

## **Connectivity on the Lake-to-Lake Trail**

City of Louisville Self-Guided Ranger Walk

**Duration:** 3.8 miles (1.9 miles out and back). Additional 1.5 miles is optional.

**Difficulty:** Easy to Moderate

**Parking:** Harper Lake parking lot (McCaslin Blvd and Washington Ave)

On this hike, we will learn about **natural corridors** and their importance in shaping the acquisition and planning of natural lands, such as Parks and Open Space. A natural corridor is where individual pieces of relatively undeveloped land connect together to form a larger patch or network of habitat for plants and wildlife. As you will learn over the course of this hike, these patches and networks play a critical role in allowing plants and wildlife to move around, access different resources they need and survive.





1. Starting at the Harper Lake Parking Lot, walk west and follow the concrete path through the underpass under McCaslin Blvd.
2. Walk past the Dog Off-Leash Area and over to the Kiosk at the entrance to Davidson Mesa Open Space. Look southwest out at the Mesa, or, if you would like, walk the 1.5-mile loop on the northeast portion of the property (see map on page 2). What do you see?

All animals need food, water, and shelter.

**What resources for wildlife are present here?** Davidson Mesa has abundant grasses that become forage for herbivorous animals like rabbits and prairie dogs. These animals, in turn, provide food for predators such as coyotes, foxes, and raptors.

**What resources are scarce here?** Davidson Mesa is a dry upland site with little to no year-round water. Remember that the ditches you see are artificial. Aside from trees growing in the people's backyards, there is practically no tall, woody vegetation to provide shelter or cover for aboveground animals.

If one property has some, but not all, of the resources wild animals need, how can they find everything they require to survive?

3. Return to Harper Lake and enter the park to take the gravel (crusher fines) trail around the lake's southern shore. As you walk, notice the many species of wildlife that visit the lake and live around its shores.

The waters of Harper Lake host osprey, Canada geese, cormorants, snowy egrets, the occasional bald eagle, and many species of ducks. It also provides an abundant source of water for mammals living in the area, such as raccoons, foxes, coyotes, and skunks and an important habitat for fish.

4. About 30 yards south of the bridge, turn right to follow the trail east. As you cross Kennedy Ave., look out for vehicle traffic and remember to be courteous to road users. Continue east on this trail to enter Coyote Run Open Space.

**Why might wildlife want to move in this direction?** What other resources can they access here? What would it be like for wildlife to move through here if people developed this strip of Open Space into housing or streets?

5. After about 1/3 of a mile, safely cross Washington Ave. Look at the trees and cattails in the drainage that runs along the center of Coyote Run.

**What is special about this area?** The low-lying areas act as an accumulation point for water, which runs downhill above and below ground. Soils here are wetter and can support vegetation like cattails, willows, and cottonwood trees, which otherwise wouldn't survive in Louisville's semi-arid shortgrass prairie climate. This is a **riparian zone**, which we discussed in a previous self-guided ranger walk (see the City of Louisville's website).

**How does this drainage benefit wildlife?** Above, we asked you to consider what it would be like if animals moving through this area had to navigate streets and houses. This drainage, with its dense vegetation and water resources, is a safe conduit for wildlife to move about in relative safety. Vegetation provides cover from humans and predators, as well as spots to build dens or nests.

6. Continue walking and enjoy the views of Coyote Run's riparian zone. Think back to Davidson Mesa. How does this area compare to the wide spaces of Mesa? Could wildlife live exclusively in either place? Some certainly do, such as prairie dogs, mice, and meadowlarks. Are there species that might benefit from having access to both areas?
7. At the trail intersection, continue straight to follow the path as it curves to the south.
8. After approximately 100 yards, there is another trail intersection. Follow the trail to the left to head east.
9. After about 200 yards, you will reach Via Appia. Please cross the street safely.
10. On the other side of Via Appia is Lake Park. The Harney Family dug this small pond in the 1950s to supply water to their agricultural operations.
11. Walk around the lake, and look at the species of plants and wildlife you see. Compare what you see to what you saw at Davidson Mesa, Harper Lake, and Coyote Run. How is each of these areas different? How are they the same?

**Why is it important to connect Harper Lake and Lake Park?** Imagine the benefits to an animal that depends on surface water for its survival, like a raccoon. Let's say that, for some reason, Harper Lake became inhospitable for the raccoons who live around it. The option for these animals to migrate safely from one area to another that provides similar resources could mean the difference between life and death.

**Do plants also benefit from natural corridors?** Yes! Plants need suitable habitat to spread their seeds and grow. Connecting patches of suitable habitat together allows plant species to persist locally. If a population in one patch dies off, individuals from a well-connected patch nearby can more easily re-colonize the area than individuals from a distant, disconnected patch. This holds true for plants as well as birds, mammals, insects, fungi... Pretty much all living things!

**How does this benefit humans?** Many visitors to Louisville's trails enjoy the option to connect one part of the city to another for commuting or simply walking for pleasure. Passing from one open space or park to another allows people to enjoy different kinds of scenery. Perhaps most importantly, natural lands around riparian zones create safe conduits for water to flow during wet seasons or flood events.

12. After you complete your tour of Lake Park, head back the way you came to finish your walk. As you return to Harper Lake, look at the map on the last page. Notice how the City of Louisville has stitched together corridors of parks and open spaces (dark blue). These corridors connect populations of plants and wildlife across the city and link up with corridors preserved by other open space programs. An important role of any Open Space program is to ensure the viability of all kinds

of plants and wildlife. Preserving and maintaining natural corridors is a critical way to accomplish this task!

