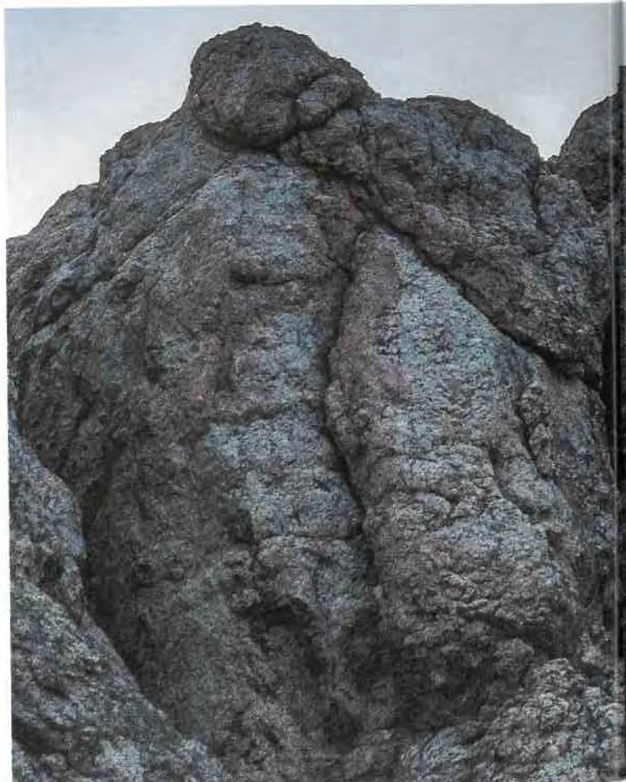
Hikers embark at sunrise from the Coyote Ridge Trailhead, just one of the trails ideal for early spring outings in the Fort Collins area.

Mud Season HIKES

AROUND FORT COLLINS

story and photographs by DAWN WILSON

Bobcat Ridge is an ideal vantage point to glass the valley for elk, great horned owls, coyotes, bobcats, even black bears and mountain lions.



WHEN MUD SEASON comes to Colorado's Rocky Mountains, the foothills around Fort Collins offer an alternative venue for spring hiking and wildlife viewing.

This area of Colorado between the prairie grasslands to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west is referred to as a lower transition zone. At an elevation of 5,600 to 7,000 feet, the area is home to mountain mahogany, ponderosa pine and American plum. These plants and animals like mule deer, scrub jays and spotted towhees thrive in a region too dry for large trees, and with soil too rocky for the plants of the plains.

As the high mountain snow melts in the spring mud season, this zone offers moderately easy – and dry – hikes without the strenuous low-oxygen workout experienced at higher elevations. Being a college town home to Colorado State University, Fort Collins also offers attractions to enjoy after a hike, such as restaurants, breweries and shops. And spring is an ideal time to take advantage of these trails before the summer heat makes them a bit unbearable. Here are four locally favorite areas with dozens of trails and destinations.

HORSETOOTH MOUNTAIN OPEN SPACE

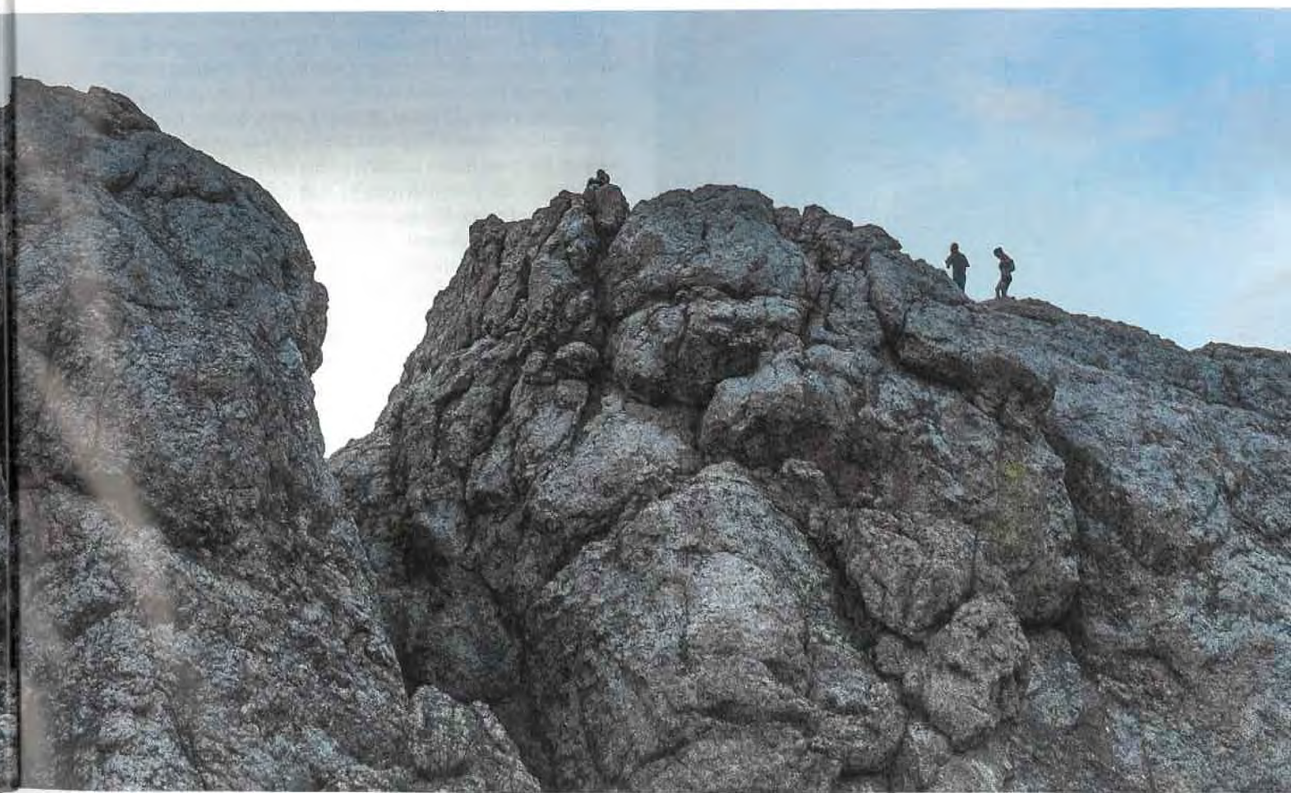
This iconic location borders the western edge of this rapidly growing city in northern Colorado. Long used by Native Americans as a landmark for traveling, the 7,256-foot Horsetooth Rock gets its name because of the vertical gaps in the rock. Set against the lighter sky, these gaps give the impression of two large teeth, similar to teeth of a horse.

According to a Native American legend, the rock represents the remains of a sleeping giant who ruled over the Valley of Contentment, which is now covered in water as Horsetooth Reservoir. The valley was full of wildlife like bison, elk and pronghorn that roamed freely under the giant's protection. The Natives were afraid to hunt the animals, but when a drought hit the area, the chief decided they must hunt so his people could survive.

A brave hunter named Flying Eagle sneaked into the valley at night. As the giant slept, his heart beat from his chest. Flying Eagle captured a rabbit to distract a night hawk that protected the giant. With the hawk distracted, the brave reached for a tomahawk in the sky and chopped the giant's heart twice, killing him. The gaps represents the slashes to his heart, and the sandstone below is colored red from his blood.

No sleeping giant lives here today. Instead, Horsetooth Mountain Open Space, a 2,886-acre open space with 29 miles of trails managed by the Larimer County Department of Natural

Left, a mule deer gets 15 seconds of fame in Horsetooth Mountain Open Space. Below, hikers scramble up Horsetooth Rock in the same park. A 5-mile round-trip trail ascends to this feature, so named because the gaps in the slashed rocks resemble a horse's teeth.



Spring hikes tend to turn up wildlife sightings, like the Abert's squirrel at Horsetooth Mountain Open Space in the top photo, and the prairie dogs in Coyote Ridge Natural Area in the lower photo. Prairie dogs have a complex communication system.

Resources, encompasses the area around the granite equine teeth. This outdoor retreat of native grasslands, ponderosa pine forest and montane landscape has sweeping views of sprawling Fort Collins to the east and glimpses of Longs Peak and Mount Meeker in Rocky Mountain National Park to the southwest. These views make Horsetooth Mountain Open Space a local favorite for sunrise, moonrise, moonset or sunset hikes.

There are two main destinations in the park: Horsetooth Rock and Horsetooth Falls.

The 2 ¼-mile round-trip hike to the falls is quick and fairly easy. Spring is the best time to see this waterfall as the runoff cascades into a pool before Spring Creek carries the water to Horsetooth Reservoir (aka the Valley of Contentment).

The other popular destination in the park is Horsetooth Rock. This longer and more difficult trail, at 5 miles round trip, gains approximately 1,500 feet as it crosses meadows of early spring blooms such as purple pasque flowers, the first to emerge in the foothills. The trail then crosses through rock outcroppings up to the base of the granite crevasses that form the teeth.

Up close to Horsetooth Rock, you get a new respect for the size of these gaps, which have become the western Fort Collins landmark. Along the trail, hikers might enjoy visits by mule deer, Abert's squirrels, cottontail rabbits and maybe a rare possibility for a black bear, red fox, mountain lion or bobcat.

A $9 entrance fee is required per vehicle for Horsetooth Mountain Open Space. Leashed dogs are permitted on the trails.

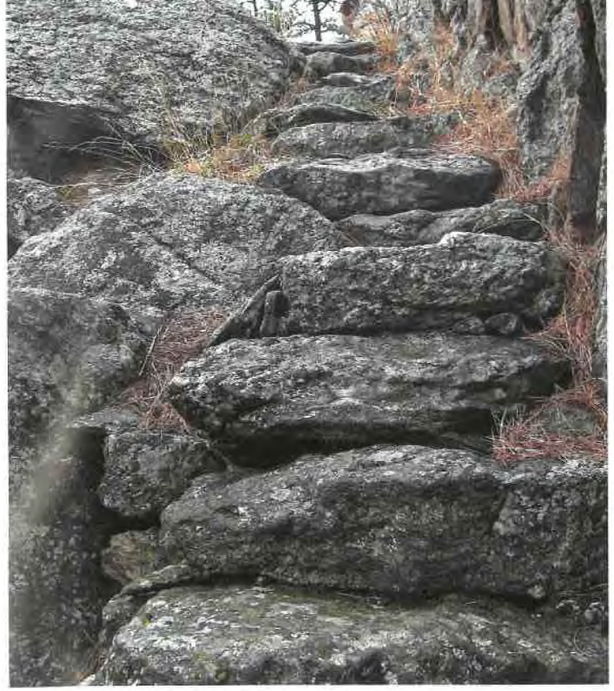
EAGLE'S NEST OPEN SPACE

Another property managed by the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources is Eagle's Nest Open Space. Located approximately 22 miles north of Fort Collins, this sweeping preserve of rolling green hills leads down to the North Fork Cache la Poudre River. The entire 755-acre property abuts Eagle's Nest Rock, a granite ridge where a large and active golden eagle nest has been located for more than a century, giving the park its name.

Spring is the prettiest time to visit Eagle's Nest Open Space, said Teddy Parker-Renga, who works for the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources. The washes drain runoff toward the North Fork, flowers bloom and grass greens up nicely. Migrating birds return to the area, as do fly fishers on the North Fork.

In springtime, the trails through this river valley provide beautiful, open views of tall grasses gently swaying in the wind. Used by ranchers in the 1870s to herd their livestock, the remnants in this valley provide a healthy landscape thick with grasses that turn vibrant green for a bit of time in spring, before reverting to their golden hues in the heat of summer. Yucca and golden banner accentuate the landscape.

The 3-Bar Trail descends for about a mile and a half from the parking lot. It then crosses the North Fork Cache la Poudre. Take a break at the river where a bench has been provided to enjoy a picnic lunch and the gurgling sounds of the flowing water. Fishing is permitted at this location, but only upstream during the spring nesting season. This is also the closest the trail comes to Eagle's Nest Rock on the rock wall to the east.



The Gateway Natural Area, northwest of Fort Collins off U.S. 287, features rocky staircases. Many of the hiking trails were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1940s. The area sits where the North Fork Cache la Poudre River meets the main artery. Parking is $6.

Take the upper portion of the 3-Bar Trail loop on the return trip for another opportunity to look for the eagle nest along the rock wall. For a longer hike, continue along the 1.8-mile "Oh-Tee" (OT) Trail that loops at the southern end of the 3-Bar Trail.

This area is prime for wildlife viewing in spring, with the possibility of seeing coyote, red fox, mule deer, bald and golden eagles, along with western meadowlarks and other songbirds singing their spring melodies.

There is no entrance fee to use this open space. Leashed dogs are permitted on these trails.

BOBCAT RIDGE NATURAL AREA

Managed by the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department, Bobcat Ridge is 2,600 acres of stunning beauty preserved for its wide variety of wildlife and history.

"Bobcat is so diverse," said Sue Kenney, City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department Education and Outreach Coordinator. "I am amazed at the variety of wildlife we see there on our 10 wildlife cameras on and off the trails – goshawks, small owls, fascinating birds, elk wallowing, a black bear jumping over her cub."

An early morning spring hike will almost surely be accompanied by a variety of mammals and birds. Elk use this area for spring grazing as they wait for the snow to melt in higher elevations. Bighorn sheep, the eastern-most in Colorado, sometimes wander into the natural area. Coyotes will bark at the edges of the day to communicate with their pack. Mule deer frequently graze in the area. An American woodcock, rare for Colorado, was first spotted here in 2015. Great horned owls, swallows and white-throated swifts nest on the red rock wall near the parking lot.

Although you may not see them, black bears, skunks, mountain lions and bobcats have been picked up on the natural area's trail cameras, an educational project sponsored by Rocky Mountain Cat Conservancy and Rocky Mountain High School in Fort Collins.

Richard Barberot, an Estes Park resident who comes down the hill to hike at Bobcat Ridge, enjoys the area for its easy trails and wildlife viewing. His goal is to cross paths with a mountain lion in this foothills nature preserve. Best time to go? Late afternoon, when the wildlife start to stir along the edges of the forests, Barberot said. "This is where I keep a watchful eye out for my first mountain lion sighting."

Beyond the wildlife, this area is rich in history and full of trails; there are almost 16 miles of trails of varying lengths and difficulty levels. Bobcat Ridge also is a place to learn about short-grass prairie and pioneer life, Kenney said. There are several original homestead buildings to discover here, including a one-room cabin used by pioneering families, and restored ranch buildings, too.

There is no entrance fee to use Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. Dogs are not permitted on any part of this property. Horses and bikes are permitted on specific designated trails. Watch out for rattlesnakes along any of these trails; they will be coming out of hibernation in late March and early April.

For more info about the trail camera project and to view some of the photos collected over the years, visit fcgov.com/naturalareas/wildlife-camera.php.

COYOTE RIDGE NATURAL AREA

Coyote Ridge Natural Area is one of six interconnected natural areas spanning the north-south hogbacks between Loveland and Fort Collins along the eastern edge of the foothills. In the spring, this easy-to-access natural area where the plains meet the foothills bursts with color from wildflowers that thrive in

these arid environments. Hikers will come across blooming yucca, golden banner, prairie coneflower, locoweed, western wallflower and many more flowers in shades of yellow, purple, red and white.

This natural area, also managed by the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department, is an ideal location to hike at sunrise. The accessibility of this open space in the midst of a population close to 600,000 residents of Northern Colorado means it attracts a large number of hikers and bikers in the late afternoon and on weekends. As the spring months progress and the temperature rises, the lack of shade at this location can even turn a late-day hike a bit hot.

Start a hike before sunrise and get to the first ridge to watch the sun break over the Eastern horizon and illuminate the morning clouds above the prairie. Another option for enjoying cooler temps and fewer people is to hike here under the full moon, since this area is open daily until 11 p.m.

The Blue Sky Trail is the six-mile trail that intersects Coyote Ridge Natural Area. A longer day of hiking can be had by taking the Blue Sky Trail and connecting to trails in Devil's Backbone Open Space to the south and Horsetooth Mountain Open Space and Lory State Park to the north. Elevation gain along this full trail can be approximately 500 to 1,500 feet, depending on how much and which sections of the trail are hiked.

Popular with mountain bikers, Coyote Ridge Natural Area is an ideal launching point for this all-day hike or bike ride, which runs along a ridge with views of the Eastern Plains and the Rocky Mountains to the west. Another option is to enjoy a short jaunt on the designated trails through the short-grass prairie and ponderosa pine forest landscape of this 839-acre natural area.

One of the popular activities at Coyote Ridge is the one-mile hike to a modern cabin. Along this easy trail, which rises only a few hundred feet, hikers can observe a prairie dog town, complete with a population of burrowing owls that arrive in the spring. Spring also marks the arrival of birds that enjoy the lush vegetation along this trail, including blue grosbeaks, western meadowlarks and lazuli buntings. At the cabin, enjoy a stroll around the Hidden Clues Trail, a 1/4-mile loop with interpretive signs about the vegetation, wildlife and history of the area.

Take a little time to watch the black-tailed prairie dogs near the trail. These cute mammals are a keystone species, meaning their survival plays a crucial role in the success of an entire ecosystem. For example, prairie dog colonies provide habitats that benefit approximately 150 other species, such as the burrowing owl, desert cottontails and black-footed ferrets. Prairie dogs also are a food source for plains predators like coyotes, golden eagles and badgers.

Prairie dogs have a distinct social system. Their large towns are divided into close-knit family units called coteries. Each family unit lives in a network of tunnels with multiple openings and underground rooms.

In addition to their unique social system, prairie dogs have one of the most complex mammalian communication systems made up of barks and chatter. Sentinels will give various warning barks to other members of the colony to announce pending threats.

When the threat is gone, the prairie dogs will give the distinct "jump-yip" call to signify all is clear.

If the all-day trek along the Blue Sky Trail appeals to you, grab a friend, two cars to shuttle between the northern and southern trailheads, and lots of water. If something a little more low-key sounds appealing, take some time to watch the wildlife and appreciate the spring wildflowers of this open space.

Coyote Ridge is free and offers a small parking area. Dogs are not permitted.

FOR ALL OF THESE HIKES, bring water, since it is not available along the trails; wear tall hiking boots because rattlesnakes are common in all these open spaces, especially as they come out of hibernation in the spring; and check trail conditions prior to arriving because muddy trails due to spring rains and runoff may cause the natural area to be temporarily closed.

The purple bloom of the spiderwort is one of the benefits of spring hiking, this one spotted on Coyote Ridge. Below, a hiker strolls through a grassy meadow at sunset in Eagle's Nest Open Space.