

COLORADO PARKS & WILDLIFE

# Fountain Valley Trail Guide at Roxborough State Park





ROXBOROUGH STATE PARK - *Fountain Valley Trail*

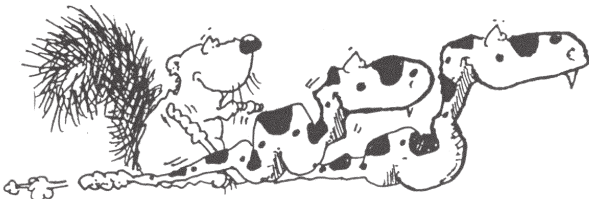
# Fountain Valley Trail Guide

**T**his self-guided hike along the 2.25 mile Fountain Valley Trail takes you through some of the most magnificent land in the park. Hiking time is approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

Remember that all of the park's plants, animals and rocks are protected by law. Collecting and rock climbing are not allowed.

We are proud partners with Leave No Trace, Center for Outdoor Ethics. Remember to follow these 7 principles:

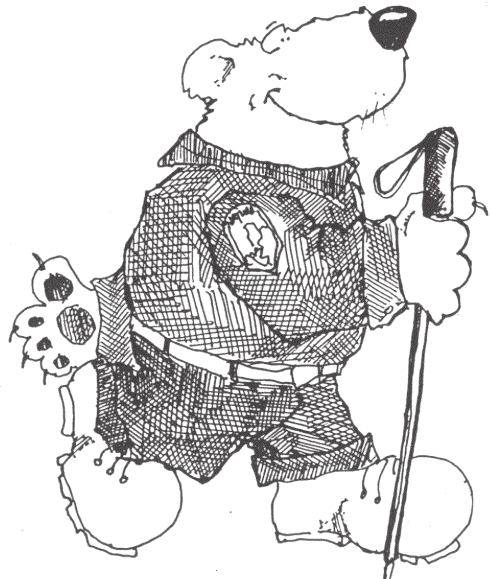
- Know before you go
- Stick to the trails
- Trash your trash
- Leave it as you find it
- Be careful with fire  
(no fires allowed)
- Keep wildlife wild
- Share the trail



Please **STAY ON THE TRAIL** and watch where you walk. Rattlesnakes and poison ivy are among Roxborough's residents.

Start your hike a few steps north of the Visitor Center. Match this guide with the numbered markers along the trail.

**“REMEMBER...”**



## Stop 1: Roxborough. . . A Home for Many

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You begin your hike here at the trailhead of the Fountain Valley Trail. Fountain Valley is named for the large formation of red rocks that jut up in front of you. These rocks are part of what is called the **Fountain Formation** and is named for the town of Fountain, Colorado, where it may also be seen. Roxborough is located in the “**transition zone**,” an area of gradual change from the plains to the mountains. Transition areas like this provide a rich mix

of habitats ranging from canyon to streamside, dry grasslands to wet meadows. As you hike, you will have the opportunity to view several of these distinct habitats here in the park. Please remember to stay on the park trails so that we may continue to preserve the park for all future generations.



*Enjoy meeting the native residents of Roxborough as you hike through their communities.*

## Stop 2: Scrub Oak Community

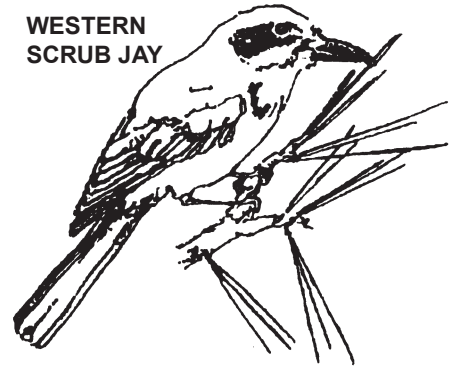
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GAMBEL OAK

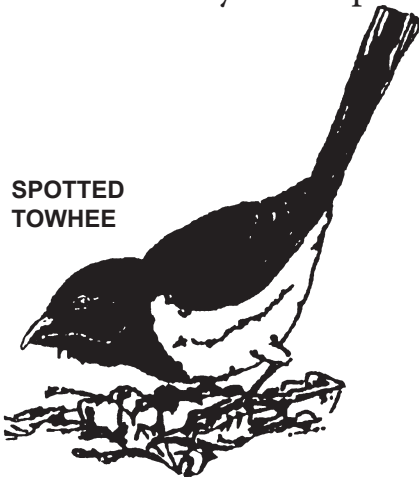
**Gambel oak**, also known as scrub oak, is one of the most common plants in Roxborough. The oaks range in size from small and shrub-like to tall and tree-like. Many of the oaks in the Park are well over 500 years old. The oaks provide a shaded understory where plants that

WESTERN  
SCRUB JAY



normally might need more water may grow. They also provide one of the most important food sources at Roxborough, the nutrient-rich acorns. Acorns, when leached, were once one of the chief vegetable foods for generations of Natives who lived in and near Roxborough.

SPOTTED  
TOWHEE



Even today, the acorns are still a principal food of the black bears that roam the area. **Western scrub jays** nest in the oaks and also eat their acorns. If you listen carefully, you may hear a spotted towhee scratching for insects in the fallen leaves. These birds are often mistaken for robins.

# Stop 3: Animal Clues

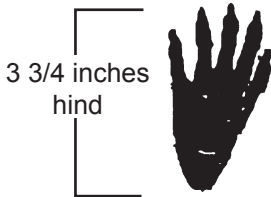


**squirrel**

You may not actually see the many types of animals making their homes here, but you can learn about them from the clues they leave behind. All along this trail, look for clues or “signs” of animal activity. Animal signs include tracks, nests, droppings, holes or diggings and trails. Watch for tracks where the ground is soft. Deer (and people) tracks are frequently seen. You may also see elk, coyote, fox, raccoon, squirrel, and mountain lion tracks.



**mountain lion**



**raccoon**



**coyote**



**elk**



**mule deer**

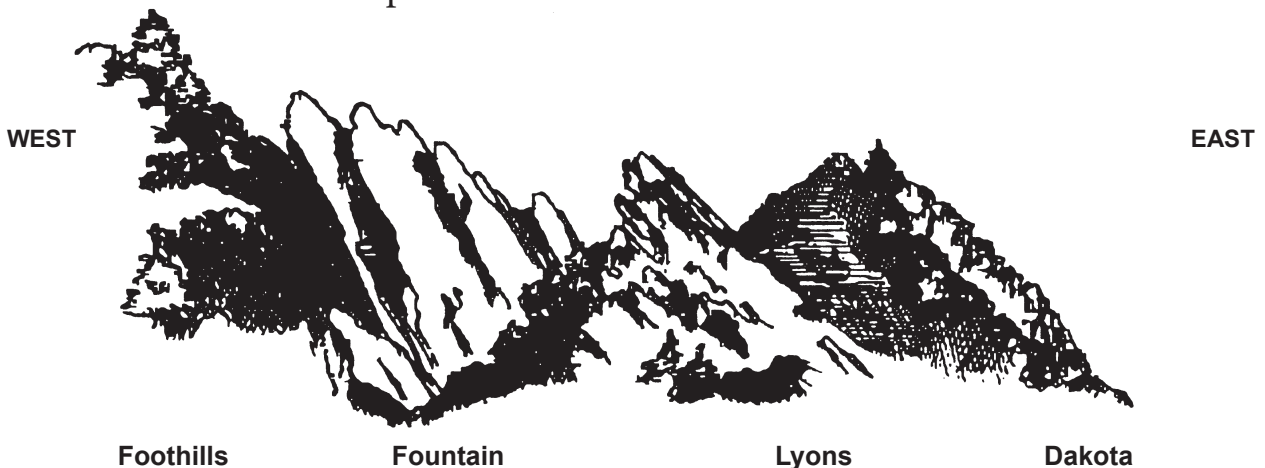
***Continue hiking north. You will visit the Fountain Valley Overlook at the end of your hike.***

## Stop 4: Rocks to Roxborough

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This is a good place to view the rock formations. The oldest rocks are to your left (west) in the tree-covered foothills of the Rocky Mountains. These rocks are a mixture of igneous rocks (formed from melted minerals) and metamorphic rocks (changed by heat and pressure). Igneous granite and metamorphic gneiss (pronounced “nice”) are rock types found in these foothills. Three sedimentary rock ridges are found in the park. Sedimentary rocks are formed by deposits of sediments such as sand and mud. The spectacular

**Fountain Formation** is the same formation you see in Garden of the Gods and Red Rocks Amphitheater. An iron-rich mineral gives these rocks their red color. Mostly sandstone, they erode easily and are not safe to climb. The middle ridge, made of yellow-orange sandstone, is the **Lyons Formation**. The rigid skyline to the east is the **Dakota Hogback**. The dramatic angle of the rocks resulted when the rocks were bent and tilted during the “uplift” forming the Rocky Mountains.



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*Here is where the loop begins. This guide follows the right or east fork of the trail.*

## Stop 5: Early People

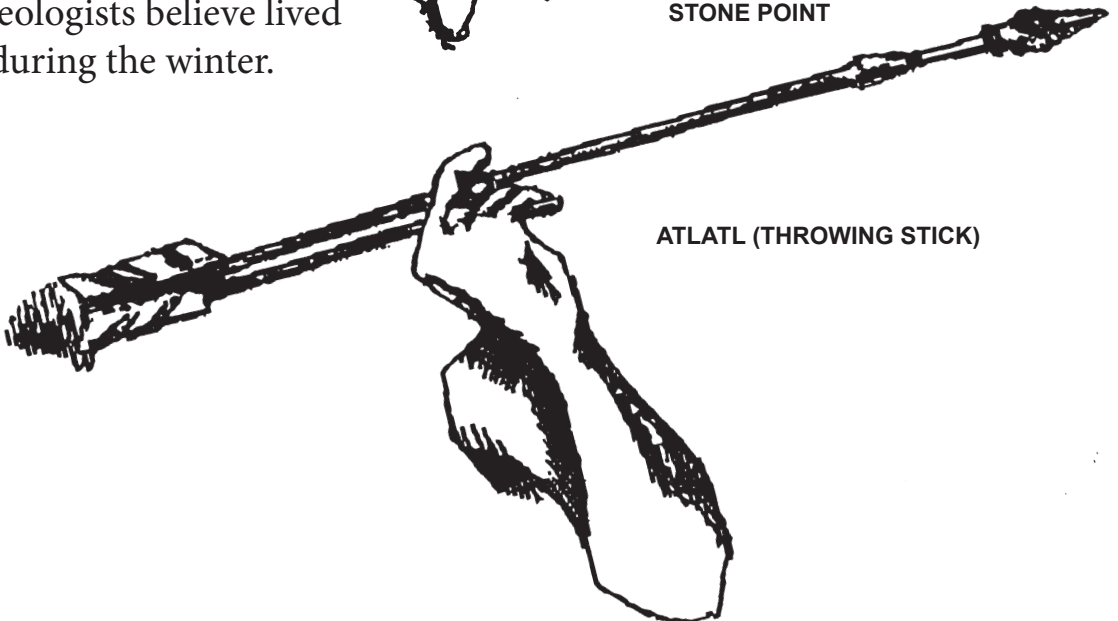
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Look through the Dakota Hogback to the plains. You are not the first to gaze on this scene. Archaic people (B.P. 7500-A.D. 150) used spears and throwing sticks called atlatls to hunt game in this area. Roxborough boasts a rich history with over 60 archaeological sites in the Park boundaries. Many of the red Fountain Formation rocks served as rock shelters for people that some archaeologists believe lived here during the winter.

Other Native people continued to live in and hunt in Roxborough up until historic times. More recently, the park was called home by the Plains Apache, Comanche, Arapahoe, Cheyenne and Ute.



STONE POINT



ATLATL (THROWING STICK)



## Stop 6: Grassland Community

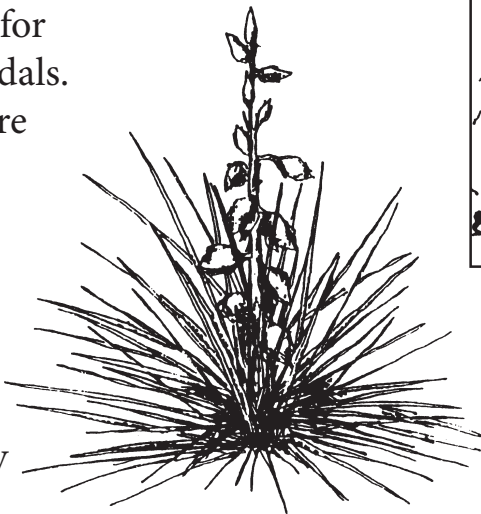
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You are now walking through a different community, **grassland**. Nearly fifty species of grasses have been identified in Roxborough.

The **narrow leaf yucca** plant is often found in this dry area. The Natives had many uses for the yucca. The leaves are one of the strongest vegetable cordages, yielding strong fibers for rope and sandals. The roots were mashed and used as soap. And both the white flowers and the cooked fleshy green pods



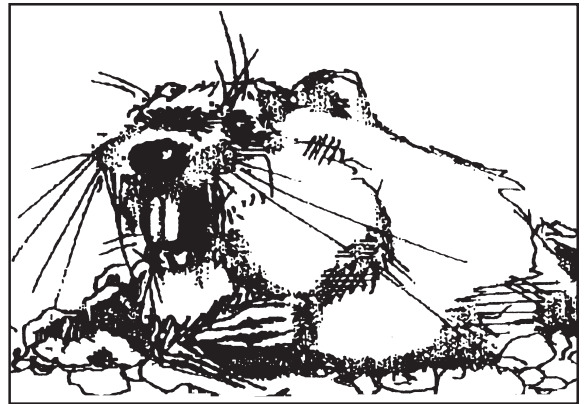
PLAINS GRASSES



YUCCA PLANT

were important foods to the early inhabitants.

Running along the ridge behind you are a number of mountain mahogany bushes. You can see where mule deer have browsed the foliage. Mountain mahogany is rich in calcium and provides mother deer with essential minerals for their growing young, while the males find that it builds strong, durable antlers.



POCKET GOPHER

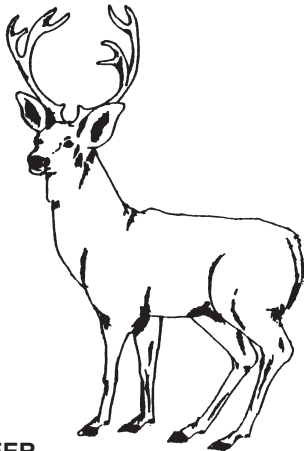
Have you seen mounds of fresh dirt near the trail? These were made by **pocket gophers**, rodents that dig long, underground tunnel systems.

## Stop 7: Where the Deer and Eagles Roam

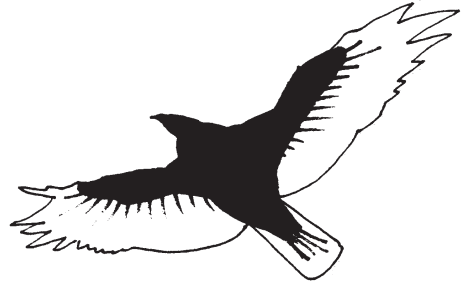
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Keep a watchful eye out for our **mule deer**. Since hunting is not allowed in the park, Roxborough's deer provide you with an opportunity to see them closer than other herds would allow. "Mulies" have large ears reminiscent of mules and like to browse on the leaves and twigs of woody plants. Remember do not try to touch them or give them treats, they are still wild animals, no matter how tame they may appear. Also, human food is not healthy for wildlife.

You may also see a **golden eagle** soaring over the hogback hunting small mammals, snakes, or birds.



MULE DEER



TURKEY VULTURE



GOLDEN EAGLE

Roxborough has been fortunate to have had a nesting pair of golden eagles almost every year. Ask at the Visitor Center for an update on the eagle's nest.

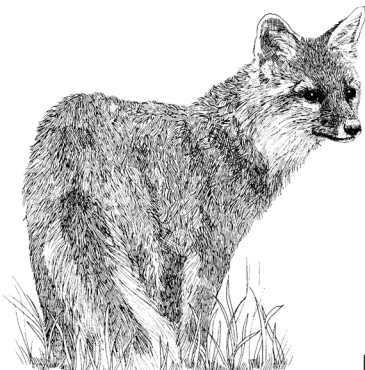
The golden eagle is Roxborough's largest bird and can have a wingspan of over seven feet. Another large bird often mistaken for the eagle is the **turkey vulture**. Turkey vultures are a common sight here at Roxborough and are one of the few birds in the world with a well developed sense of smell – using their noses to sniff out dead and decaying animals, their preferred food.

## Stop 8: Disturbed Community

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You will see a grass-covered gully beside the trail. This gully is the result of an old, eroded ranch road. When the original grassland was destroyed, invader plants of the **disturbed community** moved in.

The **thistle** with its spiny leaves and pink-purple flowers, and the **mullein** are plants living in this community. Mullein is also called velvet plant. Touch its leaves, and you will know how it gets this name. The park actively works to control these plant invaders. Insects useful in biological control have been released or established here at Roxborough. The thistle head weevils, for example,



RED FOX



THISTLE

lay their eggs in the flower buds of many of our noxious thistles. When the larvae hatch, they make a meal of the many developing seeds.

**Red foxes** like to use this trail too. Sneaking along the trail helps them to approach unwary

prey quietly. If a fox hears a small rodent rustling around in the grasses, she will often pinpoint its location by sound alone then make a dramatic pounce from the air. Watch for fox scat. They look like those of a domestic dog and often contain the hair of their prey.



MULLEIN

## Stop 9: Park Poisons

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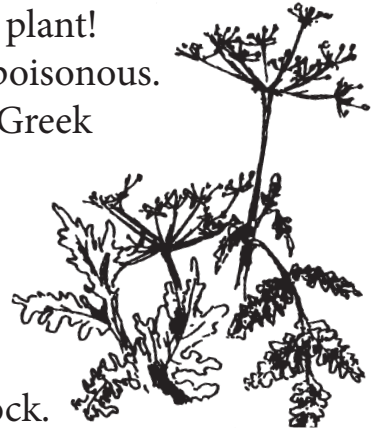
The benches near the trail are another good spot to rest, but **WATCH OUT!** Do you see that low, woody shrub or vine under the oaks with three shiny leaflets? It is **poison ivy**. Most people get an itchy rash if they touch it.



POISON IVY

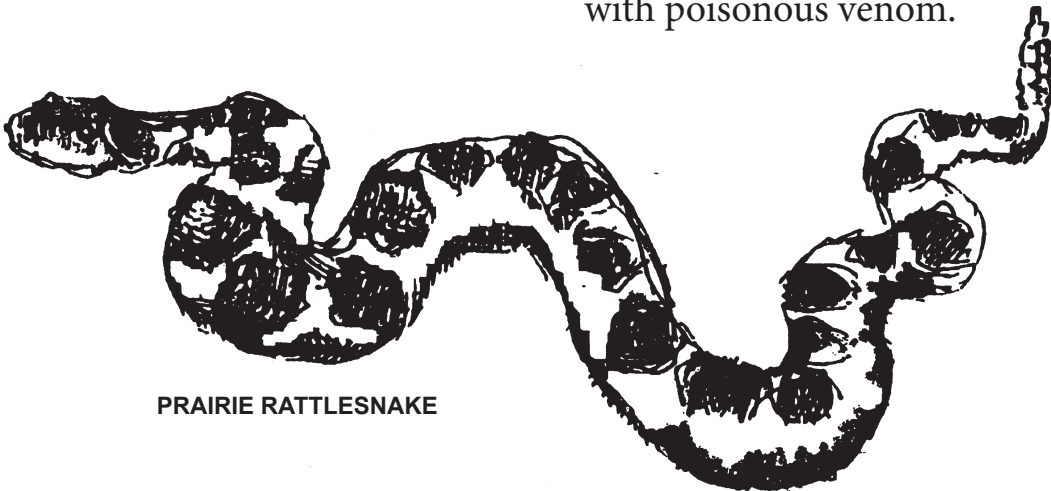
Another plant often found under Gambel oak is **poison hemlock**. Its leaves look like carrot or parsley leaves. During the summer, hemlock can grow five feet tall or more.

Don't eat this plant!  
All parts are poisonous.  
Socrates, the Greek philosopher, was put to death with a cup of tea made from poison hemlock. Indians used hemlock to make poison arrows.



POISON HEMLOCK

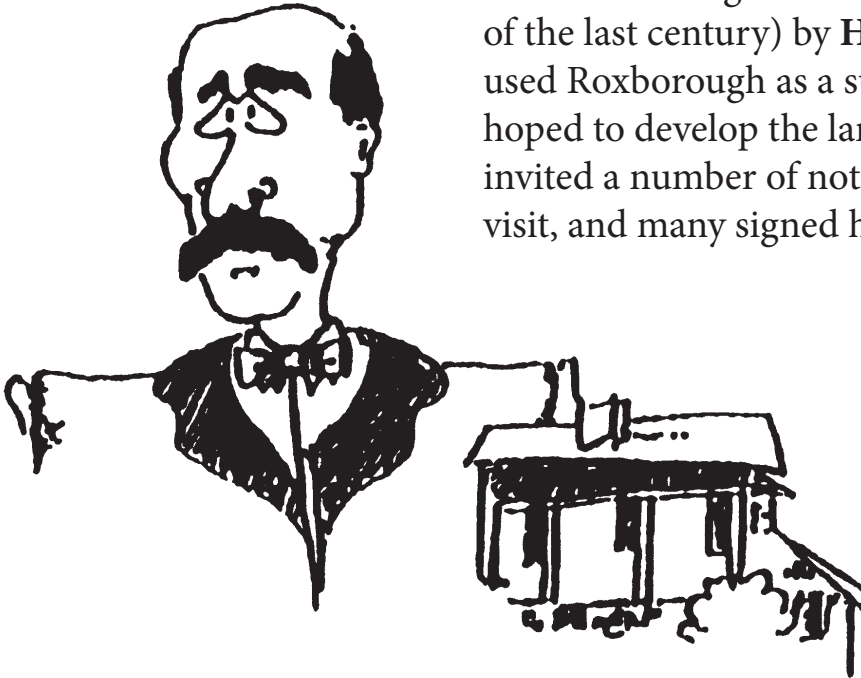
Notice the rattlesnake caution signs. **Prairie rattlesnakes** like to eat mice and other rodents living in these old buildings. Rattlesnakes kill their prey with poisonous venom.



PRAIRIE RATTLESNAKE

## Stop 10: Persse Place

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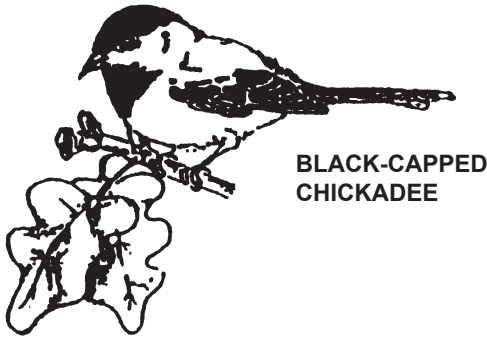
These buildings were built (at the beginning of the last century) by **Henry S. Persse**. Henry used Roxborough as a summer home and hoped to develop the land into a resort. He invited a number of notable Denverites to visit, and many signed his guest book.

R. W. Speer, Denver’s “building mayor”, wrote in 1907: “(The area) ...should be owned by the city for the free use of the people.” The land was eventually bought by a ranching family, the Helmers. For years, cattle grazed on these hills, and hay was cut in the valleys. The State of Colorado purchased the first 500 acres of Roxborough State Park in 1975. The park has grown to over 3300 acres.

# Stop 11: Riparian (Streamside) Community

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Little Willow Creek is an intermittent stream, and sections of it dry up during hot weather. However, there is usually water in this part of the creek. Many animals, including **raccoons**, drink here. You may see a **black-capped chickadee** or a **downy woodpecker** in the large **cottonwood** trees.



BLACK-CAPPED  
CHICKADEE

DOWNY  
WOODPECKER



COTTONWOOD



RACCOON

The cottonwoods provide homes for many animals. You might see a cluster of dead leaves high up in a tree. This is probably the nest (called a drey) of the eastern fox squirrel. Dead trees, called snags, are left as they are here in the park so that they may continue to provide homes for future generations of animals. Note the abundance of holes on the snag to your left.

## Stop 12: Shapes in the Rocks

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Look across this meadow. Do you see a large, red rock which looks like the profile of someone from American history?

**George Washington?**

You are right!

See the picture below if you can't find "George."

In fact, Roxborough Park was first called Washington Park. The name was changed to Roxborough in the early 1900s.



*Try to find other shapes in the rocks as you hike the west side of the loop.*

## Stop 13: Reseeded Meadow Community

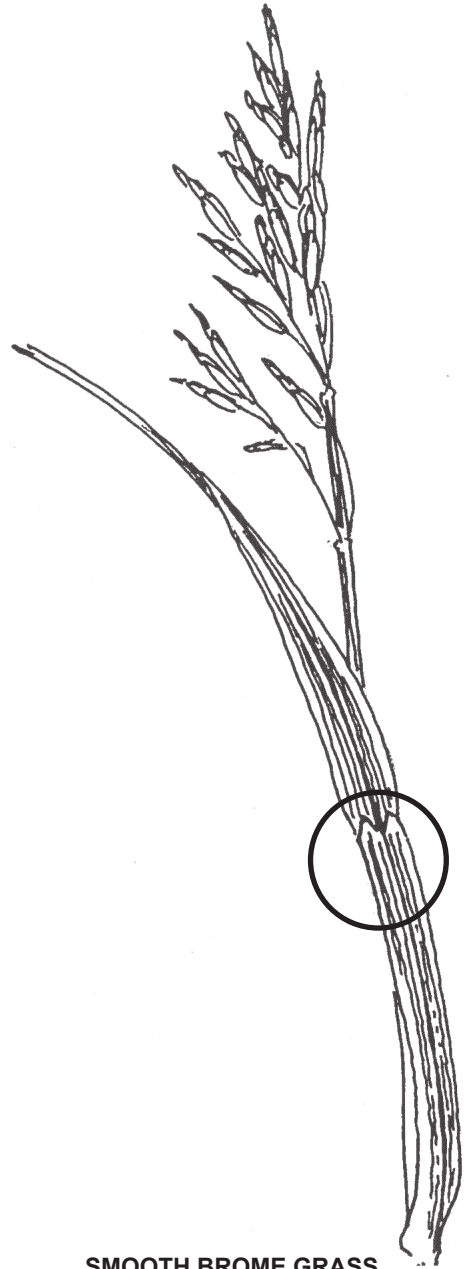
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The meadow between George and you is called the **Reseeded Meadow**. Early ranchers plowed it and tried to grow crops. When this didn't work, they planted hay (alfalfa and timothy). They even built an irrigation ditch above the field. It was at the base of the cottonwood trees you can see at the western edge of the meadow. **Vole** runways (grass hallways) can be seen here in the spring after the snow melts.

Today, the meadow is blanketed with another introduced grass, **smooth brome**. If you look closely at one of the leaves, you'll find a unique restriction a few inches from the tip. This indentation usually has the shape of a W or an M and is one way to easily identify smooth brome grass.



MEADOW VOLE



SMOOTH BROME GRASS



## Stop 14: Nature's Fast Food

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As you hike, try to find **hawthorn** shrubs near the trail. Watch out for the stout thorns on this shrub! The hawthorn's bright red berries are eaten by many birds in autumn. You might also see small yellow-brown spots on the leaves. These spots are caused by a rust (a kind of fungus) called cedar apple rust and doesn't seem to hurt the plants.



HAWTHORN



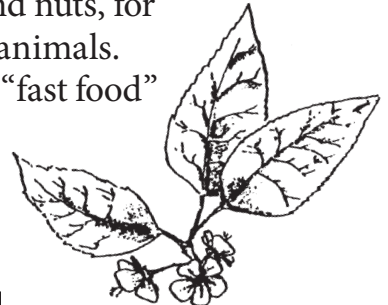
CHOCHECHERRIES

**Chokecherries** are also abundant on the Fountain Valley Trail. These extremely tart cherries are one of the most important foods for the black

bears in late summer and early fall. The bears need to eat around 20,000 calories per day in order to help them survive the winter. It's not unusual to see very large scats on the trail left by the bears. Look for large dark piles full of chokecherry pits. The smaller scats are probably left by foxes or coyotes who are also fond of chokecherries. In fact, one of the Navajo names for chokecherry is "coyote food."

In the spring, **wild plum** flowers perfume the park. Plums are another important fall food source for many animals. A short way down the trail you will find plum bushes with odd black growths on their stems. This growth is caused by a fungus often called "brown rot" and affects many of the plums here at Roxborough, leaving an empty plumlike "fruit" that is hollow inside.

Remember to leave all plants, including their berries and nuts, for Roxborough's animals. Plants provide "fast food" for wildlife.

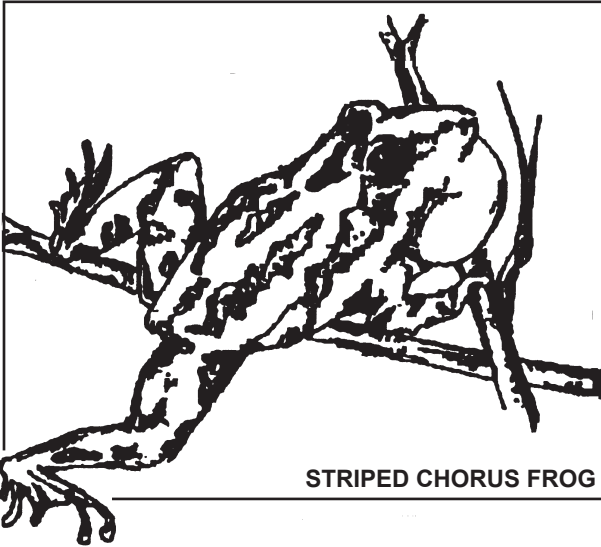


WILD PLUM

## Stop 15: Sedge Meadow Community

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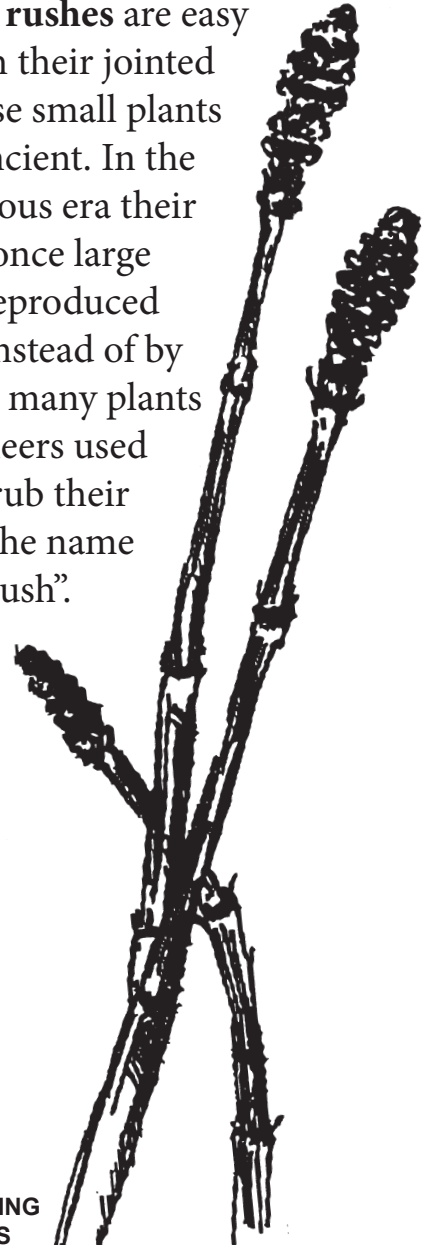
Here Little Willow Creek crosses the trail. To the west is the **sedge meadow community**. In a wet spring, it turns into “Lake Roxborough,” and ducks and herons are added to our bird list.



STRIPED CHORUS FROG

Listen for **striped chorus frogs** singing in the spring. These frogs, not much larger than a nickel, have big voices and sometimes sound like a chorus of crickets. The males quietly float and use their inflated vocal sacs to “sing.” If a female is impressed by a male’s voice, she may pay him a visit.

**Scouring rushes** are easy to find with their jointed stems. These small plants are truly ancient. In the Carboniferous era their kind were once large trees and reproduced by spores instead of by seeds as do many plants today. Pioneers used them to scrub their pots, thus the name “scouring rush”.

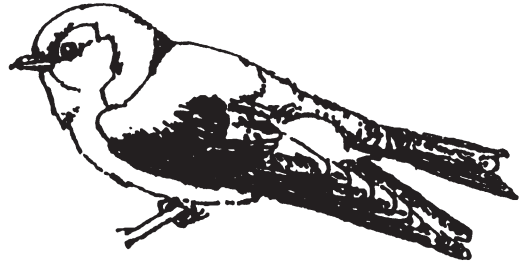


SCOURING RUSHES

## Stop 16: Canyon Community

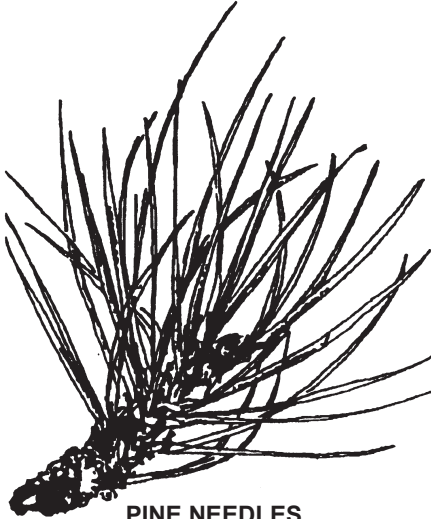
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Sand! Where did it come from? Do you see a canyon going up into the Lyons Formation? It was formed by water rushing down from the top after heavy rains. The water eroded the sandstone rocks and brought their sand down next to the trail.



VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW

Violet-green swallows nest on these ridges.



PINE NEEDLES

The conifer trees you see in the Canyon Community include junipers and **ponderosa pines**. On a hot summer day, the bark of the ponderosa pine smells like vanilla. Naturalist John Muir said, "Of all the pines, this one gives forth the finest music to the winds."



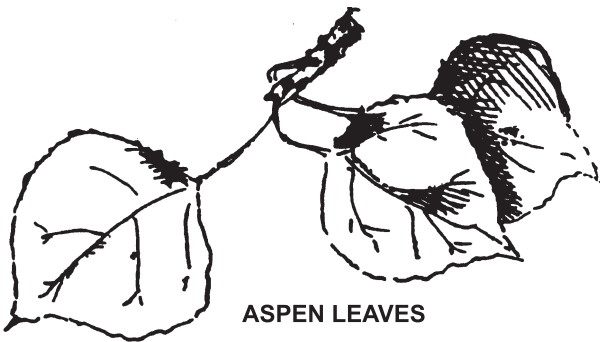
PINE CONE

## Stop 17: Aspen Grove Community

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Look for the large **aspen** grove up against the Fountain Formation. Aspens are rare at this elevation (6000 feet). These trees may be able to survive here because it is a moist and sheltered area. Aspen trees, with their gray-green bark and nearly round leaves, turn a glorious gold in autumn.

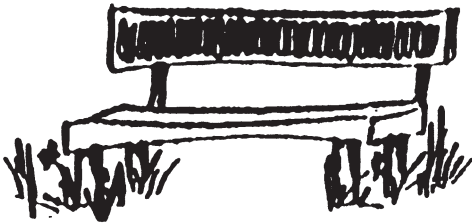
**Bear claw** marks have been found on some of the aspen trunks in this grove. Bears often claw trees to mark their territories.



There are several Douglas fir trees in the aspen stand. Eventually, these will grow very tall and shade out the aspens. This grove could become a Douglas fir stand in a hundred years or so.

## Stop 18: Sounds of Roxborough

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How many sounds can you recognize?

Sit down and rest. Listen quietly. What do you hear? Roxborough is full of sounds not usually noticed by us...birds, insects, a little mouse in the grass, the wind in trees.

As you continue listening, look across the valley to the Fountain



RED RASPBERRY

Formation. The conifer trees growing in the deep, dark, northeast facing ravines are **Douglas fir**. These firs are located in the **ravine community**.



DOUGLAS FIR CONE

This community supports many plants more commonly found at higher elevations in the mountains such as **serviceberry** and **red raspberry**. Ferns nestle in the shady, moist nooks of the ravine community.



SERVICEBERRY

# Stop 19: Dinosaur Freeway

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MANGROVES



Look toward the Dakota Hogback. Close your eyes and go back in time over 100 million years to the Cretaceous period. This area is now the shoreline of an inland sea with beaches, swamps and lagoons. There are evergreen trees called **mangroves** growing in this marshy area. You see dinosaurs walking up and down this shoreline.

IGUANODONTID DINOSAURS



How do we know dinosaurs once walked where the Dakota hogback is today? Fossil footprints have been found! In fact, **dinosaur tracks** have been discovered in the Dakota Hogback from Boulder to Roxborough. Some scientists believe this ancient shoreline was part of

a dinosaur migration route and call it the “**dinosaur freeway**.”

Keep walking until you see the fork in the trail. Go south toward the Visitor Center. Your final stop is the Fountain Valley Overlook.

# Stop 20: An Eagle's Eye View of Roxborough

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Enjoy this final panoramic view of Roxborough State Park and remember...

## **Roxborough – a place of the past**

You have walked where ancient people and dinosaurs have gone before.

## **Roxborough – a place of the present**

You have visited the communities of the transition zone and met many of its native residents.

## **Roxborough – a place for the future?**

Will Roxborough remain a beautiful natural area for future generations? The answer lies with you. Remember to leave no trace and be a part of preserving and protecting all of Colorado's natural treasures.



# Thank you to the volunteers and individuals who contributed to this guide.

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## **Roxborough State Park Staff and Volunteers**

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*Mary Bonnell* – Artist

*Joan Oden* – Co-author

*Frank Shupe* – Trail Map Artist

*Susie Trumble* – Retired Park Manager

*Friends of Roxborough* – provides funding for printing this guide.



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