



A Sample General Ecology Hike

Possible theme statements:

- On OSMP, East meets West.
- The lands of OSMP are wildly diverse because of our location..
- The varied ecosystems of OSMP provide homes for a rich array of plants and animals, making this a very special place.

Intro:

Welcome to Open Space and Mountain Parks.

Ecotone

Here the Great Plains fold into mountains and two vast ecosystems meet at Open Space and Mountain Parks. This collision of places creates a diverse array of landscapes and habitats. If you follow the trail of the tall grass from the plains to the west you'll see it climb these hills to tickle the trunks of trees you'll never see out in the plains. The trail may take you into a deep canyon, shadowed by towering, sun-scorched cliffs. You'll find shelter from your life in the city in the seclusion of pine forests, sharing the shade with the mountain lion and the mule deer.

So, wave good bye to your home, your habitat in the city, and turn west. Feast your eyes on the beauty of the foothills, breath deeply the scent of soil and try to imagine a life out here in the wild.

To help you do this I'll give you a new identity. You are to become a particular animal that lives somewhere within OSMP. Your first task is to figure out who you are. Your second task is imagining what your life would be like here. Today we will hike through some of the habitats of this ecotone. We will explore the lives and survival strategies of a few of the animals that live here.

Activity: "Who am I?" game

Stop #1a Meadow

Relict Meadow

On any given day you may not see the coyote that hunts mice, the raptors sailing here and there, or the butterflies pollinating the flowers...

But you will always see an example of one of life's most sustaining forces, plants turning sunlight into life.

Show picture of colorful tall grass meadow in the fall

What do plants need to survive? Sun, soil, air, water, space

Does all life depend on plants? A coyote for example – (Yes)

Activity: Sun Pulse game

Stop #1b Meadow

This meadow is more than grasses. It also has a beautiful array of flowers as the seasons progress, including rare species of special concern here in CO.

Show picture of a Birds Foot Violet.

Coyotes commonly hunt the rodents that find these flowers and grasses so good to eat. The coyote is an animal that can be found in all the ecosystems of OSMP, from the plains to the mountain tops.

Show a coyote skull, contrast the carnivorous teeth of this skull with an herbivore skull, such as a prairie dog or beaver. (Can extend talk into carnivore vs. herbivore vs. omnivore)

Stop #2 Mesa Top

Conclude the “Who am I?” game. Have each participant tell what animal they are and what habitat they live in. Emphasize the point that all these animals live in OSMP, **because** OSMP encompasses and protects so many different types of habitats. (“Where the Great Plains meet the mountains and towering cliffs make deep, damp shady canyons.”)

Stop #3 Foothills, Ponderosa pine forest

We’ve been talking about lots of different habitats (while concluding the “Who am I?” game) where plants and animals live. What do both humans and wild animals need in their habitats? (food, water, air, shelter, space)

How is a habitat like a chocolate chip cookie (very specific ingredients in just the right amounts)? Or a bicycle (many complicated parts that function together).

Stop #4 viewing the Flatirons

While looking at the Flatirons hold out a plaster eagle egg replica and a prairie dog skull and ask what these two things have in common, without naming them. Let the group figure out what each is, then discusses their relationship to one another. (Emphasize that an eagle’s habitat extends across the ecosystems that meet, from its nest in the peaks near the Flatirons to its food source out in the grassland plains.)

Conclusion: (given while still on the trail, since you’ll lose their attention the instant they see the bus or parking lot)

We’ve explored a few of the different habitats that meet to make OSMP the great wildlife home that it is. Without this array of different places to live there would be many fewer interesting animals living here.

Share this quote from Dave Armstrong’s forward to [From Grasslands to Glaciers](#):

“We have changed the color of the sky and made water flow uphill.

We have paved and plowed and fouled our nest in myriad ways.

But some things are still right.

We have a fair measure of wilderness left.

Our remaining wild lands have the capacity to lend perspective.”

I would propose that each of us gets our own unique message from wild lands. Some of our hearts are touched just knowing that we can still co-exist with wild animals. Others' souls are fed by the beauty and serenity of the place. Still others' brains are happily abuzz with knowledge about the delightful complexity of the survival mechanisms found in nature.

As naturalists, let's invite others to get to know the natives, the wild ones, who thrive in this crossroads where the plains meet the mountains. Hopefully their experience here with you as their interpreter will inspire them to take good care of the land; not only for the sake of the people who enjoy this land, but for the sake of the place itself.