

A Look at Nature Spencer Mountain as an Animal Movement Corridor

Wide-ranging mammals, such as elk, mountain lion, bobcat, and mule deer, cover a lot of territory throughout the year. In trying to satisfy their needs for food, water, shelter, finding a mate, raising young, and minimizing stress (from weather and potential predators) they cover large distances and can range over tens to hundreds of square miles.

We know the most about movement of elk. I got to track up to a dozen of our local herd, which had been fitted with radio collars, finding each animal at least once a week over four years. Throughout the year, they cover a 20-mile distance, wintering as far east as the Boulder Mountain Parks (with a few going east of Eldorado Springs), and summering as far west as Rollins and Devils Thumb Passes (and some going over the passes).

Locally, my own saying is that “all animal trails lead to the Arapaho Ranch.” The Ranch is what ecologists call a montane parkland. It is a relatively large expanse of flat land, whose meadows and wetlands are in sharp contrast to the surrounding coniferous forests. The abundant grasses, small mammals, and insects provide ample food for many species. The surrounding forests provide shelter; the meadows and wetlands are the grocery stores.

When tracking the radio-collared animals we found that there were two major movement corridors for elk when, in May or June, they traveled from the Ranch up to the Indian Peaks. The main route was over Eldorado Mountain. A secondary route, used by a smaller, though still significant number of elk, was along the ridge top of Spencer Mountain.

Observations suggest that Spencer Mountain is used for movement by other animal species. Most local bobcat sightings I have had or hear about occur near the top of Spencer. Moose have been observed on the east flank of the mountain. And one possible lynx sighting happened near the top of Spencer.

The use of Spencer Mountain as an animal movement corridor makes sense when considering what is north and south of the mountain at this point in time. To the north is our village and to the south is the ski area. It is probable that if Eldora the town were not present, more animals would use the valley of Middle Boulder Creek for movement. And prior to the ski area being developed, there are accounts of more elk and animal use, particularly at the base area, the site of a large wetland where the main parking lot now sits. The animals are now pinched between the two areas of development, and the top of the ridge on Spencer Mountain is what is left of this particular corridor for animals moving between the high country and the Arapaho Ranch.

The protection of the animal movement corridor is one of several important reasons favoring the purchase of the Snyder Mining Claims on the east flank of Spencer Mountain, as well as the other purchases of open space that have occurred on the mountain. Since our own presence in the valley bottom has restricted animal movement, helping to protect one of the remaining corridors makes sense.

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