PLAINS
CONSERVATION
CENTER

PRAIRIE HIKE SELF-GUIDED TOUR
Welcome to the Plains Conservation Center! Please use this self-guided tour to enhance your experience as you hike out on the open prairie. Make sure to grab a map to take with you.

Look for the numbered posts along your hike to learn a little about the wildlife and history of the Plains Conservation Center. The tour starts just outside of the visitor center, on the northeast corner, and continues on the trail going north.

If you’d like to learn more, please attend one of our naturalist-led programs. We offer tours of the sod village and tipi camp, and a variety of other historical and ecological topics.

To register for a program, visit: AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter

Scan this QR code to register for programs!
DENVER BASIN

If you look west from the northeast corner of the visitor center you can see the downtown Denver skyline. Denver was built in a depression of land shaped like a bowl. The elevation of Denver is 5,280 ft and where you are standing the elevation is 5,780 ft. You are standing on what is the equivalent of the 51st floor of the tallest building in downtown, which is the Republic building. Compare the view of the west to that of the east. You’ll see an abundance of trees out west and virtually none out east. Aurora has a semi-arid climate that only receives about 15 inches of precipitation per year. That is only a few more inches than the Sonoran Desert in the southwestern U.S. Most of the trees you see out west are planted and irrigated by us.

THE UNDERWATER PRAIRIE

To go back into the prairie’s history means to go underground. From the Precambrian era to about 300 million years ago, most of North America fluctuated between being under a shallow sea and dry land. Each time the ocean receded it left behind the remains of ancient sea creatures that are now buried under thick layers of sediment. Today, these fossil-rich deposits are buried some three miles beneath your feet. If the run and roll of the prairie sometimes makes you think of the sea, surely it is a reminder of its marine history.

RESILIENT PRAIRIE GRASSES

Plants of the prairie are adapted to enduring large temperature changes, wind, fire, blizzards, drought, and whatever else the climate throws their way. Prairie grasses have slender leaves to reduce water loss, are low-growing to avoid voracious winds, and evade drought by going dormant and retreating underground. What we think of as grass (the above-ground leaves and stems) make up less than half of the organism. Between 60 and 80 percent of prairie grasses grow below ground. Some grasses, like big bluestem (Andropogon gerardii), have fibrous roots that reach as deep as 12 feet into the earth! Prairie grasses live frugally below the surface until the rains return. The resilient blue grama (Bouteloua gracilis) can revive from dormancy and grow on as little as 0.2 inches of rainfall.
The Plains Conservation Center has a long and diverse history. It was once home to the Indigenous peoples of North America, the Plains Native Americans, then to European settlers. Towards the end of World War II, this site was part of the Lowry Bombing Range. Bomber pilots performed target practice by dropping large sacks of flour bombs at the stout remains of concrete pillars you see in front of you. Today, Buckley Air Force Base sits directly North of the PCC. You can often see F-16 pilots practicing flight maneuvers overhead.

Prairie dogs are key players in a healthy grassland. They hold the title of keystone species, meaning if they were to disappear, many plants and animals that rely on prairie dogs would also disappear and the prairie would be drastically impaired. Prairie dogs are an important food source for many predators. In addition, their burrows provide homes for everything from insects to snakes to burrowing owls. Their burrowing activity also aerates and cycles soil nutrients, which benefits plants and grazing animals. Prairie dogs have one of the most complex animal languages ever studied. They can relay what we say in one sentence through a single bark. One member of the colony acts as a look out while others forage for food. When they spot danger their barks inform the colony about the incoming predator’s identity, speed and direction in a single bark.

Pronghorn, commonly nicknamed antelope, have thrived in North America since before the last ice age. They are one of the only species that made it through the mass extinctions at the end of the last ice age. Pronghorn can reach speeds of 60 miles per hour and can maintain that speed for several minutes, making them the fastest land animals in North America. Pronghorn are a common sight at the PCC. Keep an eye out for their distinctive white rumps on the rolling prairie hills. To learn more about these survivors, visit our pronghorn exhibit in the yurt.

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For a more in-depth tour of the site, please sign up for one of our programs at AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter
The pond just south of Jewell Ave. is part of East Tollgate Creek, an ephemeral creek (flowing seasonally in the spring and summer) that flows North until it merges with Sand Creek. East Tollgate Creek runs through the entirety of the PCC and is an essential resource for resident wildlife. Along this creek is the only place where trees grow naturally on the prairie. The most common trees growing along this creek area are plains cottonwoods (Populus deltoids) accompanied by different species of willows and cattails. Together they provide food and shelter for many types of animals, especially birds.

Cottonwoods are named as such because they produce seeds that are suspended by cotton-like strands that carry them to new habitats by the wind. If you’ve ever noticed cotton “snow” in late spring or early summer, it was probably cottonwood seeds. Cottonwood trees are dioecious, meaning that each individual tree is either male or female. The female trees produce the cotton seeds. Cottonwoods are one of the fastest growing trees in North America. With enough resources, they can add 6 feet or more a year to their height. There are two cottonwood trees in front of you, one alive and the other dead at your feet. Both provide essential habitat to birds, insects, arachnids, and mammals.

If you look straight ahead at the top of the cluster of trees, you will see a bald eagle nest. The bald eagle pair constructed this nest in 2017. Bald eagle pairs mate for life and remain together until one of them perishes. However, it has been documented that they will “divorce” if one individual feels like the other is not contributing enough to raising their young. Each year they add more nesting material to the nest, making it bigger and bigger. The largest documented eagle nest was 9 feet wide, 20 feet deep and weighed over 2 tons!

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Thank you for participating in our self-guided tour! If you are interested in a more in-depth naturalist-led program, we offer tours of the insides of the buildings as well as animal interaction programs. Please sign up for one of our scheduled tours at: AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter

Plains Conservation Center
21901 E. Hampden Ave.
303.326.8380

Hiking Hours
Monday - Friday: 6:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m.
Saturday/Sunday: 8 a.m- 4:30 p.m.

Visitor Center Hours
Wednesday - Friday: Noon- 4:30 p.m.
Saturday/Sunday: 9 a.m.- 4:30 p.m.
Monday and Tuesday: Closed