

Solitude in Suburban Denver

By Dawn Y. Wilson

Nestled among housing developments, medical office buildings and busy intersections in Arvada, CO, sits a testament to the collective conservation power of determined local residents: Two Ponds National Wildlife Refuge.

Established in 1992, it is one of the smallest urban wildlife refuges in the United States.

Its 72 acres, just 15 miles west of downtown Denver, provide habitat for more than 120 bird species and various mammals, reptiles and amphibians. They also provide a place of respite for city dwellers.

"I value the peaceful feeling I get while at Two Ponds," says Barb Lautenbach, a long-time refuge visitor. "It feels like an oasis in the city where I can go to get away from my worries for a while."

This urban gem of the National Wildlife Refuge System might never have happened had it not been for citizens dedicated to conserving open space.

Before the refuge's establishment, what is now Two Ponds Refuge was primarily agricultural land with a farm on which chickens and frogs were raised; a veterinary clinic; an apple orchard; horse pastures; and wetlands.

In 1990, 13 acres of that land were purchased for development. The buyer started the process to fill an acre of wetlands and rezone the land from agriculture to business/professional and residential. Local residents opposed the move and fought to emphasize the value of the land for wetland preservation and environmental education.

In September 1990, the Two Ponds Preservation Foundation was formed as a nonprofit corporation of local citizens. Since then, the foundation has worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to preserve wetland habitat in Arvada.



This mallard duckling is among the 120 bird species that can be seen at Two Ponds National Wildlife Refuge in Colorado. The 72-acre refuge 15 miles west of downtown Denver also provides habitat for various mammals, reptiles and amphibians. (Dawn Y. Wilson/DawnWilsonPhotography.com)

Today, Two Ponds Refuge is 63 acres of uplands and nine acres of wetlands with three small ponds, all bordered by tall cottonwood trees. The uplands were historically mixed-grass and short-grass prairie. Over the years, the landscape changed as people farmed, livestock grazed and non-native plants were introduced. Remnants of the prairie can be seen in the tall vegetation that blankets the open meadows during summer.


"The mission of the Refuge System is to manage a national network of lands and waters for conservation, management and restoration of fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitat," says Two Ponds Refuge manager Seth Beres. "Urban refuges, such as Two Ponds, must do this as well as engage urban communities in nature and wildlife conservation by providing diverse and relevant recreational and environmental education opportunities."

Two Ponds Refuge delivers on that mission with educational programs for local schoolchildren, community service projects for Scout groups,

trails for visitors and wildlife-viewing opportunities for bird watchers and photographers.

"We enjoy Two Ponds because it is a place where we reconnect with each other and with nature," says Jack Van Ens, a volunteer who frequently visits the refuge with his wife, Sandy. "We love sitting at the gazebo near the cattail marsh where the birds are a choir to our ears."

Two Ponds Refuge is part of Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes Rocky Mountain Arsenal and Rocky Flats Refuges.

"These three refuges are community assets – places to go and connect with nature," says visitor services manager Cindy Souders. "They give a sense of solitude, are easy to get to and are close to a large population." 

Dawn Y. Wilson is a wildlife photographer and travel writer whose guidebook about the national wildlife refuges of Colorado is scheduled to be published early this year. Her website is www.DawnWilsonPhotography.com