

Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge

Frequently Asked Questions

Elk Nursery © Dave Showalter

Visitor Facilities

When will the Refuge be opened and available for regular visitor use?

Currently, refuge staff are leading monthly nature hikes at Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). These hikes are open to visitors and reservations are required. More details can be found at http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Rocky_Flats/

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) needs to design and build visitor facilities such as trails, parking areas, and signs before opening the Refuge on a regular basis to visitors. It is anticipated that construction of visitor facilities will begin this winter (2016) and should be completed by the end of 2017. Given this schedule, the Service hopes to open Rocky Flats NWR to regular, daily visitor use in late 2017.

What types of uses will be permitted at Rocky Flats NWR and what sort of visitor facilities will be developed on the Refuge?

The Refuge will offer a variety of wildlife-focused visitor opportunities including hiking, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, interpretation, and environmental education. Current plans anticipate nearly 20 miles of trails at the Refuge. This year-round trail system will be open to hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding.

Additionally, nature programs will be available on a seasonal basis. A multipurpose building will be built on the Refuge's northern boundary, just south of State Highway 128. The building will house offices, restrooms, interpretive exhibits, and other visitor information.

Click here for a map of proposed visitor facilities at the Refuge: <https://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/RockyFlatsNWR/ProposedVisitorFacilitiesMap.pdf>

When was it decided to open Rocky Flats NWR to visitor use?

Visitor use was envisioned and authorized in the [Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge Act of 2001](#). Following the passage of this legislation, the Service initiated a Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact (CCP/EIS) process in 2002. During this multi-year planning effort (2002-2005), refuge staff worked very closely with partners, the public, and other interested stakeholders to determine future visitor uses and management approaches for Rocky Flats NWR. This collaborative CCP/EIS process included extensive public involvement and reaffirmed that the Refuge should be open to visitor uses.

The Service is not re-opening the decisions made in the CCP. The CCP is the document that guides development

of new facilities and visitor opportunities at Rocky Flats NWR and is available here:

<https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/rfl.php>

How many people do you anticipate will visit Rocky Flats NWR annually?

Future visitor numbers at Rocky Flats NWR are difficult to predict. It is likely that visitation numbers at the Refuge will be similar to visitation on nearby open space properties. Refuge staff expects light traffic during the week and heavier visitation on weekends. For reference, Boulder County's Coalton Trail, which would tie into the Refuge trails received approximately 38,000 visitors in 2015.

Will there be additional updates regarding visitor facility development and opportunities to stay informed?

Yes. Refuge staff intends to openly share information about the development of visitor use facilities and the upcoming opening of the Refuge. This fall (2016), Refuge staff will be working collaboratively with partners and the public on trail alignments and visitor facility designs and will share updated planning maps, designs, and drawings as they are developed. The Refuge staff will use the [Rocky Flats NWR website](#) as the primary outlet for sharing this information.



Sand Lily © Root House Studio

Refuge staff will also host a series of “Sharing Sessions” in 2016 and 2017. These collaborative sessions will provide opportunities to hear updates from refuge staff, ask questions, and provide input on the trail experiences, interpretation, and programming.

Rocky Flats NWR has been referred to as an “urban” national wildlife refuge.

What does that mean?

Rocky Flats NWR is one of three urban national wildlife refuges in the Denver metro area and part of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The other two refuges in the complex are [Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR](#) and [Two Ponds NWR](#). The Service’s [Urban Wildlife Conservation Program](#) is a nationwide effort to connect urban America with our wild places and to teach a new generation about wildlife and stewardship.

Where will the Rocky Mountain Greenway (RMG) Tie Into Rocky Flats NWR?

Commissioners and Council Members from Boulder, Broomfield, Westminster, Arvada, and Jefferson County have pursued \$5M in federal funding available through the Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) in order to tie the RMG into Rocky Flats NWR. If awarded, the FLAP grant

will fund the design and construction of 2 structures to connect the RMG from where it currently ends at the Broomfield Open Space to the Rocky Flats NWR trail network via a bike/pedestrian bridge across Indiana Street. From here the trail will continue on to Boulder Open Space north of SH 128 via an underpass.

To see a map of the proposed Rocky Mountain Greenway, visit: <http://rockymtngreenway.org/trail-map/>

Will any additional sampling be done before the Rocky Mountain Greenway Trail is routed through Rocky Flats NWR?

Yes. Thousands of samples have already been taken, showing the property is safe, but refuge staff and local governments plan to work together to conduct a new round of soil sampling in conjunction with the FLAP projects to ensure construction activities and the areas being opened to visitors are transparent and demonstrably safe.

Habitat & Wildlife

How large is Rocky Flats NWR?

The Refuge is approximately 5,000-acres.

What can you see out on Rocky Flats NWR?

First you will be impressed by the striking vistas of the Rocky Mountain Front Range to the west and the views of the Denver skyline to the southeast. The Refuge harbors diverse habitats including rolling prairie grasslands, woodlands, and wetlands. Large areas of the Refuge have remained relatively undisturbed for the last 30 to 50 years, resulting in healthy habitat and wildlife populations. A portion of the Refuge also contains rare xeric tallgrass prairie, one of the rarest prairie habitats in the nation.

What type of wildlife can be found at Rocky Flats NWR?

The Refuge is home to 239 migratory and resident wildlife species, including prairie falcons, deer, elk, coyotes, songbirds, and the federally threatened Preble’s meadow jumping mouse.

Community Health & Safety

Rocky Flats NWR is safe for refuge staff and visitors. Refuge staff is confident in the results of the clean-up and remediation and recommendations from experts on public health and safety, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE). In this section we have compiled multiple resources that address the property’s history and the clean-up.

I'm concerned about the safety of Rocky Flats NWR, is there one document that clearly summarizes the clean-up efforts?

This [fact sheet](#) from CDPHE, DOE, and EPA provides a good summary.

Where can I find additional scientific information about the clean-up and site conditions?

Rocky Flats Stewardship Council has a set of fact sheets on its website. A number of these address the clean-up and can be accessed here: http://rockyflatssc.org/fact_sheets.html. In particular, the "[How Clean Is Clean](#)" fact sheet provides a concise summary of the site's history and clean-up.

The EPA maintains a summary web page for the Rocky Flats site where they explain their involvement with Rocky Flats and the site's current status: <https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/cursites/csinfo.cfm?id=0800360>

The Department of Energy's Office of Legacy Management also maintains a Rocky Flats website, which contains



Prairie grasses and wildflowers
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information on the site's history and remediation:

https://www.lm.doe.gov/rocky_flats/sites.aspx.

This DOE [Rocky Flats Fact Sheet](#) provides an overview of the site history and the agency's clean-up effort. Additionally, the fact sheet explains how DOE will retain ownership and legacy management of the 1,300-acre central operational unit found in the center of the property where the former Rocky Flats Plant existed.

The DOE's Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site Proposed Plan (July 2006) concisely summarizes the site's history, explains the DOE's preferred final remedy for Rocky Flats, and provides rationale for their process: http://www.lm.doe.gov/Rocky_Flats/Proposed_Plan_FINAL_DOCUMENT.pdf

The final regulatory decision for "Operable Unit 3," the area that became the Rocky Flats NWR, was that no clean-up action was necessary to protect human health or the environment because of extremely low contaminant levels. This decision was based on a 3-volume RCRA Facility Investigation/Remedial Investigation report that provided data on surface water, ground water, surface soil, subsurface soil, sediments, and air. See Volume I: http://www.lm.doe.gov/cercla/documents/rockyflats_docs/OU03/OU03-A-000465.pdf.

Several other sampling efforts have produced similar results. For example, an independent Citizens' Environmental Sampling Committee performed a soil and sediment sampling study in 1996. The 78 samples collected ranged in concentration from background up to 4.5 pCi/g. The study concluded that these results "are consistent with the numerous other studies of off-site soils

and sediments conducted by a variety of agencies over the years." You can find a link to this document and other historical public exposure studies on CDPHE's web page at: <http://www.cdphe.state.co.us/hm/rf/index.htm>.

For the most up-to-date Site Surveillance and Maintenance Reports (completed quarterly) within the operable unit, the portion of the site that DOE's Office of Legacy Management has retained and that is not part of the Refuge, visit the "Key Documents Archive" here: http://www.lm.doe.gov/Rocky_Flats/Archive.aspx.

Site History

Refuge staff, in partnership with DOE, will share the full story of the Rocky Flats site through interpretive media (e.g., signs, brochures, exhibits, displays, etc.) within the Refuge's new multipurpose building.

What is the Rocky Flats site's history?

Native Americans occupied the land intermittently prior to the 1800s and limited artifacts have been located from this era. Starting in 1868, the Scott family established a homestead here and they used the land primarily to raise cattle. Later, the Lindsay family also raised cattle and built a house and barn in the 1940s.

In 1951, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission acquired 2,519 acres, which included the Lindsay property, for the Rocky Flats Plant in order to manufacture plutonium triggers (known as pits) for nuclear weapons. An additional 4,027 acres were acquired in 1974 for plant expansion as a security buffer.

The Rocky Flats Plant was part of the nationwide nuclear weapons complex and one of 13 nuclear weapons production facilities in the United States during the Cold War. The Rocky Flats Plant operated from 1951 until 1989, serving as the nation's primary nuclear weapons trigger

production facility. Manufacturing activities took place in the center portion of the site which was surrounded by a large buffer zone. Between 1951 and 1970, Rocky Flats' work force increased to almost 4,000 people. However, their work was classified so almost nobody knew what went on behind the Rocky Flats fence.

The production of the plutonium triggers and other classified work ceased in 1989 after the FBI and EPA raid on the site.

Leaked plutonium, uranium, volatile organic compounds and nitrate into the water and soil resulted in the Rocky Flats site being listed on the EPA's National Priorities List (also known as the Superfund List). Following the raid and this listing, the DOE changed the facility's mission from production to clean-up and closure, and the site was renamed the Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site. With oversight from the EPA and CDPHE, the DOE embarked on a decade-long, \$7 billion clean-up effort which was completed in 2005.

Today, the DOE maintains 1,300 acres as part of their legacy management for long-term site maintenance and to ensure the clean-up is functioning as designed. These lands are not part of the Refuge.

How did Rocky Flats become a National Wildlife Refuge?

Determining the future use of Rocky Flats was a priority since a community forum in the mid-1990s recommended that the Rocky Flats buffer zone be protected as open space. Questions about what to do with the former core production area (called the Industrial Area) ranged from open space to reindustrialization. These questions were settled in December 2001 when, as part of the annual Defense Authorization bill, Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed

the [Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge Act of 2001](#). The Refuge Act designated the buffer area outside of the former Rocky Flats Plant as a National Wildlife Refuge following EPA's certification that the clean-up and closure complied with all appropriate laws and regulations. In June 2007, the clean-up was certified and the vision that was Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge became a reality.

Rocky Flats NWR is one of over 565 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System – a network of lands set aside and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service specifically for wildlife.

Where can I find more information on the history of Rocky Flats?

The Rocky Flats Stewardship Council has compiled a list of resources for historic research on its website: http://rockyflatssc.org/rockyflats_history.html

Additionally, the Rocky Flats Cold War Museum: <http://www.rockyflatsmuseum.org/> is a resource for historical information.

“In 2005 and following \$7 billion invested in the remediation, my agency (the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment) and EPA (the Environmental Protection Agency) declared that the cleanup of Rocky Flats was complete. Public access and trails through the Refuge have long been envisioned. As a result of reassuring ongoing surveillance data, the Rocky Mountain Greenway trail through the Refuge does not pose a threat to public health.”

- Larry Wolk, M.D., MSPH
Executive Director and Chief Medical Officer, CDPHE

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