

NOTHING COMPLEX ABOUT CAM-PLEX SUCCESS

Campbell County refashions defunct experimental farm into wildlife, recreational bonanza

Jacelyn Downey

The Wyoming experimental farm's role in the lives of Gillette's future generations could not have been predicted in the early 1900s when it was created.

Now, on any given day, dog walkers, runners, Frisbee golfers, and picnickers utilize what is now Cam-Plex Park.

Today's Cam-Plex Park was started in 1905 when citizens near Cheyenne hired an agriculturalist to test various plants and growing methods for dry land farming. This eventually led to a state-funded project in which nine experimental farms were created and managed by the University of Wyoming.

Gillette field station land was purchased in 1920 from John R. and Catherine Cates, and research began on various types of grasses, grains, vegetables, and tree species. Much of what was planted was tested for shelter belts and fruits for human consumption. Seven thousand trees had been planted by 1936.

The farm closed in 1980 due to a lack of funding despite this success. Community concern to preserve the tree belt prompted Campbell



The Works Progress Administration building at Cam-Plex Park.

County to purchase the land in 1983. The county established a land board and began work on Cam-Plex Park in 1984. In 1985, the management responsibilities were given to the Campbell County Parks and Recreation Department.

Year-round Oasis

Cam-Plex Park provides a year-round refuge for locals and visitors.

Wildlife also abounds amidst all the human activity.

Each spring, locals rejoice at having a chance to see life blooming again. Dolgo crabapples (*Malus dolgo*) and pin cherry (*Prunus pennsylvanica*) begin to bloom and burst into a colorful array of pinks, reds, and purples. Much of the wildlife will reappear and remind us our world will once again be full of the sounds of

the wind through the leaves and chatter of wildlife.

Summer brings a riot of greenery, such as caragana and warm-season grasses, which provide abundant food sources for wildlife as well as cover and water. Weddings will usually be in progress this time of year. Services are often outside, while receptions are in the WPA Building.

Fall is harvest time, when citizens gather grapes, chokecherries, crabapples, and more for jams and jellies and other canned goods to get through the winter with a taste of home. This is that special time when we get to pick the fruit of summer's labor.

Cold Doesn't Stop Activities

Winter doesn't mark the end of recreation at the park, even with the snow and cold; many people venture to the park to snowshoe and cross-country ski while looking for those hardy Wyoming wildlife species that refuse to give in to the cold.

Frost grapes (*Vitus riparia*) prove that, even in our coldest months, life lies just underneath the surface – they have been known to withstand temperatures as low as –70 F. In fact, the grape vines so bountiful with fruit in warmer months often have leftover dried berries and a weave of vines that provide a haven for wildlife in the winter. It's often said the berries turn the sweetest after a hard frost!

UW's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources still conducts applied research across the state at four research and extension centers. The work done has proven a great service



The Cam-Plex Trail unites users, plants, and wildlife.

by finding what plants were hardy enough to survive our weather and soil then entrusted to share results with the citizens of Wyoming.

Residents can use the decades of research to achieve great success with their own properties.

For landowners wanting to incorporate any of the varieties mentioned, you've got a head start on the planning process. These varieties can usually be found at local nurseries

or can be ordered through a nursery. There are many online sources as well.

By incorporating shrubs, vines, and fruiting trees into a landscaping plan, you'll reap the year-round benefits and appreciate the increased beauty they add in combination with traditional garden plants.

Checkout Cam-Plex Park if in the area – it is worth your time.

Jacelyn Downey is an educator with Audubon Rockies who likes having any excuse to visit Cam-Plex Park year-round. She can be reached at jdowney@audubon.org.