REFLECTIONS: Lake Pueblo, Colorado by Sharon Campbell (compiled from web resources), July 2009

Lake Pueblo State Park, one of Colorado’s most popular water sports areas, lies in an area of contrast. The high plains around the reservoir appear to stretch endlessly eastward, while Pikes Peak, the Greenhorn and the Sangre de Cristo mountain range form a scenic alpine backdrop to the west. Buttes and limestone cliffs rim the lake’s irregular, 60-mile shoreline (at maximum conservation pool).

The Arkansas River feeds the 11 mile-long body of water. The park’s low elevation – 4,900 feet – allows for a mild climate and a year-round recreation resource. Massive Pueblo Dam (10,500 feet long by 200 feet high), is a major feature of the Frying Pan/Arkansas Project planned and built by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The project diverts water from the Colorado River Basin on the Western Slope of Colorado through a tunnel under the Continental Divide. Lake Pueblo Dam provides water for drinking, irrigation, recreation and flood control. Colorado State Parks has managed approximately 4,512 acres of land and 4,646 surface acres of water under a lease agreement with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation since 1975. The area leased from the Bureau and approximately 2,160 acres of land owned by Colorado State Parks adjacent to the lease property comprise the 11,318 acre area know as Lake Pueblo State Park.

History of Lake Pueblo

The area in and around Lake Pueblo has a very rich socio-cultural history. Diverse groups of people from Native American Indians to adventuresome pioneers have called this area home. Evidence of these groups remain visible in-and-around the Pueblo State Park. According to the University of Denver, there are 130 prehistoric archeological sites in the park.

Park visitors can try to imagine sending smoke signals from Liberty Point (the main bluff above the lake) just like the large American Indian encampments used to. Personal accounts by former area residents tell how the signals floated all the way to the city of Fountain, nearly 30 miles away.

Early pioneer settlers to the Arkansas River Valley (parts of
which are presently the reservoir) were hearty men, women and children that farmed, ranched and mined the area. The Homestead Act of 1862 helped build the town formerly known as Swallows and Turkey Creek, Colorado. The town school educated hundreds of children. Locals were connected to the rest of the country via the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad.

A devastating flood in 1921 killed 130 people and demolished the area, including the city of Pueblo. Many settlers left the valley after that. The Swallows Cemetery Association includes original settlers that willingly share their stories of those days. The association maintains the cemetery created after the original graves from the Swallows and Turkey Creek cemeteries were moved to avoid flooding by the reservoir water. This cemetery, while not on park land, overlooks the north-end of the reservoir from the state wildlife area and is quickly accessed from the park. Less than ten years after the flood, in 1930, the Frying pan-Arkansas Water diversion project began to develop the area for water storage.

Inventor of the Chuck Wagon, Charles Goodnight, a famous rancher and trail driver of the famed Goodnight-Loving Trail, decided to settle down in Pueblo and build a ranch for his new bride, Mary Ann Dyer. He built Rocky Canyon Ranch on the banks of the Arkansas River just west of Pueblo. A portion of that ranch is now in Lake Pueblo. During his years at the ranch, Goodnight developed innovative techniques that changed the way ranchers did business. Goodnight left his ranch in 1876; however, his legend lives on in the land he once called home.

In the early 1970s the Frying Pan – Arkansas Water Shortage Project began supplying irrigation water for 280,000 acres of farmland in the lower Arkansas Valley. The lake has also provided flood control, water for municipal and industrial use, and recreational opportunities.

**Ecosystems at Lake Pueblo**

All the major park ecosystems include diverse wildlife and plant communities. In addition to the aquatic ecosystems, Lake Pueblo has three major land ecosystems: riparian, pinon-juniper woodlands, and short-grass prairie. Transition zones, where the various ecosystems meet and overlap, provide more diversity.

**Riparian**

The riparian ecosystem at Lake Pueblo, which lies on both sides of the Arkansas River as it leaves the Reservoir, is part of the Rock Canyon day-use area. This zone is characterized by cottonwood and peach leaf willow trees. Tamarisk and Russian olive are invasive species that are becoming more prevalent in this area. Animals commonly found in this area
include mule deer, raccoon, muskrat, and beaver.

Birds include a variety of nesting birds such as the yellow warbler, Bullock’s oriole, and the American robin. Waterfowl such as wood ducks, mallards, teal, and Canada geese are also common.

**Pinon-Juniper Woodland**

Juniper trees, with a few intermingling pinon pine trees, characterize this ecosystem. Coincidentally, the area in the park that embodies this zone is mainly around Juniper Breaks Campground. Steep, rocky bluffs identify the area where the junipers have stood their ground for hundreds of years. It is home to coyotes, skunk, cottontail rabbits, and various lizards. This area is generously inhabited by raptors such as the red-tailed hawk because of its large rodent population that includes deer mice, kangaroo mice, and pocket gophers.

**Short-Grass Prairie**

The most prevalent ecosystem in the park is the short-grass prairie found on the south side of the park. It moves north until it meets the riparian area and picks up on the north side of the park after transitioning from the pinon-juniper area. The most common vegetation includes four-winged saltbush, sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and grasses such as blue grama and Galleta. Mammals include coyotes, skunk, badgers, raccoons, squirrels, and red or gray fox. Birds of this area include scaled quail, mourning doves, and meadowlarks. Reptiles such as bull snakes, prairie rattlesnakes, coachwhips (often called red racers), Colorado checkered whiptails, and eastern fence lizards can also be seen.

**Geology at Lake Pueblo**

Lake Pueblo Park is rich in geologic history. Three major events created the geology showcased at the park, according to Glenn R. Scott, General and Engineering Geology of Northern Pueblo.

1. A vast sea once covered the park during the Cretaceous period, which left stratified rock layers and numerous plant and animal fossils.
2. There was an uplift of the land surface, deposition of non-marine sediments, and folding and faulting coincident with formation of the Rocky Mountains.
3. Finally, erosion of previously deposited sedimentary rocks, formation of modern drainage networks, and deposition of a thin veneer of stream and windblown deposits: (Scott 1969).

All that activity created sharp bluffs, soft shale, and resistant limestone that are prominent throughout the park, especially in the Rock Canyon area.

For years, universities and natural history museums realized the significance of the geology of the park. Scientists and students from as far away as Minnesota and Virginia have studied the geology at Lake Pueblo.

Wildlife at Lake Pueblo

One of the most popular spots for wildlife viewing is the Rock Canyon day-use area by Anticline pond with its watchable wildlife kiosk. A nice walk on the River Trail usually provides nice glimpses of area wildlife.

Visitors commonly see mule deer, coyote, cottontail rabbit, red and gray fox, beaver, raccoon, skunk, prairie dogs, and badger. Reptile enthusiasts might see bull snakes, rattlesnakes, sagebrush lizards, coach whips, and box turtles. A rare reptile, the blackneck garter snake, has been identified in the park.

Pueblo Reservoir lies in the Central Flyway and is a popular bird-watching site. Migratory and resident birds include great-blue heron, osprey, marsh hawk, roadrunners, pinyon jay, western meadowlark, and several other species of raptors, waterfowl, and shorebirds. One of the park’s most beloved visitors is the majestic Bald Eagle that graces the park each winter. American Peregrine falcons are also occasional visitors.

Recreation opportunities at Lake Pueblo include fishing, hiking, sail boating, water skiing, jet skiing, camping, bird watching, and just generally enjoying the water all year round. Many of the State Park facilities are open through the winter. Take advantage of the opportunity to enjoy flat water recreation at one of Colorado’s most popular visitor use areas at Lake Pueblo! For more information visit http://parks.state.co.us/Parks/LakePueblo/.