



Meet Some of Our Riparian Residents

Let's say you're biking or walking along Fountain Creek and you see a wet, whiskered critter swimming along. "Hmm," you wonder, "Is it a baby beaver?"

You might be surprised to learn what it really is.



Nancy Bernard, Fountain Creek Nature Center Supervisor, is an expert on Fountain Creek critters. If you spot a semi-aquatic mammal during the day, most likely it's a muskrat. "We like to say the muskrat is the beaver's little cousin," she says. "The muskrat works the day shift, while the beaver works the night shift."

How can you tell the difference? Nancy points out that beavers are relatively large and heavy, so you'll only see their heads when swimming – the rest is under water. When muskrats swim, you'll see their full body and tail, followed by a V-shaped wake. Another quick fact: Muskrats acquired their name thanks to the strong musky odor adults emit to communicate with one another.



Speaking of communication, you may know that great blue herons frequent Fountain Creek Nature Center's ponds, wetlands, and wooded areas. Do you know their fascinating mating ritual?

"The migrating herons come back in spring, usually around April," Nancy explains. "The males come back first and repair last year's nests as part of the courtship ritual. The

returning females fly around, checking out the nests. Meanwhile, the males all click their beaks to attract attention. (Females select a new mate every year.) When a female lands in a nest, the male will have a stick in his beak. When she takes the stick from his beak, this seals the deal!"



Great blue herons aren't the only feathered friends that frequent our creek. "Fountain Creek is a migratory highway," Nancy says. "We have hundreds of species of songbirds – such as the Western tanager and yellow-headed blackbird – as well as many predatory raptors including bald eagles, golden eagles, a healthy population of great horned owls, and a wonderful variety of hawks."

Other Fountain Creek fauna include deer, elk, foxes, coyotes, bobcats, skunks, the occasional bear, and 5 turtle species including the Western painted turtle – the state reptile.

Nancy points out that Fountain Creek is an unsung hero in our community. "We cannot continue to abuse the creek and not even recognize its existence," she says. "We can become a gratitude-based community and recognize the value of this resource and treat it with respect."

