

Winter hiking goes down long country roads

By Tim Keller For the Comet | Posted: Monday, March 9, 2015 12:00 am

Raton is a hiker's paradise—not just because of the pristine high-mountain beauty of nearby Sugarite Canyon State Park, but because Climax Canyon Nature Trail offers secluded two- and three-mile mountain loops right within the western city limits, built and maintained by the City of Raton Department of Parks & Recreation.

But as winter snows soak the mountain trails and turn them into alternating cycles of deep snow, boot-sucking mud, and treacherous ice, it's hard to maintain hiking mileage through the winter. The City of Raton has offered another great option with the asphalt walking trails around Roundhouse Park surrounding the aquatic center just across the railroad tracks east of downtown Raton. Even on mornings after big snows this winter, the trails have been cleared and dry, and it's easy to walk a couple miles without retracing any steps.

At peak hours, though, the Roundhouse Park trails get crowded—almost like in a real city!—and so many people are walking their dogs that “Dog Park” might as well be added to the name.

That's when I like to get out of town, but I never have to go far. Wherever you live in our region, long dirt ranch roads go off endlessly toward every horizon. They can be muddy the first couple days after a storm, but they're generally well made and well maintained so they dry quickly. Best of all, you'll seldom see another soul as you walk into the very vistas that cause most of us to love this land.

With our two dogs, this winter I've been hiking a beautiful ranch road that starts six miles southeast of downtown Raton and—Dead End sign notwithstanding—the road goes on forever. We walk four miles to a quaint one-lane bridge before turning back. We've spent a lot of hours on that road this winter. On average, we've been passed about once per hour by a vehicle, almost always a ranch pickup. We can hear them coming long before they reach us, plenty of time to be sure we're out of their way.

The ranches are so widespread that our four-mile hike to the bridge doesn't quite reach the first ranch headquarters. The second ranch is two miles past the first. On one hike, we saw more elk than people. When we do see people, they're in passing pickups. Sometimes they stop to say hi or ask whether we need a ride. When they find out that we're out walking for fun, invariably they smile and continue on their way.



Jett and Django on Blosser Gap Road

We recently adopted a Jack Russell Terrier that last fall had been chewed up and left for dead by a coyote outside a stable near Colorado Springs. Nursed back to health by a great veterinarian and loving dog-rescue people, Jett was ready to go on long hikes by the time we got him in late January. The ranch road was his first hike. Helping me watch and train Jett was our border collie, Django, himself rescued from the shelter at Las Vegas, NM, more than four years ago. By now, Django is a veteran hiker with countless miles on many of the trails within a 12-mile radius of Raton.

Jett has joined Django in telling me that he wants to go hiking. It happens when they see me pull my hiking boots from the closet. They go berserk.

When we return from the eight-mile ranch-road hike, they're transformed. They sleep the rest of the day and night. But the next day, they keep their eyes on the closet, watching for the boots to come out.

Winter's almost over. Soon we'll climb mountain trails with new greenery growing all around us. The April 25 Climax Canyon 5K walk/run is only weeks away, sponsored by the City of Raton. By then my favorite six-mile trail up and over the ridge west of Lake Maloya will be calling me and Django and Jett.

Meantime, we're giving the weekend snow a couple days to melt and dry on the ranch road. Then we're going for a long walk, far beyond the Dead End sign, toward a one-lane country bridge in the middle of nowhere, one of our favorite places.