



# *Guide to the* **High Line Canal Trail**

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The workers who built the High Line Canal more than a century ago didn't envision that people would be using their ambitious irrigation project as a recreational outlet in the midst of a busy urban area. In fact, to the builders of the 71-mile High Line, the canal was solely a commercial idea to bring South Platte River water to settlers and farmers following a gold rush in 1859 near the confluence of the South Platte and Cherry Creek. Although the canal has become an emerald strand of natural beauty through a bustling metropolitan area, its original intent was to entice settlers headed west to stop, grow crops and create communities on the high plains at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. While the High Line, which is owned and operated by Denver Water, still supplies farmers and other users, its adjacent service road has become a path for hikers, joggers, cyclists, equestrians, bird watchers and others who yearn for a slice of the outdoors in the middle of a city.

When it was completed in 1883, the canal, though a marvel of Victorian-era engineering, was no more than a glorified ditch that

connected the mountains to the dry prairie. As time went on, the canal contributed, by design, to the fields, lawns, gardens and golf courses of those who had an official stake in the canal's water and, by chance, to the verdant growth along its banks. Somewhat leaky, the High Line waters trees and plants, recharges aquifers and has spawned an entire ecosystem of its own as it meanders from Waterton Canyon southwest of Denver to its destination on the plains northeast of the city.



*Crews place concrete in the floor slab of the High Line Canal Canyon Flume in this 1934 photo.*

Until about 40 years ago, the High Line Canal was off limits to the public. It was an irrigation ditch and nothing more. But it had started to look more and more like a cool, natural and inviting stream. As giant



cottonwoods, willows, wild junipers and goldenrods volunteered in profusion, so did pressure grow from residents of the city and the suburbs to fully use the canal. In 1970, Denver Water lifted its restrictions on the canal and began a series of agreements with municipal agencies to maintain and safeguard the facility as a recreational trail.

Today, more than 500,000 people annually use the path, designated as a National Landmark Trail. There's much to do and see. Surveys



*This 1935 photo shows the High Line Canal carrying 275 cubic feet of water per second.*

show that 199 species of birds, 28 mammals, 15 reptiles and all sorts of flora call the High Line home. This booklet is not only a guide for the High Line's trail, but also a road map to its geography and history.

## General Information

- **Operation:** Denver Water operates the canal from spring through fall to satisfy calls by lease holders for South Platte River water. The canal doesn't run continuously in the summer and is dry in the fall and winter. The water isn't drinkable, so carry your own beverage.
- **Safety:** The canal's depth ranges from 2 to 7 feet deep with a strong current. Swimming, tubing, boating and other water activities are strictly prohibited. The public is urged to stay on the path and keep away from the facility's pipes and headgates. Only authorized agencies are allowed to operate motorized vehicles on the trail.
- **Grade:** Generally, the canal is an easy, almost flat walk, dropping 2 feet each mile.
- **Access:** The trail is open to walking, jogging, cycling and, in certain stretches, horses.

Sharp, nasty thorns called goat heads are strewn along the trail during the fall and winter. These aptly named seeds can penetrate bike tires, so carry a spare tube and patch kit. Otherwise, leave the goat head in your tire until you get home. The tire likely will stay inflated until you can make repairs.

- ***Distance:*** Distances along the trail are measured by mile markers posted by the High Line Canal Preservation Association on the mountainside of the canal. The markers are the reference points for this guide. The occasional yellow or orange pipes demarcate Denver Water property.

