

Looking At Nature

Sunnyside: A Look at Eldorado Mountain

Framing Happy Valley on its north side is Eldorado Mountain. It rises out of the valley over 1,000 feet. To its west, the land continues to rise into Mineral Mountain until it reaches Caribou Flat. Eldorado Mountain is the sunnyside of Happy Valley. Both summers and winters are warmer than across the valley due to the increased solar radiation. Snow melts faster. The climb out of the valley on the Caribou jeep-road has never been a great cross-country ski tour, partly due to the greater sun exposure throughout the winter.

Because of the greater warmth, the plants found on Eldorado Mountain have much in common with the vegetation of lower elevations and lower latitudes. Ponderosa pine is a dominant tree along with Douglas-fir. These stands are often very open and sunny, particularly toward the east. Small patches of aspen are present. As one moves toward the top of the mountain, where the land flattens, dense stands of lodgepole pine dominate. Moving west, where the formation is called Mineral Mountain, the stands become denser and include trees more common at higher elevations, including Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir.

The open and sunny nature of Eldorado Mountain allows for a well developed shrub understory, including mountain maple (*Acer glabrum*), waxflower (*Jamesia americana*) common juniper (*Juniperus communis*), wax currant (*Ribes cereum*), chokecherry (*Padus virginiana*) and thimbleberry (*Oreobatus deliciosus*). Waxflower has a long history in Colorado. Fossils indicate its presence over two million years ago making it a relict of the Tertiary Geologic Period.

Portions of Eldorado Mountain contain some of the largest, and possibly oldest, trees in the area. Old-growth ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir are present, some over 30" diameter in size. Because of rock outcrops and the openness of the stands, major stand-replacing fires were not common on this side of the valley. There is much evidence of historic ground fires; many of the larger ponderosa pines show fire scars on the uphill side of their base, where accumulated duff would ignite and smoulder. A good example of an old-growth woodland exists along the Caribou jeep-road just before the switchback.

Field Notes (2001)

Spring came early to the valley this year. Many migratory bird species arrived at least a week earlier than normal. I heard my first broad-tailed hummingbird of the season whiz by on April 26 (May 2nd has been average for the past 20 years). Many plants are also flowering early. Pasque flowers are finished, aspen are leafed out, and larkspurs have flowered before the end of May.

If you are into watching the water level of the creek rise in the spring, there is a good Web site that quantifies what you are seeing. It is Colorado Streamflow data - actual data from stream gaging stations. The closest one for Middle Boulder Creek is at the inflow into Barker Reservoir. So it includes a bit more drainage than what we see, but still provides a relative value from day-to-day and year-to-year. There is historical data for the Middle Boulder Creek gage going back to 1907. And there is recent data just a day behind what we are seeing, with a weekly chart. The average peak flow, generally occurring in June, is 560 cubic feet per second (cfs). The recorded high was 811 cfs on June 2, 1914, and another high of 800 cfs on June 18, 1951. Last year we peaked at 500 cfs on June 24th. Very warm temperatures seem to be the main variable causing an increase, with hard rainfall as a secondary factor.

Dave Hallock