

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wetlands and riparian areas in Colorado make up a small but important part of the natural landscape. With semi-desert conditions in most of the state, places with abundant water provide habitat for much of the state's wildlife and contribute significantly to maintaining Colorado's biodiversity. Some types of wetlands are common, others are unusual, but almost all have been substantially altered by human activity during the past century. Except at the highest elevations, few pristine wetlands remain. At lower elevations, water diversions and impoundments, construction in floodplains, and groundwater pumping have often changed the extent and character of many wetlands and riparian corridors. In some areas, wetlands supported by artificial sources such as reservoirs and irrigation have replaced naturally functioning systems.

The primary purpose of this multi-year project is to identify Colorado's most significant remaining natural wetlands. We also aim to recognize the stewardship efforts of landowners and protect the highest quality sites through natural area registry and designation. Landowners and managers of designated Natural Areas will be eligible for management planning assistance and stewardship project funding from CNAP. Another purpose is to support local natural resource planning efforts by providing information to county and local resource planning departments.

The Colorado Natural Areas Program (CNAP) began compiling a list of potentially significant wetlands in 1997, using EPA funding. During the first three years of the program, we surveyed many of the outstanding natural wetlands in the state. Sites were classified by hydrogeomorphic (HGM) class and subclass and by conservation significance (statewide or local/regional).

CNAP has evaluated 53 priority wetland sites in 28 of the state's 63 counties. We have started the designation process for 18 of these sites. The Mt. Emmons Iron Bog was designated as a Colorado Natural Area in 1999, and several other iron fens were evaluated in 1999. The remaining sites have been recommended for protection by other state or local entities; reports describing their values and significance have been sent to the appropriate counties and local governments. Wetland stewardship projects have been funded for sites in Larimer County, the Gunnison Basin, and on the San Miguel River.

This report provides maps and descriptions of 18 sites in 16 counties; each report contains information on the significant natural features, current status, potential threats and protection and management recommendations for the site. Of the sites evaluated in 1999, 11 have values of statewide significance, and will be considered for natural area designation or proposed for other types of protection. CNAP will support alternative protection efforts for the sites with natural values of local or regional significance.

While many of the state's significant wetlands have been identified through this program, much remains to be done. Fewer than half of the state's counties have been thoroughly surveyed for their wetland resources. During the year 2000 field season, CNAP will complete evaluations in three additional counties. CNAP hopes to continue the wetland program for at least one more year to extend identification, evaluation and designation efforts to several remaining critical areas of the state, areas where growth is imminent and where few wetlands are currently protected.