

## Get Wild: Cucumber Gulch is a wildlife haven

*Stasia Stockwell*



**A young beaver is pictured in Cucumber Gulch.**

*Richard Seeley/Get Wild*

May has arrived. It's that time of year when winter starts to loosen her grip and give way to warmth and sunshine up in the High Country. Some skiers aren't ready for that transition yet, and lifts are still spinning for a few more weeks at Breckenridge Ski Resort — but not the gondola. As of May 1, the lift is shut down until summer operations begin, and the reason for that is the land that lies below the thick cables. Cucumber Gulch Wildlife Preserve is a protected area within the town of Breckenridge that's teeming with wildlife, especially this time of year. The resort is required to stop gondola operations during the spring in order to keep the preserve it hovers over as peaceful and undisturbed as possible for wildlife during this season of transition.

Cucumber Gulch was designated as a wildlife preserve nearly two decades ago as both the town of Breckenridge and the ski resort were expanding. Among the pines, between downtown Breckenridge and the base of the resort, lies a wetland ecosystem that's unique in this part of the High Country, where steep mountains and narrow valleys don't leave much room for flat landscapes. The preserve is teeming with life: It's one of the most biodiverse chunks of land in the area, with beavers, moose, elk, deer and nearly 50 species of birds inhabiting it at various points throughout the year.

Among the ungulates and birds, another small creature makes a home. The boreal toad is an endangered amphibian that is found in many parts of the southern Rockies. But the 70 acres of fen wetlands within the 117-acre preserve provide an ideal habitat for these toads. Fen wetlands are ecosystems that depend on groundwater and host an immense amount of biodiversity. They develop over thousands of years and are incredibly delicate. Destruction of this wetland area would harm the already endangered boreal toad and leave its wetland neighbors without homes, too.

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In the springtime, moose and mule deer flock to Cucumber Gulch for calving season. When the calves are first born and in their first weeks of life, they're weak and entirely dependent on their mothers. It's a delicate time for these animals, and the preserve provides an ideal habitat as the newborns adjust to life in the mountains. Vail Resorts is required to shut down the gondola for at least 45 days each spring in order to give the animals in the preserve space, peace and quiet, though Colorado Parks and Wildlife would prefer this period to last a little longer — at least until the end of June. Nonetheless, this break in operations is a small inconvenience that helps preserve a special and unique habitat for the wildlife that also call Breckenridge home.

Operations at Breckenridge Resort continue, despite the gondola closure (skiers and riders can take a bus up to the Peak 7 base), all in an effort to claim the longest ski season in Colorado. I love skiing, and I'm happy that I get the chance to do it as much as possible. But as much as I enjoy it, I want to also make sure this place is still a welcome home for humans and wildlife alike.

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Come June, the gondola will reopen for summer operations and the trails that exist within Cucumber Gulch will dry out. If you head there this summer for a hike, remember what a special place this is and be mindful of the creatures that make a home there. Perhaps you'll spot a moose in the distance, or hear a boreal toad croaking in the moss.



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