

2024

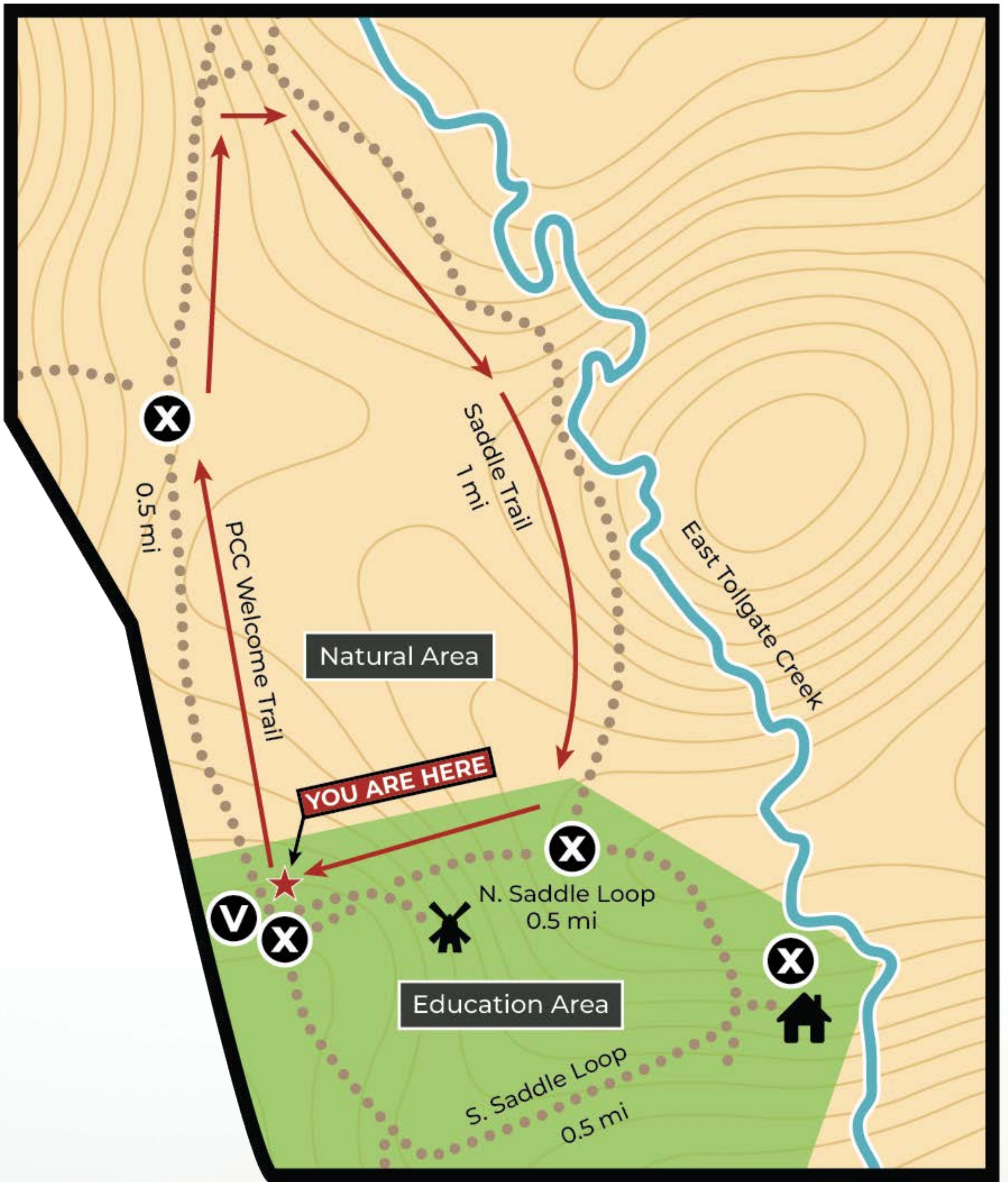
# Prairie Hike

SELF-GUIDED TOUR



Welcome to the Plains Conservation Center! Use this self-guided tour to enhance your experience while you hike on the open prairie. **The tour is a 1.9-mile loop.** Start by walking north from the visitor center to the PCC welcome trail then keep going right until you return to the parking lot. Look for the numbered posts along your hike to learn about the prairie.





Entrance/Exit

HAMPDEN AVE.



## The Shortgrass Prairie

The shortgrass prairie exists because of the Rocky Mountains. Aurora and the Denver metro area receive an average of 14 inches of precipitation per year, creating a semi-arid climate. The climate is influenced by the rain shadow effect, where the Rocky Mountain Range blocks much of the rain and snow fall on the eastern slope. This climate shapes the plants and animals that live here.



## The Underwater Prairie

Three hundred million years ago, most of North America fluctuated between a shallow sea and a dry land. Each time the ocean receded, it left behind the remains of ancient sea creatures that are now buried three miles beneath your feet. If the run and roll of the prairie sometimes makes you think of the sea, surely it is a reminder of its marine history.



## Resilient Prairie Grasses

Plants of the prairie are adapted to enduring large temperature changes, wind, fire, blizzards, drought and whatever else the climate throws their way. Prairie grasses evade drought by going dormant and retreating underground. What we think of as grass (the above-ground leaves and stems) make up less than half of the organism. Some grasses, like big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), have fibrous roots that grow up to 12 feet deep! Prairie grasses live frugally below the surface until the rains return. The resilient blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) can revive from dormancy and grow on as little as 0.2 inches of rainfall.



## Nesting Bald Eagles

Look straight ahead at the top of the cottonwood trees, and you'll see a bald eagle nest. Bald eagles have been nesting here since 2017. People assumed that they mate for life, but research has shown that they will separate if nesting duties are not shared and, there have been documented cases of polygamy where three eagles all raise young together. Nature is fluid and dynamic, using methods that help ensure the success of new life.



## Living Fossil of the Pleistocene

Pronghorn, commonly nicknamed antelope, have thrived in North America since before the last ice age. They are one of the few species that made it through the last mass extinction event. Pronghorn are the fastest land mammals in North America, reaching speeds of 60 miles per hour and maintaining that speed for several minutes. Keep your eyes peeled for their distinctive white rumps on the rolling prairie hills, as they are a common site at the Plains Conservation Center.



## Riparian Ecosystem

A riparian ecosystem is the land directly next to a body of water, whether it's a river, stream, lake, or pond. The presence of water changes the habitat enough to support different types of plants from the upland prairie next to it, which invites different species of wildlife to live in a place that otherwise would be uninhabitable for them. East Tollgate Creek runs through the PCC and provides water, an essential resource for life.



## Prairie Restoration Project

The mission of the Prairie Restoration Project is to restore relationships between people and nature and support a healthy, thriving ecosystem through land stewardship rooted in respect and reciprocity. We work towards this mission by providing opportunities for people to connect with nature through education and volunteer programs. Intrigued? Learn more and join us by visiting [AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter](https://AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter).



## Talk of the Town

Prairie dogs have one of the most complex animal languages ever studied. They can relay what we say in one sentence through a single call. Each call has a different meaning. When they see a predator, their calls inform the colony about who the predator is, and they react based on the identity of the predator. For example, if they see a hawk, they retreat to their holes but if they see a badger, they wait above ground to avoid being dug out of their burrows by the badger.



## Land Stewardship

For thousands of years, humans have shaped ecosystems using knowledge of the plants and animals that live in them, creating healthy habitats for all. In the last couple of centuries, we've fallen away from this role and are exploiting natural resources, resulting in environmental degradation and the climate crisis. We should restore our connection with nature to work in harmony and ensure that all life can thrive. We can do this by practicing reciprocity, relationality and respect for the land upon which we live.



# Thank you!

For participating in our self-guided tour. If you are interested in a more in-depth naturalist-led program, we offer wagon tours, birding safari's, plant walks, full moon hikes and more. To register visit [AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter](https://AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter).

## Interested in learning more?

Join us for educational programs and volunteer opportunities by visiting [AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter](https://AuroraGov.org/PlainsCenter) or scan the QR code.



## Plains Conservation Center

21901 E. Hampden Ave.

303.326.8380

### Hiking Hours

*Daylight Saving Time (March 1 to Oct. 31)*

#### **Monday through Thursday**

6:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

#### **Fridays**

6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Saturday and Sunday

8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

*Standard Time (Nov. 1- Feb. 28/29)*

#### **Monday through Friday**

6:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

#### **Saturday and Sunday**

8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

### Visitor Center Hours

#### **Wednesday through Friday**

Noon to 4:30 p.m.

#### **Saturday and Sunday**

9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

#### **Monday and Tuesday**

Closed

*Hours are subject to change.*



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