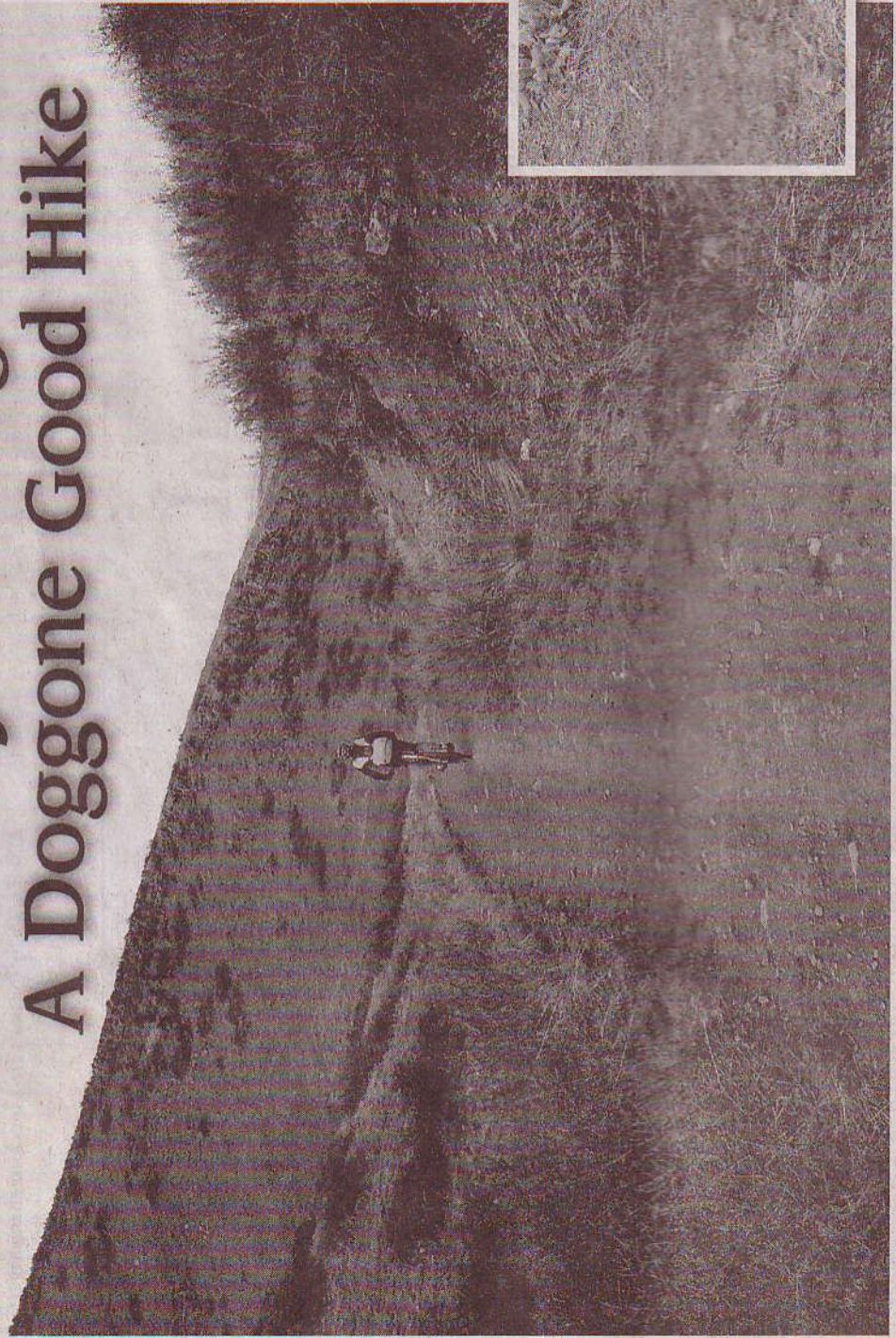


OUTDOORS...

Coyote Ridge: A Doggone Good Hike



Natural area provides plenty of scenery—of large vistas and small creatures



Photos by Felix Wong

BY FELIX WONG
For Fort Collins Now

It only took 20 minutes to realize that my friend Tori had been looking forward all week to our hike

at Coyote Ridge Natural Area for completely different reasons than I was. Whereas I wanted to inhale some fresh air while doing a moderate amount of exercise, it seemed like all she wanted to do was stand around and gawk at wildlife.

"Look, over there! There's one

... and another," she exclaimed.

"What? Where?" I asked.

"A prairie dog! See him?"

"No."

"Right along the trail."

"That's not a prairie dog. That's a mountain biker,"

I replied as Tori

kept insist-

ing, "No, right

there..."

As it turned

out, only the

blind could have

possibly missed

seeing prairie dogs

proudly perched

on top of dirt

mounds scattered

around this preserved natural area

between Fort Collins and Loveland.

TO GET THERE

The area is between Loveland and Fort Collins about one mile south of the Larimer County Landfill on the west side of County Road 19 (Taft Hill Road from Fort Collins; Wilson Street from Loveland).

THE HIKE

4.5 miles (about 1.5-2.5 hours).

There were dozens of them, some barking their characteristic warning call while others dived into their network of burrows that allow them to escape from predators.

There were other animals as well, including rabbits, mice, sheep (used to keep invasive weeds in check) and coyotes. Or so my friend told me. Of course, when she pointed out one of the latter, I never saw it.

What were easily apparent even to my tunnel-vision-challenged eyes in the wide open prairie were the wild grasses and tall, spear-shaped woolly mullein, whose plush, soft leaves are sometimes called "mountain toilet paper."

Speaking of which, there are bathrooms at Coyote Ridge with

real toilet paper along with a cabin with a drinking fountain—reminders that as peaceful as it was out here, civilization was still nearby.

Directly to the west of the prairie are montane shrublands climbing a rocky ridge. This was where we were headed, but only after I had sufficiently distracted my friend away from visiting a centipede.

The trail turned steep enough to slow some mountain bikers down to our walking pace. The reward for making the vigorous hike up were views of high peaks to the west and prairies below on both sides of the ridge. Up here, I needed no coaxing from Tori to stop, relax and enjoy the scenery.

Going back down and return-

ing to the car was another story.

My friend once again wanted to say hello to every prairie dog in existence. But this time—due to getting much closer to them—I was able to clearly make out their 10-inch, cinnamon-colored bodies, their beady eyes, and their tiny paws.

Several cupped their paws next to their mouths, as if to drink out them. I even saw two that were positively kissing each other.

I could now understand my hiking partner's fetish for these rodents: They were awfully cute little fellas. ☺☺☺

Felix Wong is an avid outdoors enthusiast in Fort Collins. His personal blog is at felixwong.com and he can be reached at fcw@felixwong.com.