What does Montane mean? Montane means “mountainous,” and it is appropriate to describe soils that exist above 6,000 feet.

Montane forest ecosystem

The name “Montane Forest” is a very broad designation that applies to several forest types that grow between 6,000 and 9,000 feet. Many forest types exist along our cross-section, including aspens groves and fir trees found on the slopes of Mount Herman and the ponderosa pine forests found in Woodmoor. Although the lodgepole pine of the Black Forest is farther south from our cross-section, it too exists in this region. The ponderosa pine is typically the dominant tree from 6,000 to 8,000 feet. A few species of birds, including the pygmy nuthatch, Steller’s Jay, and black-capped chickadee, are so strongly associated with the ponderosa pine forests in this region that they are rarely found elsewhere.

Grassland ecosystem

Grasslands in the Tri-Lakes region have been or will at some point be developed. For generations, ranchers in northern El Paso County grazed cattle and coexisted with the wildlife native to this region. Small grassland remnants remain, but are not of a size suitable to support most of the birds and animals that once thrived here.

According to the museum, Colorado’s native prairie once covered nearly half the state. Plants and animals on the eastern plains of Colorado thrived under good grazing practices. At one time, private landowners provided habitat for more than 70 percent of the wildlife species in the state. Today, with the exception of a few commercial enterprises, bison have disappeared, but other animals including pronghorn, mule deer, and jackrabbit are occasionally seen here. For some reason, coyotes abound. A few prairie dogs still exist but are generally considered to be harmful and eradicated. As the prairie dog habitat disappeared, so did habitat for the mountain plover and burrowing owl. Also included in the grassland ecosystem, but not along our cross-section, are spiky yucca plants found in dry and rocky areas along I-25 between the Air Force Academy and Colorado Springs, where breeding Cassin’s sparrows can be found.

Explore!

The residents of northern El Paso County are fortunate to have great biological diversity and a number of places to see the abundant wildlife. One of my favorite places to look for birds is along the Santa Fe Trail. As the trail ascends in elevation from Colorado Springs to Greenland Ranch, it is possible to see great variation in landscapes, soil types, vegetation, and wildlife. I also enjoy driving the back roads and am often surprised at what I find. I probably need to plaster my car with those bumper stickers that warn “Stop for birds”.

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