

Greenway Foundation's Overland Pond Rises From The Reclaimed Riverside

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by **Paul Kashmann**

With a rich history dating back to the days of Denver's founding on the banks of the Platte River, the Overland neighborhood claims boundaries of W. Mississippi Ave. South to W. Yale Ave., and Broadway west to the Platte River.



A GROUP OF LOCAL 5TH GRADERS EXPLORE OVERLAND POND BY BOAT on a crisp fall day, hoping to spot some of the wide variety of wildlife that call the park home, while learning about the history of the pond and the ecology of the surrounding landscape. Photo: J.J. Clark

T'was a day that mention of the Overland community brought raised eyebrows and concerned looks. The one-time home to radioactive remains of the Shattuck Chemical Company and other radium processors, Overland today has been well-cleaned of past sins, and now exists as a quiet community in the midst of a three-pronged revitalization of its housing stock, commercial properties and considerable natural resources. Among the hidden jewels of Overland's civic crown, Overland Pond lies just west of the larger and more visible body of water collecting golf balls from the AquaGolf driving range at Overland municipal golf course. Unless you've been searching for it, chances are you haven't noticed this 1.7-acre wildlife habitat on the north side of Florida Ave., just east of Platte River Dr.

Born as remains of a once-active gravel pit that provided material for local road beds as well as fill for the Valley Highway (I-25), the pond and surrounding habitat that exists today was the 1980s brainchild of the late Merle Grimes. As a UCD graduate student in landscape design, Grimes had the idea for an ecological education park that would bring together a broad range of Colorado's eco-zones in one location.

In 1986, having taken a position with the Greenway Foundation, Grimes put his ideas into action, spearheading creation of the Overland Pond habitat that would become the first natural area reclamation project along the Platte River Greenway.

Today, locals of all ages relax around the pond, fishing, listening to the birds and hoping to get a glimpse of the variety of other wildlife – fox, beaver, skunk, snakes, raccoons and turtles – that call the area home.

Fulfilling Grimes' original mission, thousands of local students visit the pond each year. SPREE, the educational arm of the Platte River Greenway Foundation, brings all Denver Public Schools 5th graders either to nearby Grant Frontier Park or Overland Pond Park each year, and other school districts in the area make use of the pond for a variety of environmental programs.

Ronnie Crawford is a fisherman and resident of the Overland neighborhood. He takes pride in the pond (and adjacent Platte River to the north) he spends time fishing in, as well as in his role as a loyal volunteer, donating time and labor to clear brush, move stones and any number of other chores required to maintain the civic resource.

"It's in my neighborhood," Crawford declared, "and a river runs through it. How about that?" He explained that the lentic/lotic combination of a warm water pond adjacent to a cool water river makes for a rare opportunity for avid fishermen.

"You could expect catfish, bass, bluegills or walleye pike in a pond like this (which is currently stocked with trout), and the river would be ideal for all kinds of trout." Currently, the pond's depth is only 7 feet at its deepest point. Crawford would like to see it deepened closer to 20 feet, to allow for more species and larger fish.

He also touts efforts to clean up and maintain access to the Platte River as well as the concrete path that winds along its banks.

Casey Davenport is project coordinator for Overland Pond Stewardship Partners. She became interested in Overland Pond in 1997 through her work with Mayor Wellington Webb's South Platte River Commission. "Mayor Webb had declared it 'The Year of the South Platte River,'" said Davenport. "Some \$12 million of Great Outdoors Colorado funds became available for improvements to and along the Greenway.

"In all the meetings we sat in, and on all the requests for funding we considered, we heard, 'We're doing this for the kids.' And truth be told, at that point it wasn't a good picture to show anyone about how we were respecting the river."

Davenport credits the increased attention paid to the pond and the Platte River to the Overland Park Neighborhood Association (OPNA). "None of this would have gotten done without their interest and commitment."

Davenport places OPNA at the head of the lengthy ad hoc roster of agencies making up the Overland Pond Stewardship Partners. "The Urban Drainage and Flood Control District are really unsung heroes, and the Audubon Birders have been keeping track of the comings and goings along that stretch of the Platte since 1995."

The Greenway Foundation, the Athmar Park neighborhood, Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Trout Unlimited and Denver Parks and Recreation all make her list of "couldn't have done it without you," as well as a group of dedicated high school students who spent the summer volunteering on park reclamation projects and four students from UCD who helped develop a list of park priorities for future attention.

A major windfall brought needed funding to Overland Pond in 2009, when Davenport was able to obtain a \$120,000 grant from a Natural Resources Claims Fund set aside by the owners of the Shattuck Chemical Company site to help mitigate the damage it had perpetrated upon the local watershed. "The original park plantings dated back to Merle's work in the 1980s," said Davenport. "They were looking pretty bad." The funds allowed for construction of a small stone amphitheater on the south bank of the lake – designed by the UCD team – plant restoration and replanting, and paid for an inventory of the plant and wildlife assets in the park, so they could be tracked over time.

In a recessionary economy when many governments are cutting critical services to make ends meet, the Overland Pond Park project stands as an example of what can be accomplished through public will.

As Crawford puts it, "If people need something to feel good about, this is a real good place to come."

For more information, call Davenport at 303-345-1675 or visit <http://www.greenwayfoundation.org>.

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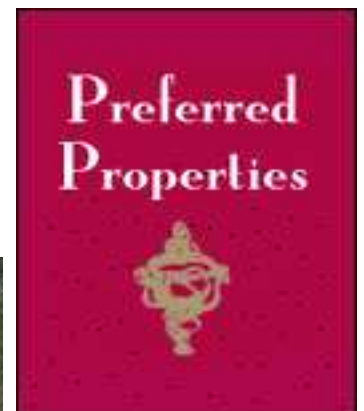
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OVERLAND POND AND THE ADJACENT SOUTH PLATTE RIVER make for a rare haven for fishing enthusiasts and nature lovers alike. Ronnie Crawford is a frequent face at this hidden jewel located north of Overland Park Golf Course, just east of Platte River Drive. Crawford not only enjoys the varied wildlife, but spends a good deal of time and energy as one of the volunteers who have transformed the one-time gravel pit, now Overland Pond, into a multi-faceted public amenity.

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