee. At that time, the idea was for the county to pursue partnerships to find other sources of funding — an concept that has not come to fruition.

"It's certainly a balancing act," Fleming said. "We're still looking at options for how to continue to support the Backbone into the future."

Since 1999, the entire Larimer County Open Spaces program has grown. The county, with other land preservation partners, has conserved more than 55,000 total acres. Of those, 60% were purchased outright, while 40% protected through conservation easements.

Just under half of the 55,000 acres, 24,500 are open for public access.

The county's first open space sales tax, approved by voters in 1995, began to be collected in 1996. Voters extended it in 1999 and then, in 2014, approved another 25 years by a landslide 82% vote. The idea is for the county to continue to protect and maintain open spaces, like the Devil's Backbone, for future generations.

For information on all of Larimer County's open spaces and parks, visit larimer.org/naturalresources/parks.