

Nature center at Star K offers programs for all ages

By: Eric Mees, The Aurora Sentinel

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As Kate Kramer was hiking around Star K Ranch open space recently, a coyote jumped from behind a Russian olive tree and across her path. On its heels was a deer in hot pursuit. Kramer took a couple more steps and saw what had angered the doe enough to chase after the coyote - a fawn stood just behind the tree.

"It was my most exciting urban experience ever," said Kramer, who is the executive director of Sand Creek Regional Greenway Partnership. "It was just like Wild Kingdom right there in an urban area."

That urban area - 200 acres north of Colfax Avenue and between Chambers Road and Airport Boulevard - is about to have another encounter with nature with the opening of the Morrison Nature Center at Star K.

The Morrison Nature Center celebrates its grand opening at 10 a.m., on Oct. 26 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, barbecue and other festivities. And while the project has taken less than two years to go from funding to foundation to completion, the concept has been on the minds of many for much longer.

"We've been working on the Star K Ranch nature area since the 1980s and we always dreamed of turning the old farm house into a nature center," said Linda Strand, the division manager for open space and the natural resource division of the city's Parks and Open Space Department. "It's been a longtime dream of ours."

The Nature Center incorporates the original Stark family homestead and garage, which have been tied together with new construction, including space for rotating and permanent exhibits, a classroom, kitchen and reception. Also, there will be staff onsite five days a week and interpretive rangers available for special programs.

The Nature Center ties Star K into the Sand Creek Regional Greenway. The Nature Center and its adjacent parking - with room for horse trailers - will also serve as the trailhead for the greenway, a 14-mile trail that connects the South Platte River and High Line Canal.

The \$1 million project was funded by a \$550,000 grant from the Pauline A. and George R. Morrison Charitable Trust; \$170,000 from the Adams County Open Space Tax Initiative; \$160,000 from the Sand Creek Greenway Partnership; and \$75,000 from the city of Aurora, via Greater Outdoors Colorado Lottery proceeds.

Kramer said that while other greenway projects often become transit corridors, Star K and all the other amenities and parks make Sand Creek a destination.

"This is a habitat environment and a wildlife corridor," she said. "What our greenway offers is a whole habitat can be explored and enjoyed not only by Aurora, but the whole metro area."

There are two, limited-access wildlife preserves within Star K's boundaries.

In addition to a 100-year-old cottonwood stand at Star K and the aforementioned coyotes and deer, the area is also home to many species of birds, including ducks, great blue herons, great horned owls, red-tailed hawks and bald eagles. There are also foxes, prairie dogs, skunks and raccoons in the area.

Organizers say it will be just the second nature center within the metro area, after the Carson Nature Center in Littleton.

The center will be seeking volunteers for such jobs as running the center, trash details, bird boxings and general habitat maintenance. Call Strand at 303-326-8948 for more information.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife has already scheduled its final Wildlife Watch program of the

year at the Nature Center, for 9 a.m.-1 p.m. on Nov. 15. These classes include tips on what to look for, how to select binoculars and the like. Cost is \$15 per household. For more on Wildlife Watch, call 303-291-7258 or visit www.wildlifewatch.net .

If you go:

- * Morrison Nature Center Ribbon-cutting, with Mayor Paul Tauer
- * 10 a.m. Oct. 26
- * Star K Ranch, Smith Road and Laredo Street
- * Call the city at 303-326-8948 or Sand Creek at 303-393-7700

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