

May, 2004



# WILDERNESS MATTERS

## Defending the “Forgotten Wilderness”

**F**or Roaring Fork Valley residents – both human and wild – western Colorado’s natural-gas boom is suddenly hitting closer to home.



*The Thompson Creek area from the air.*

On May 13, the Bureau of Land Management’s quarterly auction of mineral leases included three roadless parcels in the Thompson Creek and Reno Mountain areas, southwest of Carbondale. As was widely reported in the local media, the Wilderness Workshop and six other conservation groups filed a formal protest of the leases. The

sale went ahead anyway, but our protest triggered an automatic 30-day suspension while the BLM reconsiders the leases.

The sale got as much attention as it did largely thanks to the efforts of WW executive director Sloan Shoemaker, who

teamed up with Bruce Gordon of EcoFlight to organize overflights of the affected areas for local elected officials, reporters and ranchers.

Sloan’s efforts helped convince Pitkin County to file its own protest of the leases, which will arguably carry more weight with the BLM bureaucrats than ours. Getting a couple of ranchers to come on the flights also broadened the campaign’s base: ranchers don’t often side with enviros, but when they do it sends a powerful message.

Thompson Creek is becoming

a contentious symbol of the clash between industry-friendly federal energy policies and local environmental values. Forming a major part of a 125,000-acre roadless complex that has been dubbed Colorado’s “forgotten wilderness,” Thompson Creek contains the largest concentration of old-growth spruce-fir forest on the White River National Forest, and is considered some of the WRNF’s most important lynx habitat. The creek itself is a primary Colorado River cutthroat trout watershed, and has been design-

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## Wilderness: The Next 40 Years

**S**hort notice, this, but if you’re in the Roaring Fork Valley and it’s not yet 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, May 20, head on down to Aspen’s Paepcke Auditorium and check out “Wilderness: The Next 40 Years.”

This free event – the first in our “Wild for Good” series (see page 3) – will feature a panel discussion, a short video and a slide show with live bluegrass music.

Comprising the panel will be four distinguished wilderness experts: Michael Soulé, founder of the Society for Conservation Biology and the Wildlands Project; Martha Ketelle, supervisor of the White River National Forest; Vera Smith, conservation director for the Colorado Mountain Club; and Rob Peters, executive director of the

Western Slope Environmental Resource Council. WW executive director Sloan Shoemaker will moderate.

But wait, there’s more. The Trust for Public Land will screen a 10-minute video about the High Elk Corridor, the valley that lies between the Maroon Bells-Snowmass and Raggeds Wilderness Areas. The video was made by Snowmass filmmakers Chelsea Congdon and James Brundige, who produced the award-winning documentary “Subdivide and Conquer,” and are currently



*Biologist Michael Soulé is credited with doing more than any other living scientist for the cause of preserving biodiversity.*

shooting “Wild by Nature” for us.

Finally, the Fiddlin’ Foresters, a bluegrass band that mixes music, pictures and commentary, will take the stage at 7:30. The Foresters are USFS-issued musicians who tour the Rocky Mountain region with their multimedia program focused on the importance of conservation and public land stewardship. They come courtesy of the Forest Service’s regional office, which is hosting the annual Wilderness Ranger Academy in Aspen May 18-21.

# “Forgotten Wilderness”

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nated a “very high significance” conservation area by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program. At its western edge, this roadless area complex merges into what is reputed to be the largest aspen forest in the world, stretching from Thompson Creek south all the way into the West Elks Wilderness.

In a region whose local economy is based on recreation and tourism – the White River National Forest is the most heavily recreated forest in the country – there is overwhelming public support for preserving the pristine character of places like Thompson Creek.

Yet Thompson Creek lies at the southern fringes of the Piceance Basin, the gas-rich geological formation that has sparked a drilling boom in the Grand Valley.

Even the energy industry doesn’t have great hopes for a killing in Thompson Creek – witness the relatively low bids, of \$17 and \$39 per acre, for the two lease parcels there – and the cost of extracting any gas in the remote, steep-sided area will be much higher than in the heavily drilled areas around Rifle.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration is pushing for more energy production on public lands, and is loathe to let environmental concerns stand in the way.

Hence the outcome of the May 13 auction. For a mere \$44,000 – before expenses – the BLM in effect sacrificed the long-term ecological values of Thompson Creek to short-term energy exploitation.

But Thompson Creek is as much a battle over a principle as it is over particular parcels of land.

The principle at stake is called the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, a Clinton-era administrative order that the Bush administration would love to bury. In a nutshell, the Roadless Rule says that federal agencies like the Forest Service and the BLM must inventory their major roadless tracts and, having done so, they must not allow new roads to be built in them without rigorous environmental review.

Almost as soon as the Bush administration took over in 2001, it delayed implementation of the Roadless Rule pending an internal policy review. And when opponents of the rule filed a flurry of legal challenges, the administration sent a strong signal by opting to not defend the rule in court. It was only through environmental groups’ intervention that the rule got a fair hearing in court, and rulings overturning it were appealed.

To date, two federal district courts have issued conflicting rulings on the Roadless Rule. The Forest Service is choosing to follow the go-ahead-and-build-more-roads decision, while conservationists believe the rule stands and will push to see that roadless areas like Thompson Creek remain intact.

The Roadless Rule follows what’s known in the broader environmental community as the Precautionary Principle: ecological systems are so complex and long-lasting, and our understanding of them so incomplete and short-term, that when considering actions that could have environmental consequences we should always err on the side of caution.

The question of road-building and other development in road-

less areas is a classic case where precaution is called for. Allowing development in such areas not only alters the land’s ecology, but may render it permanently ineligible for wilderness designation. Restrictions on development can always be lifted later if they’re found to be unnecessary or harmful.

None of this is lost on the Bush administration. Many observers have speculated that its enthusiasm to auction off marginal gas leases in roadless areas is a deliberate ploy to scuttle the chances of future wilderness designation. And as Sloan was quoted as saying in one of

the local papers, the energy companies see “a perfect storm of opportunity right now,” in what may be the last days of the Bush administration, to put their markers down on millions of acres of land that under any other administration would be off-limits.

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*Did you catch the terrific profile of Connie, Joy and Dottie in the April 3 Aspen Times Weekly? We have copies in the office.*

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## Update: Army choppers in potential wilderness

In these days of heightened security concerns, one doesn’t want to be seen to be advocating a reduction in national defense. Nevertheless, we think the Colorado Army National Guard might be able to train its helicopter pilots without them actually landing their machines in potential wilderness areas.

That was the backdrop to comments the Wilderness Workshop and several other conservation groups filed in late March to the Guard, the BLM and the Forest Service. The three agencies are renegotiating an agreement that has permitted the Guard to run training flights over 429,000 acres of BLM and FS lands around the Eagle airport since 1987.

Our concern is that the new agreement could sanction helicopter landings – previously allowed only in emergencies – on a routine basis throughout the flight area. Guard pilots

currently train over Dome Peak and Red Table, which are recommended by the Forest Service for wilderness designation, as well as Deep Creek, an area included in our White River National Forest Wilderness Campaign. Routine landings would make it more difficult than it already is, if not impossible, to secure wilderness designation for these areas.

In our comments we reminded the agencies that the 2002 WRNF plan specifically directs the Forest Service not to allow any activities that jeopardize the wilderness eligibility of the first two areas, and to work with the Guard to find alternative training sites. We also urged them to conduct an environmental impact statement on the matter, rather than a less stringent environmental assessment, and to consider an alternative that prohibits trainings over potential wilderness areas.



# Wild for Good

## Celebrating 40 years of wilderness — 1964-2004

**O**ur event series commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act has evolved into quite a production. Here's the lineup as it stands right now — more details will be published in the local papers as they become available.

We're still looking for volunteers to help set up for events, put up posters, send out mailings, etc. If you'd like to get involved, please contact Dave at the WW office, 544-0733.

**May 20 — "Wilderness: the Next 40 Years."** (See page 1.)

**June 27 — Wilderness Wingding.** (See box this page.)

**June or July TBD — EcoFlight and WW will offer overflights of proposed wilderness areas** surrounding the Roaring Fork Valley.

**July 4 —** Calling all outdoor types: join **WW's float in the Aspen parade**, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act!

**July or Aug. TBD — "A Tale of Two Valleys: Maroon, Castle and Beyond,"** a slide presentation by local author Paul Andersen.

**Aug. 12 or 13 — Stars & Shots**, a star- and meteor-gazing tailgate party/sleepover.

**Aug. or Sept. TBD — "Wild at Heart,"** a slide presentation

by local author Janis Huggins.

**Aug. or Sept. TBD —** Local premiere of the Discovery/Animal Planet documentary, **"Papa Bear,"** by Basalt producer Carol Fleisher and editor Krysia Carter-Giez. Basalt Bistro.

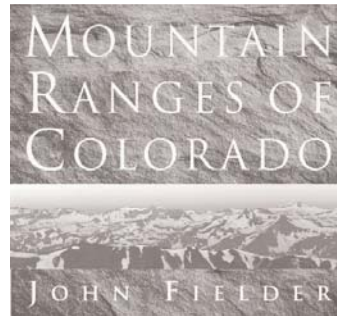


*Dave Foreman will speak at the Paepcke Sept. 1.*

**Sept. 1 — "Rewilding North America,"** a lecture by **Dave Foreman**, legendary eco-warrior and founder of Earth First! and the Wildlands Project. Presented in association with the Aspen Writers' Foundation. Paepcke Auditorium.

**Sept. 3 — "Images of Wilderness"** opening reception. Our 2nd annual juried photo exhibition. Woody Creek Gallery and Store. The theme of this year's show is water. *Photographers, please contact John Emerick (9254281) if you would like to enter your work.*

**Sept. 10 — "Mountain**



*John Fielder comes to the Wheeler Sept. 10.*

### **Ranges of Colorado."**

Acclaimed photographer **John Fielder** brings a slide show based on his latest book, in a benefit for WW. Wheeler Opera House.

**Sept. 25 — Walk for Wilderness.** A fun walk to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, with speakers, giveaways, live music, etc. Ashcroft Ghost Town. Presented in association with the White River Interpretive Association, Colorado Mountain Club, U.S. Forest Service and Pine Creek Cookhouse.

**Sept. TBD —** An evening of **wilderness poetry readings.**

**Oct. TBD —** Premiere of **"Wild by Nature,"** a film commissioned by WW.

**Dec. TBD — "Wilderness heroes" dinner** — a gala affair honoring Connie Harvey, Joy Caudill and Dottie Fox. Hotel Jerome.

*Thanks to the following sponsors who have helped make "Wild for Good" possible: the Ute Mountaineer, Bristlecone Mountain Sports, Nordic Gardens Landscaping, Earth Wireless, the Pine Creek Cookhouse, Reese Henry & Company, Lost Marbles Ranch (John McBride family), Basalt Printing, Walnut House, the Aspen Daily News and KSNO.*

## Walk in wilderness

Join John Emerick and other naturalists for guided hikes in proposed wilderness areas this summer and fall. Everybody who did these hikes last year raved about them! This year's dates are June 26, July 24, Aug. 14, Sept. 18 and Oct. 16.

Trips must be limited to 15 people. To sign up, please call Dave at the office (544-0733).

## Wingin' it

Come one, come all! It's time for a new tradition: On Saturday, June 27, the Wilderness Workshop will hold its first-ever Wilderness Wingding, a members' and friends' picnic that we hope will become an annual event.



Unlike past years' member dinners at the Little Nell, the Wingding will be a decidedly informal affair that everyone can afford. Admission is just \$5 for members — and it'll be free for anyone who joins WW that day — and there'll food, live music, activities and some juicy door prizes.

Best of all, we're going to do it at the East Maroon Portal picnic area, a gorgeous spot by Maroon Creek with barbecue facilities and plenty of space for spreading blankets out on the grass. To keep our impact to a minimum, everyone is encouraged to take a free shuttle bus from Aspen Highlands — a slight inconvenience, but well worth it for the incomparable setting.

We're trying to do this on the cheap, so please bring a side dish or dessert to share. We'll provide the burgers and dogs (and veggie equivalents), fixin's and soft drinks.



### Wilderness Workshop

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The Wilderness Workshop's mission is to protect and conserve the wilderness and natural resources of the Roaring Fork Watershed, the White River National Forest, and adjacent lands.

The Workshop is a non-profit organization that engages in research, education, legal advocacy, and grassroots organizing to protect the ecological integrity of local landscapes and public lands with a focus on the monitoring and conservation of air and water quality, wildlife species and habitat, natural communities, and lands of wilderness quality.

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## Give your input on proposed off-road rules

By late May, the Forest Service is expected to propose new rules for the use of dirt bikes, ATVs and other off-road vehicles in national forests, including the White River.

Strong reform is needed to protect America's forests from eroded soils, polluted rivers, lakes and streams, and decimated wildlife habitat, and to ensure that all Americans can enjoy our national forests that are quiet, safe and unspoiled.

The Forest Service's upcoming draft rule is expected to:

- ◆ Prohibit cross-country travel by motor vehicles except under limited circumstances.
- ◆ Authorize ATV and dirt

bike use only on roads and ORV routes specifically designated for such use.

Although these changes are a step in the right direction, it's critical that the Forest Service include additional measures in the final rule to protect public lands, wildlife and other types of recreation.

The Forest Service needs input on this important issue. If you'd like to comment on the proposed ORV rule, or for additional information about this issue, please call Aaron Clark at (303) 650-5818 or visit [www.cmc.org/cmc/conservation/orvrulemaking.htm](http://www.cmc.org/cmc/conservation/orvrulemaking.htm).

In your comments, consider urging the USFS to:

- ◆ Establish a two-year time-frame by which routes must be designated for off-road vehicle use.
- ◆ Designate off-road vehicle routes based on sound science, site-specific analysis and balanced public participation, and not simply designate unauthorized renegade routes under the demands of a few forest users.
- ◆ Authorize off-road vehicle use only to the extent that effective monitoring and enforcement are annually funded, implemented and used to determine appropriate levels of continued use.

## New Alpine card benefits WW

If you're an Alpine Bank customer, be sure to apply for their new Environment loyalty card. It's just like your regular ATM card, except each time you use it Alpine will donate 10 cents to local environmental groups, including Wilderness Workshop.

## Grants received

Big, big thanks to the following organizations for their recent grants to the Wilderness Workshop:

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## Donor honor roll

We're deeply grateful for the following donations made between March 1 and May 1, 2004:

### General operating donations

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### In-kind donations

Kelly Alford – brochure design  
Bernie Arndt – use of photo images  
Dan Bayer – use of photo images  
Dottie Fox – use of paintings  
Ruth Harrison – dictionary and thesaurus  
Riccardo Savi – use of photo images  
Mike Stranahan – five copies of "Earth From Above"  
Harry & Karin Teague – laptop computer