
Ranchettes spell trouble for conservation of native species

Privately owned ranches in the Mountain West are being sold and subdivided into ranchettes at a breathtaking pace, and the consequences for native plants and wildlife could be dire, according to a recent study along the Colorado Front Range.

In what is believed to be the first study of its kind, researchers at Colorado State University compared plant and wildlife communities across livestock ranches, nature reserves, and exurban developments.

Exurban developments, commonly known as ranchettes, are low-density residential developments with houses on lots from 10 to 40 acres, built beyond incorporated city limits.

Researchers concluded the human disturbances that come with subdividing ranches into small acreages ultimately produce ecosystems with more nonnative plants, fewer birds of conservation concern, more generalist bird species, and fewer native predators.

“We found that a host of so-called ‘human-adapted’ species, such as the black-billed magpie, European starling, and domestic dogs and cats, had population sizes that were up to 15 times greater on ranchettes than either ranches or nature reserves,” says Jeremy Maestas, one of the researchers who is now the State Biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Oregon.

This and other studies also show:

- In general, exurban developments favor common bird species able to cope with human disturbances at the expense of other species of higher conservation concern.

- Dogs and cats harass and kill wildlife and can lead to the local extinction of some species.
- There are fewer native predators such as bobcats, coyotes and foxes on ranchettes than undeveloped lands.
- Songbird nesting success can be reduced on ranchettes compared to intact ranch lands.

The studies suggest the long-term result of continued land conversion to exurban development could be an increasing number of conservation problems as desirable species of both plants and animals begin to show population declines and less desirable species start colonizing new areas, according to the researchers.

Protecting intact working ranches will be critical in efforts to protect the natural heritage of the West, adds Wendell Gilgert, a wildlife biologist with NRCS, who facilitated the study for NRCS.

Funding for the project was provided by the Western Center for Integrated Resource Management at Colorado State University and the NRCS Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC), formerly the Wildlife Habitat Management Institute.

The AWCC, located in Madison, Mississippi, is a fish and wildlife technology development center.

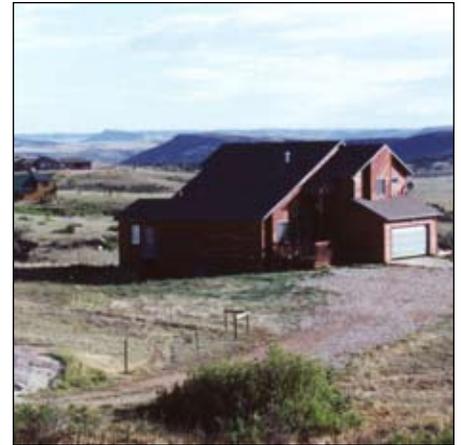


Photo by Jeremy Maestas, NRCS

Ranchette on former rangeland

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