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BioBlitz at Belvoir Ranch draws record-setting crowd

By Matt Murphy, Wyoming Tribune Eagle Jun 12, 2016



Rich Walker of Wyoming Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit presents a crayfish captured in nearby pond to volunteers Lauren Salsgiver, center, and Melibe Downey for the BioBlitz survey event Saturday at the Belvoir Ranch outside of Cheyenne. The method team must inspect dozens of scientists and volunteers to find and learn more about

CHEYENNE – It took a few minutes, but a group of kids finally caught something in their net.

“A crayfish!” one exclaimed, as the rest gathered around for a closer look.

Further inspection revealed the crayfish was a female still carrying eggs on her belly.

So off the crayfish went into a holding tank for everyone else to see.

The crayfish was caught during the annual BioBlitz event this weekend, organized by four organizations – the University of Wyoming Biodiversity Institute, The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Rockies and the Wyoming Geographic Alliance.

This year, the BioBlitz was held for the first time in eastern Wyoming at Cheyenne’s Belvoir Ranch.

With a total of 150 people in attendance, including volunteers, organizers and biologists, the 2016 BioBlitz at the Belvoir Ranch was likely the largest ever in Wyoming, said Brent Lathrop, The Nature Conservancy’s program director for southeast Wyoming.

The end goal of the BioBlitz is to have an inventory of as many plant and animal species as possible found on a given property. That data can then be used as a baseline for further research and for land-use planning and management.

The crayfish in question was caught in a small pond near Lone Tree Creek on the north side of the property, within view of Interstate 80.

Dozens of volunteers scoured the waters of the pond and Lone Tree Creek, using nets and taking water samples to see what else could be found.

Numerous insects and larvae were pulled from the water, as were larger animals, like a tiger salamander – the only salamander native to Wyoming.

Samples were taken to a set of tables outfitted with microscopes and trays, where collected materials could be spread out and sorted.

Meanwhile, another group searched on an adjacent hillside for other reptiles and amphibians.

And that was just part of Saturday morning.

Throughout the weekend, which included Friday and continues through today, the volunteers and biologists are spending hours focusing on finding macroinvertebrates, amphibians and reptiles, birds, mammals, grasses and wildflowers.

The days have been punctuated with presentations, including a discussion on the Atlas missile site, which participants passed through on their way to the BioBlitz.

Some participants camped out at the ranch the whole weekend, while others commuted between the Belvoir and Laramie or Cheyenne.

Among the campers were a group of high school students working on their requirements to earn a Congressional Award by the time they graduate. Two of the students, Hannah Clark and Lily Joslin, said they found out about the BioBlitz from staff at Cheyenne's East High School.

"(A secretary) suggested it, and we figured, why not?" Joslin said.

The students weren't wary of getting their feet wet – literally – and said they were enjoying their time so far, especially once they started finding animal life in the pond.

Volunteers were diverse, representing all ages, backgrounds and interests.

Some, like Chris Fine, who brought her 3-year-old son, said she appreciated that the event was family friendly.

For others, like Timi Saville, the experience of being able to visit the Belvoir Ranch was a factor in deciding to volunteer.

"It's the Belvoir Ranch, and access is kind of limited," she said.

The city of Cheyenne bought the Belvoir Ranch in 2003 for almost \$6 million. A master plan for the property was developed later that decade, which includes future trails and public recreation use. However, the city has done very little with the property since, and there are few ways for the public to legally access the property.

The city allowed BioBlitz organizers to use the ranch, but no city staff members were in attendance Saturday morning.

Regardless, data collected from this weekend's event will help contribute to research of the High Plains ecosystem.

"We have data gaps out here, basically from Laramie east," said Lathrop, The Nature Conservancy staff member. "We don't have a lot of information about these species."

At the same time, the data can assist land management efforts in the future as it pertains to the natural landscape at the Belvoir.

"It's important to know what's on the property to know if any of our activities are changing what's on the ranch," said Brenna Marsicek, who works at UW's Biodiversity Institute.

Besides the data, though, volunteers were able to learn more about the ecosystem of the High Plains, as biologists explained what role each identified organism played.

Lathrop said he thinks local residents are becoming more interested in their environment as time goes on.

"Wyoming folks are becoming more and more proud of their wildlife and their landscape," he said.

Matt Murphy

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