

## **Welcome to Soapstone Prairie**

**By Suzy Riding, Soapstone Prairie Natural Area Gate Attendant**

"It's like the feeling you get when you first fall in love...it's that special!" said a visitor who experienced Soapstone Prairie Natural Area on a volunteer-led tour. Many visitors, staff, and rangers felt the same way when they experienced waves of peaceful prairie grass, the quiet gait of a pronghorn herd, the history of the Lindenmeier archeological site and the remoteness of this treasured natural area.

My home, since early June, has been the gate attendant station at Soapstone Prairie which is about 25 miles north of Fort Collins, and five miles south of the Wyoming border. From the gate station, in between two ancient prairie buttes, I can see the dust fly from the wheels of visitors several miles away as they travel towards the entrance. Wide-eyed and eager, they inch up toward the gate station window in anticipation. My cheerful "welcome to Soapstone Prairie!" is always met with a grin and an enthusiastic search for more information. Soapstone opened to the public on June 6, 2009 and since opening, visitors have come from as far away as South America, Europe, Australia, Canada and the east coast. Visitors came from California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. And we got local visitors too, from Cheyenne, Denver, Boulder, Colorado Springs and the northern Front Range. Many people have read about Soapstone Prairie, heard about it, or sometimes have just found themselves drawn to it through a sense of adventure and mishap while exploring. None leave without a complete and absolute fascination from their experience.

Soapstone Prairie offers trails to challenge rider's skill, a path for quiet reflection and more. Members of the Overland Mountain Bike Patrol came each week to ride "The Loop," history buffs came to connect with the past under the shade of the Lindenmeier overlook, geology students, wildflower aficionados and bird enthusiasts were drawn to the Towhee and Mahogany trails. Other visitors found solitude deep into the ranchland prairie on the Pronghorn Trail. During the summer months several parties came to celebrate a milestone or a birthday in the warmth of the picnic tables at the North Trailhead. On sunny afternoons so many cowboy hat and chaps outfitted equestrians lined the Cheyenne Rim Trail that I watched them in fascination from my west facing window. I felt I was witnessing images from the past- or was it the heat? Some people came to learn, cars lined the entrance station up to 6 and 7 deep, to catch a "Discovering the Lindenmeier Site" or "What's so Special About Soapstone?" educational program given by volunteer Master Naturalists or staff.

Visitors wanted to know everything from "...what are those big anthills?" and "why does that snake lay in the road?", to "...HOW high are we up here?". Because the number one question of visitors was, "What are the big purple flowers?", Master Naturalist, Lynn Rubright, created and updated the bi-weekly Soapstone Wildflower List. The remote location of Soapstone spurred many questions related to distance. "Where is the nearest gas station?", "...the nearest restroom?", and "how far are we from Wyoming?" was often asked.

At the end of their visit, energized from a ride, educational program or hike, many visitors would stop by the gate to give me a thumbs-up or a wonderful comment about Soapstone Prairie. I feel so fortunate to have been a part of the very first season of Soapstone Prairie. The season and this special place are a success because of the foresight of voters who choose to support land conservation with dedicated sales tax dollars, the vision of city managers and the dedication and hard work of the Natural Areas Program rangers, staff, and volunteers. The success of Soapstone Prairie is evident in the smiling faces and exuberant cries from the visitors as they inch their way toward the entry station, "...I made it! I'm here! I'm finally here!" they say. Welcome to Soapstone Prairie!