

Get Wild: Thankful for wilderness

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Karn Stiegelmeier
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Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteer sawyers clear trails in Eagles Nest Wilderness Area.

Frances Hartogh/Courtesy photo

Thanksgiving is a time of abundant food preparation and appreciation, and a time to be thankful for family, home and much more that we too often take for granted.

We have much to be grateful for here in Summit County: a diverse array of natural treasures and recreational activities, interesting businesses and towns, and an active community, drawing visitors from near and far. But our biggest attraction is our natural beauty: 80% of the county is on public land, mostly national forest land in Dillon Ranger District, and significant parcels of Summit County open space.

I am so thankful to gaze out at our beautiful Eagles Nest Wilderness Area from my home, knowing wilderness is protected for future generations. Of course, we mostly think about the joys of recreation – hiking, skiing and other adventures – but just looking at our beautiful wilderness peaks gives one a sense of contemplation and peace.

The Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 during a time of broad awareness of the damage humans were doing to our land, water and wildlife. Eagles Nest Wilderness Area, created in 1976, was early in that process. Across the valley, Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Area was founded in 1993. Our third nearby wilderness area, Holy Cross, was established in 1980. I am thankful that local nonprofit Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance works tirelessly to preserve our three wilderness areas.

This Thanksgiving, I give thanks to our wilderness areas for the wildlife habitat, which provides homes for elk, deer, moose, pika, marmots, lynx, mountain lions, bears, wolves and beavers. A special thanks goes to [beavers for their beneficial water retention, fire protection and drought resilience work](#). We have all been thankful for our big birds of prey, especially the osprey and bald eagles returning each spring, with populations growing every year.

We must also thank our wilderness areas for collecting snow and water, providing water throughout the summer and fall, and for sequestering carbon in soil, roots and mycelium in our forests.

We often forget to be thankful for our Dillon Ranger District staff members, who are hardworking stewards of these lands and wonderful members of our community. Sadly, there is inadequate funding for U.S. Forest Service staff to do the work required to maintain our federal public land. Thank you to Friends of the Dillon Ranger District and Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance for their volunteers. We recognize that these lands are suffering from getting loved to death, fire, trash, pollution, dog poop left behind and cutting new trails, so volunteers are deeply appreciated.

Our local community volunteers work hard to keep our wilderness wild, clearing trees from trails, picking up trash and poop, cleaning up illegal campfires and educating visitors. Volunteer sawyers cleared over 800 fallen trees from trails this year, and volunteer wilderness rangers completed over 400 patrols on 2,700 miles of trails, greeting 12,000 trail users. Trailhead hosts educated over 400 backpackers and 2,400 day users about Leave No Trace ethics, and other volunteers worked to eradicate invasive weeds. Colorado Mountain College sustainability student Drea Sanchez worked tirelessly on trail sustainability.

Thanks to thoughtful planning and funding from Summit County, National Forest Foundation, The Summit Foundation and the Schuette Family as well as the hard work of the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, the Beau Schuette memorial walkway was completed this summer, a significant boardwalk protecting wetland and riparian areas near Mesa Cortina.

And thanks to Arapahoe Basin Ski Area's Employee Environmental Fund for more than two decades of generous funding in support of wilderness preservation work.

So many things to be thankful for in Summit County!



Karn Stiegelmeier

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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