



If you think a “creek is a creek,” think again!

Discover 7 creek ecosystems in the Fountain Creek Corridor.

Every creek is actually a set of diverse ecosystems. Each ecosystem serves a unique purpose and offers slightly different wildlife habitat. For example, beavers and great blue herons prefer open water channels while coyotes, deer, elk, foxes, raptors, and even mountain lions might be drawn to cottonwood galleries.

The Fountain Creek Corridor Restoration Master Plan identifies 7 different ecosystems within the Fountain Creek Corridor between Colorado Springs and Pueblo:

1. ***The creek (open water channel) ecosystem*** – Here, the flowing water may be narrow and deep or it may be wide with meandering channels separated by sparsely vegetated sandbars.
2. ***Sandbar / gravel creek bank ecosystem*** – These sand, gravel, and rock benches have limited vegetation and, unfortunately, host several invasive species including salt cedar (tamarisk).
3. ***Riparian woodlands / fringe wetland ecosystem*** – Due to its proximity to the water table, this is the most prolific ecosystem in the Fountain Creek Corridor. Abundant native plant species include trees, shrubs, grasses, rushes, and sedges. Sadly, large stands of invasive species here are difficult to control.
4. ***Marsh riparian ecosystem*** – Thanks to access to water and seasonal flooding, this biodiverse ecosystem contains a vast array of plant species, such as cat tails and bull rushes. Take a close look, and you might spot cottonwood trees, willows, chokecherry, wild plum, milkweed, sunflower, monkeyflower, wheatgrass, needlegrass, cattails, and many kinds of sedges and rushes.

5. ***Pond ecosystem*** – Several small agricultural ponds for irrigation or livestock have little vegetation except for nearby grasses. When ponds no longer serve agricultural uses they could be transformed into riparian habitats with biodiverse plantings that will attract wildlife.
6. ***Cottonwood gallery ecosystem*** – Here, large cottonwood trees have a dense understory of shrubs and native grasses. Cottonwood galleries protect the creek from bank erosion and offer critical wildlife habitat. Unfortunately, cottonwood galleries are vanishing due to development and agricultural uses.
7. ***Shrub / grassland ecosystem*** – Situated well above the water table, this ecosystem lies at the highest level of all ecosystems of Fountain Creek. Rich in vegetation, this ecosystem includes trees, shrubs, and upland grasses. Most likely, this is the ecosystem most of us readily see, since it typically adjoins private property and agricultural lands along the creek.

The next time you hike or ride your bike on one of Fountain Creek's greenway trails – or cross country ski or snowshoe along the paths or participate in Creek Week – take a look around. How many different ecosystems can you identify?