

Level 4 Potential Conservation Area (PCA) Report

Name Rito Alto Peak

Site Code S.USCOHP*10842

IDENTIFIERS

Site ID 199 Site Class PCA
Site Alias None

Network of Conservation Areas (NCA)

<u>NCA Site ID</u>	<u>NCA Site Code</u>	<u>NCA Site Name</u>
1956	S.USCOHP*5778	Sangre de Cristo

LOCATORS

Nation United States Latitude 380343N
State Colorado Longitude 1054717W

Quad Code Quad Name

38105-A7 Mirage
38105-A6 Rito Alto Peak

County

Saguache (CO)

Watershed Code Watershed Name

13010003 San Luis

SITE DESCRIPTION

Minimum Elevation	7,600.00	Feet	2,316.00	Meters
Maximum Elevation	9,450.00	Feet	2,880.00	Meters

Site Description

The Rito Alto Bosque site delineates nearly 3000 acres of riparian forests/woodlands which extend down the alluvial fan from the mouth of Rito Alto Canyon on the western edge of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The site slopes westward from the mountain front and ranges from an elevation of just under 7600 feet at the western edge to nearly 9450 feet at the eastern margin. The large areal extent, complex canopy structure, and community diversity make this streamside forest/woodland unique in the northern San Luis Valley. The near streamside zone is vegetated with quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) and narrowleaf cottonwood (*Populus angustifolia*), with an understory of western birch (*Betula occidentalis*), Bebb's willow (*Salix bebbiana*), wild rose (*Rosa woodsii*), and mesic forbs, sedges, and grasses. Further from the channel, mixed woodlands of Rocky Mountain juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*) and Gambel oak (*Quercus gambelii*) predominate, extending the forest/woodland as much as 100 meters on either side of Rito Alto Creek. At the driest upland edges of the site, needle and thread (*Stipa comata*) forms extensive grasslands. This is the most extensive forested riparian corridor extending from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains toward the valley bottom wetlands of the San Luis Valley. Dense canopy shading, with perennial water and abundant cottonwood snags, suggest the site provides excellent habitat for riparian dependent fauna. Livestock graze the site. Impacts are light in the upper reaches of the site, where an abundance of downed aspen logs apparently inhibit access to the creek. At the lower reaches of the site, the forest becomes more open, and livestock impacts are evidenced by browsed and trampled cottonwood seedlings, and large patches of non-native grasses (*Bromus* spp., *Poa pratensis*) in the understory. Several two-track roads skirt the edge of the riparian forest, but they appear to show little use. The extreme eastern edge of the site is contained within the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness and a hiking trail passes through the northeast edge of the site.

Key Environmental Factors

No Data

Climate Description

No Data

Land Use History

No Data

Cultural Features

No Data

SITE DESIGN

Site Map P - Partial Mapped Date 02/15/1998
Designer Sarr, D.A.

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Boundary Justification

The site boundary is drawn to encompass the floodplain of Rito Alto Creek and the juniper and oak woodlands which flank the riparian wetlands. This boundary is drawn to 1) protect the occurrences from direct impacts such as trampling or other surface disturbances; 2) to delineate an area of valuable aquatic habitat which may be impacted by hydrological disturbances upstream. The site boundary was based on initial aerial photo analysis, a field visit by CNHP wetland and riparian ecologists, and subsequent corroboration with satellite imagery.

Primary Area 2,996.55 Acres 1,212.67 Hectares

SITE SIGNIFICANCE

Biodiversity Significance Rank B3: High Biodiversity Significance

Biodiversity Significance Comments

This site supports some of the most extensive stands of aspen/western birch (*Populus tremuloides*/*Betula occidentalis*) and narrow-leaf cottonwood/western birch (*Populus angustifolia*/*Betula occidentalis*) riparian forests in Colorado. The narrow-leaf cottonwood/western birch plant association occurs in Utah and Colorado (Padgett et al. 1989, Kittel et al. 1994). Similar types may occur in Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming (Manning and Padgett 1995, Hansen et al. 1995, Youngblood et al. 1985, and Gerard et al. 1995). In Colorado, this association occurs in the White and Gunnison National Forests on the western slope and along the Front Range (Kittel et al. 1996, Kittel et al. 1995, Kittel et al. 1994, Rondeau 1995, Cooper and Cottrel 1990). Thus far, less than twenty occurrences of the type have been reported in the state. The aspen/western birch plant association is documented from eastern Nevada (Manning and Padgett 1995) and Colorado (Colorado Natural Heritage Program 1997). In Colorado, this plant association is known only from steep foothill streams of the west side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and along the Colorado Front Range. This association is highly threatened by development, recreational use, and stream impoundments. In addition to the rare plant communities, the site contains excellent grassland, woodlands, and aquatic habitats, providing exceptional habitat for common species of plants and animals.

Other Values Rank No Data

Other Values Comments

No Data

LAND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Land Use Comments

No Data

Natural Hazard Comments

No Data

Exotics Comments

No Data

Offsite

No Data

Information Needs

No Data

ASSOCIATED ELEMENTS OF BIODIVERSITY

<u>Element</u>			<u>Global</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Driving</u>
<u>State ID</u>	<u>State Scientific Name</u>	<u>State Common Name</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Site Rank</u>
20205	<i>Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis</i>	Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout	G4T3	S3	No
24884	<i>Populus angustifolia</i> / <i>Betula occidentalis</i> Woodland	Montane Riparian Forest	G3	S3	Yes
24611	<i>Populus tremuloides</i> / <i>Betula occidentalis</i> Forest		G3	S2	Yes

REFERENCES

Reference ID Full Citation

- No Data

ADDITIONAL TOPICS

Additional Topics

No Data

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VERSION

Version Date 02/15/1998

Version Author Sarr, D.A.

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