

Off the beaten path

By Brian Kaufman

25 things to KNOW

An inside look at Fort Vasquez near Platteville.
Photo by Brian Kaufman

Take a little time to discover some of Northern Colorado's best-kept secrets

Rather than stick with the tried and true, consider expanding your list of must-see spots with these hidden gems.

22. FORT VASQUEZ There's a piece of Colorado history sitting on the median of U.S. Highway 85 near Platteville. Fort Vasquez is an authentic adobe fort, rebuilt on the original historic site.

In 1835, Louis Vasquez and Andrew Sublette built a fur-trading center on the South Platte River, six miles from Fort St. Vrain. The site became a key trading site for Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians, who offered hides and pelts for blankets, kitchen necessities and whiskey.

The original structure was a 100-foot square adobe fort with 12-foot tall corner towers. The walls circled the living quarters, a barn and storage rooms. By 1841, however, the demand for beaver pelts had dropped, and Vasquez and Sublette

sold the business.

A year later, Indians destroyed the fort. Parts of Fort Vasquez were rebuilt to give shelter to settlers and mail carriers in the following decades, but by the dawn of the 20th century, all that remained of the fort was the foundation and a few feet of adobe wall.

The acre around the fort's ruins was deeded to the Weld County Commissioners in 1934. WPA crews rebuilt the walls using the original bricks. In the 1960s, archaeologists and students excavated the site, finding more than 4,000 artifacts while uncovering the original interior wall foundations.

The site is now a museum, operated by the Colorado Historical Society. Exhibits inform visitors about the fur trade period. The museum also features a bookstore on related topics. The fort is open from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and from 1-4:30 p.m. on Sundays. Admission

and parking are free. Call 970-785-2832.

23. GATEWAY PARK Looking for a great place to picnic? A beautiful slice of mountain and river, away from highway bustle, yet easy to reach? A place for hikers and fishing enthusiasts, boaters and nature lovers?

You can find all that and more at Gateway Park on the Poudre Canyon Highway just five miles from Ted's Place on U.S. Highway 287. Built with help from organizations such as the Friends of the Poudre, the Poudre Canyon Group of the Sierra Club and the local Audubon Society, Gateway is a multi-use day area that has something for everyone.

The park's driveway entrance drops down through a cut in the rock to a secluded area of the river. There are plenty of recreational opportunities, including a designated boating area, fishing and a selection of trails.



A wooden sculpture found at Gateway Park.
Photo by Brian Kaufman

A recent addition to the park is the Black Powder Trail, a three-quarter mile hiking trail that was built over a two-day period by 250 volunteers. The trail is rated moderate to difficult, with an elevation gain of 500 feet. The trail was named for the gunpowder hidden by French trappers along the "Cache la Poudre River" in the 1800s. A second, quarter-mile nature trail is available for less strenuous hiking.

The park grounds are decorated with riprap walls, gravel trails and natural mountain plant life. The park features covered picnic shelters complete with grills. Rolling grass meadows offer plenty of room for Frisbee. Leashed pets are welcome.

Parking fee is \$4 car, \$8 for vans, buses and campers. Gateway is open year round.

24. KODAK WATCHABLE WILDLIFE AREA

Looking for a natural oasis just a baseball throw from Windsor? Take a ride three miles south of town on U.S. Highway 257 to the Kodak Watchable Wildlife Area. The parking area sits on the edge of the highway, but traffic sounds disappear 50 yards down the trail and are replaced by bird songs and the slow gurgle of the Poudre.

The area serves as an example of habitat restoration and preservation, as well as an example of the cooperation

between the Colorado Division of Wildlife and private enterprise in protecting wildlife. The 40-acre site was established by Kodak's Colorado Division as a part of the company's commitment to environmental stewardship.

The one-mile trail runs alongside a lazy stretch of the Poudre River. The combination of grasses, trees and underbrush offers a natural habitat to waterfowl and flocks of migrant birds. Trees include cottonwoods, Russian-olives and willows. Local birdwatchers have reported a wide variety of birds on the trail. Fall sightings included a Townsends Warbler and a Plumbeous Vireo.

A hint for birdwatchers: just north of the parking lot, across the highway, a pond is visible on Eastman Kodak property. During the winter, the pond fills shore-to-shore with geese.

The area is perfect for hiking, wildlife spotting and photography, or just quiet contemplation. Leashed pets are welcome. Visitors must have a Wildlife Habitat Stamp—available wherever hunting and fishing licenses are sold.

25. LYONS CLASSIC PINBALL

Attention pinball wizards! You don't have to die to go to "heaven." You can find heaven in Lyons. Part arcade and part time machine, Lyons Classic Pinball is a paradise stocked with vintage pinball games.

Carole and Kevin Carroll opened Lyons Classic Pinball in 2003. The arcade features 36 classic pinball machines. "I enjoy seeing the expression on people's faces once they walk through the door," Kevin says. "Some are rediscovering pin-



Take a hike at Kodak Watchable Wildlife Area.
Photo by Brian Kaufman

ball for the first time in years." Younger players are intrigued by the games that once captured their parents' quarters.

The idea for the arcade came from a birthday gift. Carole bought the Kiss pinball machine for Kevin. "After that, I was taken over by all things pinball," he says.

Kevin does much of the upkeep on the machines, though he relies on Tom Grobe, his repairman, for the more difficult work. The machines are serviced every two to three weeks to keep them in top shape. "A broken flipper on a dark, dirty game makes no fans. It all has to work 100% or else it stinks," Kevin says.

The Carrolls also opened Lyons Classic Video next door to the arcade. It features 27 classic video arcade games.

Arcade rooms can be reserved for private parties and both arcades are a few steps away from Lyons' oldest brewpub and grill, Oskar Blues.

Located at 339-A Main St., Lyons Classic Pinball is open from 5-10 p.m. Thursdays, 3-11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3-9 p.m. Sundays. For information, call 303-823-6100 or visit lyonspinball.com.



Lyons Classic Pinball owners Kevin and Carole Carroll.
Photo by Brian Kaufman