COLORADO
WILDERNESS ACT

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Sewemup Mesa

Overview

Colorado is home to some of the most unique and treasured landscapes in the country, and for many residents, these outdoor spaces are what make life here so special.

A recent survey by Colorado College found that over 70 percent of Colorado's residents participate in some sort of outdoor recreational activity each year. And most Coloradans surveyed agree that one of Congress' top priorities this year should be working to permanently protect our state's public lands for future generations to enjoy.

"Colorado is known for its treasured landscapes and abundance of natural resources. Protecting our public lands is not only essential to our state's overall economy, it's essential to preserving our renowned way of life."
– Rep. Diana DeGette

Colorado's public lands provide more than just a unique place to visit, they are a major economic driver for our state's economy.

According to the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade, **Colorado's outdoor recreation industry generates $28 billion in consumer spending each year in our state and supports 229,000 jobs.**

Without our public lands, this massive industry would not exist. And to ensure that some of Colorado's most treasured landscapes remain protected – and available – for generations to come, U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette (D-CO) is introducing legislation – known as the **Colorado Wilderness Act of 2019** – to permanently protect more than 740,000 acres of land located in 33 distinct areas across the state.

If approved, DeGette's bill would designate these 33 specific areas as federally-protected wilderness, giving them the highest-level of permanent protection available. Once designated as wilderness, DeGette's legislation would ensure these areas remain available – an untouched – for many years to come.

Colorado currently has more than 3,500,000 acres of land designated as wilderness. This land, however, is mostly at higher elevations and includes many of the alpine landscapes for which Colorado is so famous for.

Many of the 33 areas included in DeGette's bill are mid-elevation ecosystems that provide valuable habitats for a staggering variety of plants and wildlife – and that have often been overlooked by previous Congressional efforts to designate new wilderness areas in the state.

The Benefits of Wilderness

Backcountry Recreation

- Wilderness provides a diverse and unique range of landscapes – free of any motorized vehicles or commercial development – for hikers, equestrians, rafters, kayakers, hunters, anglers, mountaineers and climbers to enjoy.

Economic Benefits

- Wilderness pays dividends for nearby local communities. Protected public lands increase nearby property values, help attract new businesses and residents, and support direct tourism businesses. Outdoor recreation generates $28 billion in consumer spending each year for our state and is responsible for 229,000 jobs that pay $9.7 billion in salaries and wages.

Biological Diversity

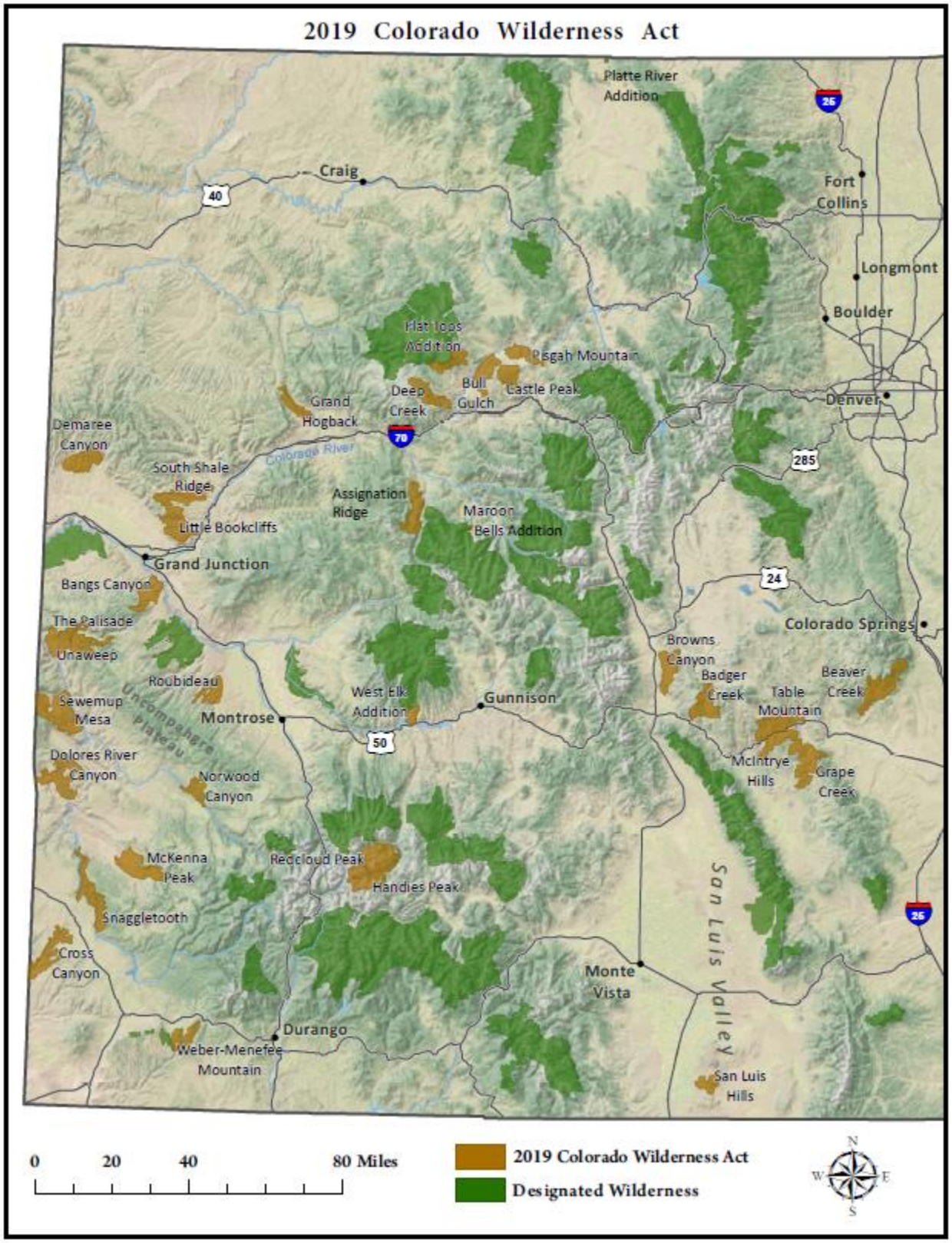
- Untouched wilderness areas provide undisturbed refuge to rare and endangered species. Many endangered species, such as the canyon tree frog, kit fox, kachina daisy and sage grouse depend on these areas for their survival. They also provide critical winter range for big game herds of elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep.

Clean Water

- Wilderness helps maintain the quality of our rivers and drinking water by protecting watersheds from damaging activities that often remove vegetation, erode topsoil and leach minerals into our streams.

Hikers a Little Bookcliffs Proposed Wilderness (left); Snaggletooth Proposed Wilderness (right)

Map of Proposed Protections



Proposed Protection Areas

The Colorado Wilderness Act of 2019 encompasses **741,000** acres of public land managed primarily by the Bureau of Land Management. The specific proposed protection areas include:

Assignation Ridge – 25,232 acres
Assignation Ridge is home to a diverse wildlife population including elk, bear, mountain lion, wild turkey and others, as well as providing much of the regions domestic and agricultural supply. The area is lush with cottonwood, ponderosa pine, scrub oak, pinyon-juniper, Douglas fir, and aspen, all of which wildlife call home. It is a popular spot for recreational activities including hiking, ice and rock climbing, and skiing.

Badger Creek – 25,192 acres
Badger Creek is perhaps most notable because of the lack of human impact. The people who do make it to Badger Creek find a pristine habitat for bighorn sheep, black bears, mountain lions, and a litany of other species that live in the shadows of the Sangre de Cristo range. The area also serves as winter forage and winter range for the bald eagle. In addition, as one of very few spring-fed waterways in Colorado, Badger Creek provides consistent moisture to the ecosystem and supports a healthy population of trout and a happy population of fishermen.

Badger Creek (Photo Credit: Kate Spinelli)

Bangs Canyon – 20,996 acres
High desert plateaus and canyons form the landscape of this proposed area. It is increasingly hard to find impressive wild recreation areas in such close proximity to an urban center, but Bangs Canyon remains one of those treasures just outside of Grand Junction. The area offers views of red rock mesas and, at the right time, blooming cacti. Among the species of cacti is the Uinta basin hookless cactus, which is endemic to the area and receives protection under the

Endangered Species Act. The land also supports bighorn sheep and its waters support rainbow trout.

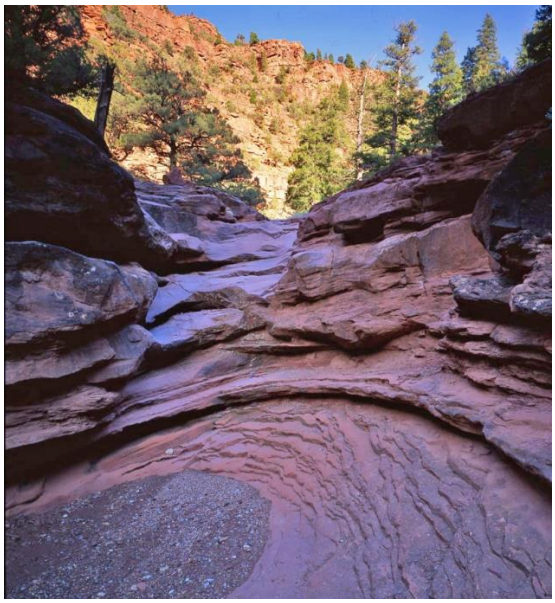
Beaver Creek – 38,253 acres
Beaver Creek, positioned within the Pikes Peak Massif area, is nestled among a number of wilderness areas and state parks. The biodiversity of the area ranges from junipers at lower levels to Douglas fir, aspen, and ponderosa at higher elevations. The creek runs year-round and provides recreation opportunities to residents of nearby Colorado Springs and surrounding communities. A characteristic feature is the two canyons of the East and West Beaver Creeks, which come together at the edge of the area.

Browns Canyon – 22,654 acres
Browns Canyon, in addition to being a popular location for recreational activities such as hiking, fishing, and rafting, is also important for paleo-climatological research. Due to changes in the climate and other events, a variety of endemic plant life such as, Brandegee's buckwheat, Fendler's Townsend-daisy, Fendler's cloak-fern, Livermore fiddle-leaf, and Front Range alumroot. Additionally, the area is rich with animal species of all varieties including raptors like peregrine falcons, prairie falcons, and golden eagles, as well as mammals such as mountain lions, bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer, bobcat, red and gray fox, black bear coyote, and several others. There is also a multitude of birds, insects, reptiles, and amphibians, making Browns Canyon a hotspot of biodiversity.

Browns Canyon (Photo Credit: Bob Wick)

Bull Gulch – 20,171 acres
The landscape of Bull Gulch demonstrates the Colorado River's beautiful transition from alpine forests to desert canyons. While the Colorado River never crosses into the area, it provides the defining boundary. Sandstone formations dominate the scenic horizon of an area known for populations of sage grouse, elk, and mountain lion. The area also serves birders interested in

bald eagles and prairie falcons. In addition to the natural beauty, the area offers culturally relevant sites such as ancient campgrounds with lithic scatter.



Bull Gulch (Photo Credit: Jon Fielder)

Castle Peak – 16,230 acres
With elevations ranging from 8,400 to more than 11,000 feet, this area features dramatic mountain scenery and a breadth and depth of conservation and recreation potential. Because it receives more precipitation than many areas in Colorado, Castle Peak is able to provide forage for both cattle grazing and healthy populations of elk and deer. The elk and deer in turn provide ample hunting opportunities that are accessible to the Front Range, as this area is just miles from Interstate 70. Recreation is not limited to hunting; trails wind their way through the area for hikers and horseback riders.

Cross Canyon – 26,776 acres
The contrast of rising mesas and steep canyons outline the scenery in Cross Canyon. The area features pinyon-juniper woodlands and a full slate of birds, including sage and jays. But beyond its natural beauty, Cross Canyon deserves recognition because of its historical and cultural significance. The area was inhabited by the Anasazi people between 450 and 1300 and their presence is well-preserved in Cross Canyon. In fact, the area has the densest collection of cultural artifacts anywhere in America. In some parts, there are over 100 sites per square mile.

Deep Creek – 20,742 acres
Deep Creek's claim to fame is the largest cave complex in the western United States. But the caves should not overshadow many other elements of natural beauty present in Deep Creek. The area has canyons with depths of over 2,000 feet, along with other cliffs and outcroppings. The area has attracted attention as a lower-elevation watershed that remains relatively ecologically intact.

Demaree Canyon – 25,897 acres
The rugged canyons of this area are some of the most intricate and interesting geology of Western Colorado. A combination of sandstone, clay, and shales, create a dazzling area of colors. The arid ecosystem supports mule deer, and predators including mountain lions, bobcat, and coyotes. This secluded area is perfect for people looking to experience solitude in the wilderness.

Dolores River Canyon – 34,867 acres
The Dolores River Canyon boasts towering red cliffs that shepherd the Dolores River before its confluence with the Colorado River. At points, the canyon rim rises more than 1,000 feet above the river. Important species, including the endangered peregrine falcon, the golden and bald eagles, and the river otter call the area home. In early summer, several thousand rafters come through Dolores Canyon, and other recreationists include hikers and kayakers.

Flat Tops Addition – 16,305 acres
The Flat Tops encompasses a multitude of different types of terrain. From sweeping valleys to sharp peaks, the Flat Tops area is a stunning Colorado emblem that incorporates the best of what Colorado nature has to offer. With over lakes and ponds sprinkled throughout the area, it is a popular destination for fishing. The mountains that comprise Flat Tops today are a result of ancient volcanic activity that has had a lasting impact on the area. The land itself is home to moose, elk, and deer and is an area that is also rich in the diversity of its vegetation.

Grand Hogback – 11,291 acres
As the dividing geological feature between Colorado's Plateau and the beginning of the southern Rocky Mountains, the Grand Hogback lives up to its name. The ridge provides the perfect environment for both the adventure-seeker and wildlife, supporting a thriving ski community and flourishing elk population. The Grand Hogback is one of the only geomorphic features of its kind in North America, its continuity and distinctive ridges make it a valued natural phenomenon.

Grape Creek – 35,535 acres
Grape Creek is a secluded and serene body of water that flows into the Wet Mountain Valley of southern Colorado. This creek is responsible for nearly all the snowmelt that comes through this valley, creating a lush habitat with diverse vegetation and wildlife. Grape Creek above all is a destination for fisherman. It has few points of access, and can be successfully fished throughout numerous seasons due to the low elevation of the Valley. These factors create a pristine environment that is a haven for both fish and fisherman alike, a true example of sustainable Colorado recreation.

Handies Peak – 26,557 acres
With breathtaking vistas and an impressive elevation of 14,048 feet at the summit, the Handies Peak Wilderness area is one of Colorado's crowning gems. As the area boasts of a trademark fourteener, glacial ponds, canyons, and waterfalls its geomorphic individuality is indisputable. Beyond the impressive land features however, the area is also home to a diverse crop of

vegetation and wildlife. This wildlife is including but not limited to elk, black bear, deer, and bighorn sheep. Animals are not the only ones who flock to Handies, as adventures come from all over to revel in and enjoy the beauty of this Colorado wonder.

Handies Peak (Photo Credit: Bob Wick)

Little Bookcliffs – 29,045 acres

As the only Wild Horse Range in Colorado Plateau province, the Little Bookcliffs Range is clearly unique. Beyond just a sanctuary for wild horses, this land is home to an array of wildlife. Animals such as deer, bobcats, mountain lions, elk and bears all inhabit the stunning Colorado Plateau. Characterized by its sweeping vistas that are dotted with numerous types of vegetation but particularly the juniper plant, the Little Book Cliffs Wild Horse Range is a beautiful and functional paradise in northwest Colorado.

Maroon Bells Addition – 312 acres

The Maroon Bells are noted to be the most photographed place in all of Colorado. Photographs however, are unable to truly capture the majesty of this geologic wonder. The results of 300 million years of geologic erosion, the Bells are works of art that have inspired adventurers for generations. With 14,000 foot peaks and reflective glacial pools the Maroon Bells are an ideal destination for fisherman, hikers, and anyone who enjoys a beautiful view. The valley hosts a variety of animals such as moose and deer. The area is a stunning landscape that encapsulates Colorado's natural wonder, the staggering peaks, clear water, and fields of wildflowers all drawing people from near and far. This addition on Eagle Mountain will help define the existing wilderness along topographical contours.

McIntyre Hills – 17,213 aces
Rugged and underdeveloped natural land is becoming rare in the modern world. The McIntyre Hills area is an exception. It has remained relatively untouched, and consists mostly of semiarid vegetation. The dense nature of the vegetation makes this land an attractive destination for cross country hikers, horseback riders, and backpackers. The area also is home to a distinct array of wildlife that includes elk, black bear, mountain lion, and wild turkey. Geologically, McIntyre Hills features continuous area of canyons and rolling hills.

McKenna Peak – 33,114 acres
The McKenna Peak Proposed Wilderness area is a distinctive and stunning feature of Colorado's landscape. The vista boasts a photo-worthy sandstone peak that rises an impressive 2,000 feet directly above the plains. Surrounded by eroded adobe and other sediments localized to the southwestern region, the land itself is a treasure to paleontologists who have found fossils within its soil. It is host to a number of animal species, including elk, antelopes, mountain lion, and the majestic bald eagle. The Proposed Wilderness Area offers sharp changes in elevation from the plains to the peak, enabling all sorts of adventure activities within this diverse and striking area.

Norwood Canyon – 12,986 acres
With majestic views of the La Sal Utah Mountains, the Norwood Canyon serves as one of Colorado's best rafting sites. The San Miguel River rushes through the canyon, passing through momentous granite passageways and past sandstone towers. The rapids are beloved by adventurers and explorers and home to a variety of aquatic creatures. The area serves as the only western Colorado riparian woodland with water birch as the main component. Norwood canyon is a unique gem distinctive for its "ledge" cliffs and lush landscape.

Pisgah Mountain – 14,538 acres
The rugged, wild terrain known as Pisgah Mountain in Central Colorado is perfect for visitors yearning to explore the areas rich history of gold mining or lush landscape. Once home to the Ute tribe, the mountain now includes two grazing allotments. Despite the grazing facilities, the land remains quite remote with expansive wild mammals and thriving vegetation. The soil is some of the state's most fertile due to the mountain's location in the Central Colorado Volcanic Field. Home to some of the state's most prized scenic views, Pisgah Mountain is emblematic of Colorado in its most natural form with flourishing wildlife, breathtaking views, and a rich plant-life.

Platte River Addition – 31 acres
This small addition to the existing Platte River Wilderness would preserve the North Gate Canyon. This scenic, rushing whitewater canyon is popular among rafters and fisherman. The area is primarily steep, rocky hillside covered by Douglas fir, pinyon-juniper, and sagebrush.

Redcloud Peak – 38,176 acres
With an elevation just over 14,000 feet and as one of Colorado's famous fourteeners, Redcloud Peak yields stunning views of red-topped peaks and lush green valleys. The peak, regarded as

one of Colorado's quintessential mountain views, connects by saddle to its sister mountain, the Sunshine Peak. The Umcompahgre fritillary butterfly, an endangered species, has been found to only exist on the Redcloud and Uncampahgre peaks in Colorado. The land hides many other treasures, including aquafers providing locals with drinkable water. Along with many other animals, the peaks are famously home to a thriving population of big-horn sheep.

Redcloud Peak

Roubideau – 17,660 acres
Home to a striking array of animals, the Roubideau lower desert canyon is rich in wildlife. The diverse assortment includes black bears, deer, bobcats, mountain lions, and golden eagles. This ecologically dense region includes rare vistas, riparian areas, and occasional streams. The red and orange rock is covered in expansive foliage, providing visitors with breathtaking views. The land spans from the Sonoran desert to the subalpine forest, enriching the canyon with a massive variety of plant and animal life as well as unique geomorphic structures.

San Luis Hills – 10,871 acres
The San Luis Hills are rolling hills in the middle of the otherwise flat and arid San Luis Valley. The dry climate limits vegetation, but it is enough to sustain wildlife including deer and antelope as well as a variety of songbirds and raptors. The hills boast breathtaking views that attract hikers, climbers, and horseback riders. Keen eyes often spot the Sage Sparrow, a common patron of the always-blue Colorado Sky.

Sewemup Mesa – 45,220 acres
With stunning views of the Dolores River cradled by steep sandstone, the Sewemup Mesa is a beloved favorite of hikers. Surrounded by 1,000 foot cliffs on three sides, the mesa is covered in towering Ponderosa pines. The land, home to elk, mountain lions deer, provides much-needed nesting areas for the Golden eagle and endangered Peregrine falcon. In the winter, bald eagles swarm to the cliffs edges to create nests from the Ponderosa pine needles. Sewemup Mesa's majestic views, thriving foliage, and spiky cliffs are deeply valued by nature lovers and explorer.

Snaggletooth – 31,752 acres
Snaggletooth, a launching area for backpackers heading into the Chemehuevi Mountains, is a multifunctional outdoor arena. The area serves hikers, horseback riders, and campers, providing all guests with exquisite views of the mountainous surrounding region. Referred to as the "Southwest Secret" of Colorado, the area includes lushes meadows of wildflowers, the commanding Dolores River, rocky Ponderosa Gorge. Snaggletooth is famous to visitors for its wild rapids that are sure to give visitors a thrilling adventure.

South Shale Ridge – 27,517 acres
As a maze of canyons, the South Shale Ridge is intricate and unique by nature's design. Cherished by hikers for its distinctive geomorphic structures, the land is home to America's national bird, the bald eagle. Referred to as one of Mesa City's Natural Wonders, the South Shale Ridge hosts many endangered plants on the floor of the canyon. The canyon walls are a pristine example of sedimentary layering, perfect for rock-enthusiasts exploring the region. The native foliage is typically low to the ground and is home to small mammals living among the crevasses in the rock.

Table Mountain – 27,719 acres
Together with McIntyre Hills to the south, Table Mountain comprises one of the steepest Arkansas River canyons. Table Mountain acts as a wildlife corridor along the Arkansas River and to other regions to its north, and it also serves as the home and nesting ground to a variety of raptors, including bald eagles in the winter. There is also a broad array of habitat in the area of Table Mountain including arid shrubland, woodlands, and meadows. This allows a variety of animal life to inhabit the area including the aforementioned raptors, as well as bighorn sheep, mountain lion, coyote, elk, deer, rattlesnake, among others. The area also offers opportunities for recreational activities such as hiking, horseback riding, and rock climbing.

Table Mountain (Photo Credit: Kate Spinelli)

The Palisade – 27,150 acres

Palisade, home to the rare Great Basin Silverspot butterfly, rests in the DeBeque Canyon along the Colorado River. The area offers magnificent views of both mountainous regions and the plains, making this the ideal location for hikers, climbers, and explorers. The region includes both desert and mountainous areas, including Ponderosa and Juniper forests. The valley area is shadowed by commanding red cliffs that tower above, exemplifying the beauty of sedimentary rock.

The Palisade (Photo Credit: John Fielder)

Unaweep – 20,420 acres
This area encompasses the deepest portions of Unaweep Canyon, with steep granite cliffs contributing to a dramatic elevation drops. Unaweep acreage benefits from a woodland mix of pinyon-juniper and aspens to create scenic vistas. The area is frequented by large wildlife such as black bears and mountain lion as well as deer and elk. Many outdoor enthusiasts value the area for its hiking, backpacking, and horseback riding opportunities.

Weber-Menefee Mountain – 14,339 acres
Renowned for its sandstone cliffs and widespread Juniper, Douglas Fir, Ponderosa, and Mountain Mahogany forests, the Weber-Menefee Mountain is a diverse landscape in Southwest Colorado. The land, practically untouched by modern-man, serves as a wildlife haven for deer, big-horn sheep, mountain lion, black bear, and many other woodland creatures. The Mexican Spotted Owl, a rare breed in North American, nests along the rugged hills. The mountain calls all adventurers to experience the scenic vistas, hiking, horseback-riding, exploring.

West Elk Addition – 6,846 acres

Located in Gunnison National Forest, the West Elk wilderness isn’t frequented by humans, except during the autumn hunting season, when there is an overabundance of elk and deer. Additionally, there are many valleys that contain ponds that are home to beavers and surrounded by trees. Given the secluded nature of the area, hiking and backpacking are another recreational activity popular in the West Elk Wilderness.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does the term “Wilderness” mean?
The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as "untrammeled by man" and "retaining its primeval character." Once designated as such, wilderness areas are protected for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such a manner that leaves them untouched for future generations to enjoy. Wilderness designation generally prohibit commercial activities, motorized access, and other human infrastructure, with some exceptions.

What is the history of the Colorado Wilderness Act?
The Colorado Wilderness Act began as the Citizen’s Wilderness Plan and was developed by a group of concerned citizens who inventoried lands across the state to identify pristine federal lands that could meet the criteria for a wilderness designation, if Congress was willing to act. This group of citizens gathered input from communities across the state and eventually presented their proposal to Rep. DeGette. DeGette, understanding the need to preserve Colorado’s public lands, took the group’s proposal and introduced it as a bill in Congress in 1999. While the proposal itself has been modified slightly over the years, DeGette’s commitment to getting it approved has never wavered – and she has reintroduced an identical or slightly revised version of the bill in every Congress since then.

Why these 33 areas?
The 33 areas included in the Colorado Wilderness Act of 2019 were selected after countless meetings Rep. DeGette has had over the years with residents and stakeholders - including off-highway vehicle groups, ranchers, mountain bikers, rock climbers, land management agencies, land owners, and local elected officials – to discuss their priorities and hear their concerns. Rep. DeGette has not only personally visited many of the places included in her bill, she’s held several public meetings on the plan to solicit feedback from all interested parties. DeGette has used that feedback to adjust her adjust her bill slightly over the years.

Is this the first time Rep. DeGette has introduced this bill?
No. Rep. DeGette has introduced the Colorado Wilderness Act in every Congress since 1999. But this is the first time that DeGette has received assurances from Congressional leaders that her bill will receive a hearing in the House Natural Resources Committee, which it has never received before and is a critical first step in moving the bill forward.

Why is protecting these areas so important?
The need for protecting these areas continues to grow as more and more people move to the state. From 2010 to 2018, Colorado's population has grown by nearly 700,000 people and there are now an estimated 5.7 million people who call our state home. Colorado’s growth rate was fourth in the nation during that time, and its access to public lands and available outdoor recreation activity is seen as a major reason why people continue to flock to the state.

Supporters

DeGette's Colorado Wilderness Act of 2019 is supported by leading local and national public lands groups, including:

- Sierra Club
- Conservation Colorado
- Wild Connections
- Outdoor Alliance
- San Juan Citizens Alliance
- Mountain West Strategies
- Colorado Mountain Club

Here's what some of those groups are saying about the bill:

"Colorado Mountain Club is pleased to see the re-introduction of the Colorado Wilderness Act which protects a variety of landscapes, from west-slope deserts to San Juan peaks, for natural resources and primitive recreation. The bill codifies some long-standing Wilderness Study areas in remote Northwest Colorado, as well as iconic mountain vistas in the Southwest part of the state." – ***Julie Mach, Conservation Director, Colorado Mountain Club***

"Wild Connections board and members are greatly pleased to see Congresswoman Diana DeGette reintroduce the Colorado Wilderness Act (CWA). These are primarily rugged and scenic lower-to-mid-elevation areas and ecosystems that are currently underrepresented in Colorado's wildernesses. All of the areas in the bill are most deserving of Wilderness designation. We are especially pleased that it would offer protection to the remarkable wild values found in six of the bill's proposed wildernesses in Eastern Colorado--Beaver Creek, Grape Creek, McIntyre Hills, Table Mountain, Badger Creek, and the Browns Canyon National Monument. With ever increasing development pressure on Colorado's wild lands, the protections afforded by the CWA become more valuable." – ***John Sztukowski, Conservation Director, Wild Connections***

"The Colorado Wilderness Act importantly offers protection to some of the wildest regions in Colorado that are also most at risk from the Trump Administration's relentless assault on America's public lands. I've been intensively engaged in advocacy on behalf of these wildlands for over 30 years, and have had the great privilege of visiting a number of these areas with Rep. DeGette." – ***Mark Pearson, Executive Director, San Juan Citizens Alliance (Durango)***

"Colorado's BLM lands mark a grand transition in the American landscape from the southern Rockies to the Colorado Plateau. Places like Roubideau, Castle Peak, and The Palisade are not only prime examples of high desert and canyon country, but critical wildlife habitat, and the kind of natural places that will only grow more critical over time. But only if we have the foresight and vision to protect them now. As someone who have live surrounded by, found solace in, and worked to defend and support these lands for over two decades, I remain committed to seeing

them protected by Congress. I applaud Rep. DeGette for her leadership, and for introducing this legislation today." – ***Pete Kolbenschlag, Mountain West Strategies***