

Looking at Nature A Sense of Place

Famed sociologist and writer Jane Jacobs once described California suburbs with the statement “there is no there there.” What she meant was they lacked distinction and a sense of place. You didn’t know when you entered or left, let alone if you were actually *there*! The same could be said for most new residential subdivisions in towns like Louisville, Lafayette or Longmont, and any new shopping center or strip mall. You could be anyplace.

In Eldora, we know when we are there. The scenery, vegetation, weather and character of the buildings all provide a strong sense of place. Tied to these unique elements of our surroundings, each of us has our own set of seasonal events by which we track time. In fall, it may be the aspen turning color, the glorious days of Indian Summer, or the closing of cabins. We tend to characterize winter by the presence or absence of snow and wind; or maybe the quality of skiing. But best of all are the few perfectly calm and sunny days; a true simple pleasure of life. Days spent skiing to the top of the divide when it was perfectly calm are not quickly forgotten. Spring brings heavy snows, followed by melting, followed by heavy snow, mud season, the arrival of Mountain Bluebirds, elk on the Arapaho Ranch, the fresh green leaves of aspen, the first wildflowers and the opening of cabins. Summer brings continuous arrays of color from flowers, symphonies from birds, annoying bites from insects and dramatic light shows from thunderstorms. Late summer into early fall brings a harvest of mushrooms and berries.

The history of our community provides a sense of place. What began as a mining camp was sustained by those desiring a beautiful place for a summer vacation. Boulder County is dotted with old mining camps that came and went; Lakewood, Tungsten and Caribou to name a few. But here, people who came for vacations via the train, stagecoach or Stanley Steamer, as well as some mining families, were taken by the beauty of the valley enough to know they wanted to spend their time here.

But where are we? Starting with the “big picture,” we know we are in the Universe, part of the Milky Way galaxy, in our solar system, on planet Earth, in the Northern Hemisphere, and in North America. The next identifier for where we are starts getting closer to home; the Rocky Mountains. Within this mountain range we are located in the Southern Rockies. They begin just south of Casper, WY, separated from the Central Rockies by the Wyoming Basin, and extend south to Santa Fe, NM. Being in the Rockies is probably the most significant element to our sense of place. The creation of the Rockies some 65 million years ago (plus or minus a day or two) resulted in our scenery, climate, vegetation and geology.

The meeting of the Rockies with the Plains is one of the great landscape features of North America. The rise in elevation results in a climate that is cooler, wetter, windier, and has a shorter growing season than below. As a general rule, the average temperature decreases 3 to 5 degrees (F) for every 1,000 feet gained in elevation. For every 100 feet you gain in elevation, fall comes 1 day earlier and spring comes 1 day later. In terms of climate and vegetation change, a 25-mile journey between the city of Boulder and Arapaho Pass is analogous to a 2,500-mile journey from Boulder to Fairbanks, Alaska!

The rise in elevation, and subsequent change in climate, has resulted in bands of similar vegetation that run north and south along the Front Range; these are sometimes called lifezones. Eldora, at 8,600 feet elevation, is within the Montane Lifezone. However, within our valley the patterns of vegetation are complex due to the steep rise of the adjacent mountains, which ascend to about 9,700 feet. Eldorado Mountain, being south facing, receives more sunlight and has a drier climate. Its vegetation is similar to lower elevations with the overstory being dominated by ponderosa pine and Douglas fir trees. Spencer Mountain, being north facing, has a cooler and

wetter microclimate, hence is dominated by lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir (along with aspen which is slowly being replaced by these other species). Spencer Mountain, vegetatively, has a lot in common with higher elevations. When on Eldorado Mountain, you have one foot in the mountains of New Mexico and Arizona. When you are on Spencer Mountain, you have one foot in the mountains of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana.

So now you know where we are. Depending on where you stand in the valley, you could be anywhere from Montana to New Mexico. It's an easy way to travel; just takes a little imagination.

Field Notes: For many, the fall season is considered the best time of year. The days are filled with bright sun, deep blue skies and mild breezes. Nights are crisp. It's the calm before the storm. Memories of this fall include meadows and open hillsides filled with the bright yellows of goldeneye sunflowers (*Heliomeris multiflora*). It was a bountiful year for collecting mushrooms.

Huckleberries (also commonly called blueberry, whortleberry and bilberry) were found in good number this year. For being so small, they have a wonderful taste. These low-growing shrubs of the genus *Vaccinium* are in the Heath Family. Three species are found in our vicinity. *V. myrtillus* is the most common, particularly in spruce-fir forests, and generally has blue-black berries. *V. cespitosum* generally has blue berries. *V. scoparium* has small red berries, smaller leaves than the other two types, and is generally found at higher elevations near tree line. A favorite place to find huckleberries is sorry, this is classified information (but I probably woke a few of you up). Families in Eldora have had favorite locations for huckleberry picking that go back several generations. Only if you are on your deathbed and have no heirs, do you divulge the location.

The crowning glory of autumn is the golden crescendo displayed by the changing color of aspen. Locally, this generally peaks toward the last part of September. The scientific reason for the color change involves interactions of shorter day length, drier conditions, and cooler temperatures. The onset of these conditions leads to the development of a thin-walled layer of cells at the base of the leaf stem. This wall, along with a general decline in the vital activities of leaves (photosynthesis) due to less favorable growing conditions, stops chlorophyll, which has green pigment, from being replenished. The underlying yellow pigments of carotin and xanthophyll are then revealed. Oranges and reds may be produced when there is a buildup of sugars in the leaf. High acidity in the soil may also contribute to red colors in the leaves. Some botanists believe that certain aspen are genetically inclined to display red (much like redheads in humans).

An interesting facet of aspen is that even though we see individual trees above ground, they are interconnected by the root system into groups called clones. They most often grow by root suckering. A group of aspen trees tied to one root system are actually all one organism. An easy way to see the extent of each clone is during the fall color change. The trees in each clone will change color in unison, but often at a different time than an adjacent clone. Hence, one part of an aspen hillside may be yellow, while another part is still green. This can also be seen in the spring as one clone will have leafed out while another will be bare.

Aspen are the most widespread tree species in North America, and may also be among the largest and oldest. One aspen clone found in Utah covered 106 acres, weighed more than 6,000 tons and consisted of some 47,000 connected stems! Some clones have been estimated to be 10,000 years old; some may even predate the ice age!

As the valley proceeds toward winter, look for the crest-cloud to appear over the divide. Elk will make their movement down from the Indian Peaks; snow depth seems to be the primary variable causing the movement to lower elevations. A normal winter will send them to areas east

of the Peak-to-Peak Highway along Magnolia Road. Resident birds will be seen in mixed flocks, including chickadees, nuthatches and kinglets. Migratory birds will have gone to lower elevations, or the southwest, Mexico or South America; like many humans, they will not return until spring. Bears, chipmunks, marmots and ground squirrels will hibernate.

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