

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Citizens of Garfield County are concerned about issues of open space, wildlife habitat, and conservation of their unique natural surroundings. They recognize the need to plan for the conservation of the plants, animals and plant communities that are native to Garfield County. They also recognize that with limited resources, it is important to prioritize their conservation efforts. The need for information on the locations of the most significant biological resources of the area is urgent. In 2000, the Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) in cooperation with Colorado Division of Wildlife's (CDOW) Wetlands Program proposed to the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (CDNR) through a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Region VIII to survey for critical wetlands and riparian areas within Garfield County. The survey summarized in this report was conducted concurrently with a Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) funded survey of critical biological resources of Garfield County. The goal of the project was to systematically identify the localities of rare, threatened, or endangered species dependent on wetland and riparian areas and the locations of significant natural wetland and riparian plant communities.

This project supports the CDNR's effort to strategically protect Colorado's wetland resource. The results of this survey support **six** statewide wetland efforts:

- (1) the Colorado Wetlands Initiative Legacy Project, a wetlands protection partnership that includes the Colorado Division of Wildlife, the Colorado Office of The Nature Conservancy, Colorado State Parks, Partners for Wildlife, Duck Unlimited, and GOCO;
- (2) the Lower Colorado River Wetlands Focus Area Strategic Plan;
- (3) the CNHP's Statewide Wetland Classification and Characterization Project;
- (4) The Nature Conservancy's Priority Conservation Sites in the Colorado/Gunnison River Basins and Roan Plateau Priority Areas;
- (5) the hydrogeomorphic (HGM) wetland functional assessment program; and
- (6) the Wetland Bioassessment method or Index of Biological Integrity (IBI) project.

This project supports the IBI and HGM development process by identifying potential reference wetlands and the range of variation and potential subclasses within Garfield County, and by performing a qualitative wetland functional assessment to guide future quantitative efforts in assessing the range of variation within a subclass. The CNHP's wetland work provides input to the Wetlands Initiative Partners (e.g. The Nature Conservancy) and the Colorado Wetlands Partnership by identifying potential sites for protection and restoration. Finally, the results of this survey will be incorporated into the CNHP's Comprehensive Statewide Wetlands Classification.

Field surveys began in June 2000 and continued through September 2000. Wetlands and riparian areas occurring on private lands were given the highest priority for inventory.

Such locations were identified by: (1) examining existing biological data for rare or imperiled plant and animal species, and significant plant communities (collectively called **elements**) from the Colorado Natural Heritage Program's database, (2) accumulating additional existing information on these elements and, (3) conducting extensive field surveys. Areas that were found to contain significant elements were delineated as "Potential Conservation Areas." These areas were prioritized by their biological urgency (the most rare or imperiled) and their ability to maintain viable populations of the elements (degree of threat). A functional assessment was conducted at most of the wetland and riparian areas visited using a modified version of the Montana Wetland Field Evaluation Form (Berglund 1996) and the hydrogeomorphic approach (HGM) (Brinson 1993). The restoration potential of each site was also noted.

Results of the survey confirm that Garfield County contains areas with high biological significance. There are several extremely rare plants and animals that depend on these areas for survival. The inventory documented new records for 19 biologically significant elements, including two plants, 14 plant communities, and two fish. In addition, many older records were updated. Garfield County contains a diverse array of wetlands that support a wide variety of plants, animals, and plant communities. At least 49 major wetland/riparian plant communities (G1-G5), six birds, five plants, five fish and three amphibians from the CNHP list of rare and imperiled plants, animals, and plant communities are known to occur in, or are associated with, wetlands in Garfield County.

Thirty-nine wetland and riparian sites of biodiversity significance are profiled in this report as Potential Conservation Areas (PCAs). These sites represent the best examples of 49 types of wetland and riparian communities observed on the public and private lands visited. The CNHP believes these sites include those wetlands that most merit conservation efforts, while emphasizing that protecting only these sites will, in no way, adequately protect all the values associated with wetlands in Garfield County. Additionally, five areas of local significance have been identified based on the local importance of their functions within the county. Despite the best efforts during one field season, it is likely that some elements that are present were not documented during the survey due to either lack of access, phenology of species, or time constraints and future surveys may identify additional areas of biological significance that have not been identified in this report. The delineation of PCA boundaries in this report does not confer any regulatory protection on recommended areas. They are intended to be used to support wise planning and decision making for the conservation of these significant areas. Additional information may be requested from Colorado Natural Heritage Program, 254 General Services Building, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523.

Protection and/or proper management of the PCAs would help to conserve the biological integrity of Garfield County and Colorado. Of these sites, several stand out as very significant such as East Fork Parachute Creek, which harbors the best known population of the endemic plant, hanging garden sullivantia and Rifle Stretch Colorado River, which contains the largest, continuous riparian habitat along the Colorado River in Garfield County.

Of the 39 PCAs, we identified six of **very high significance** (B2), 22 of **high significance** (B3), nine of **moderate significance** (B4), and two of **general significance** (B5). Overall, the concentration and quality of imperiled elements and habitats attest to the fact that conservation efforts in Garfield County will have both state and global significance.

The general location and distribution of weeds (non-native) and aggressive species were documented. For a separate, yet related project, the CNHP, in collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Grand Junction District, also conducted an inventory for seeps and springs on BLM lands in western Garfield County. The results of this project indicate that Garfield County may have one of the highest concentrations of seeps and springs among counties in Colorado.

The results of the survey will be provided to the county in GIS format and will be available to the public on the CNHP website (<http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu>)