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<https://www.summitdaily.com/opinion/columns/get-wild-what-is-wilderness/?fbclid=IwAR2yNBwZin6C1gE090MFE574u-eEpAhzOtjffwBzl7vaxDuSZfjb-ee5aPQ>

## Get Wild: What is wilderness?

Mike Browning



**Gore Lake is pictured Aug. 10, 2019, in Eagles Nest Wilderness Area.**

*Photo by Tim Drescher / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance*

Summit and Eagle counties are fortunate to have lots of public land that we can enjoy and on which we can recreate. That is why we live here.

Most of these lands are in the White River National Forest. Some special areas of the national forest are designated and managed as wilderness areas, including the Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan Peak and Holy Cross wilderness areas.

So what are wilderness areas, how do they differ from the rest of the national forest, and why are they important?

Wilderness areas are federally owned lands designated by Congress in accordance with the 1964 Wilderness Act to be part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Only Congress can designate a wilderness area. Eagles Nest was designated by Congress in 1976, Holy Cross in

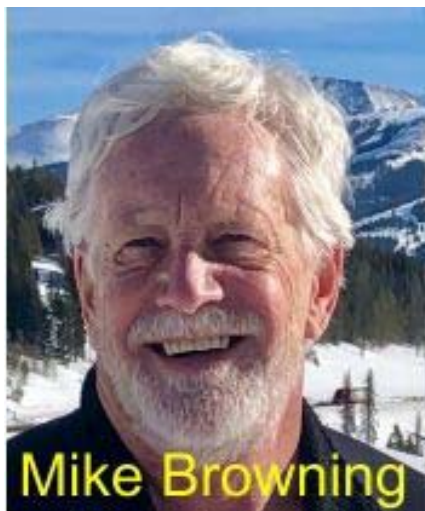
1980 and Ptarmigan Peak in 1993. Wilderness areas are the creme de la creme of our public lands: 36% of Colorado land is federally owned but only 3% is designated as wilderness.

Mindful of our “increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization,” Congress passed the 1964 Wilderness Act to preserve and protect certain lands “in their natural condition” and thus “secure for present and future generations the benefits of wilderness.” The act recognized the value of preserving “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

Congress therefore directed that designated wilderness areas “be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness.”

Accordingly, certain uses that are generally allowed in national forests are not allowed in wilderness areas. No roads, use of motorized equipment, landing of aircraft or other forms of mechanical transportation, including mountain biking, are permitted. Commercial enterprises or installation of structures are not allowed except in limited circumstances.

Wilderness areas are intended to be left in their natural condition “where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”



Wilderness areas are important because they provide long-term protection to the last of our nation’s wild landscapes — places that possess spectacular beauty, offer outstanding solitude, support native plants and animals, protect valuable water resources, and provide opportunities for passive recreation and contemplation. As our world becomes more hectic and disconnected from nature, wilderness provides an opportunity to engage with the natural world and our quieter selves.

But these wonderful places are fragile. Increasing human visitation threatens the very qualities that make them special. Wildlife flee, invasive species are introduced, meadows get trampled, streams are polluted and the quiet is pierced. It is up to all of us to tread lightly on these lands. One footprint in a high-Alpine meadow, a single fire ring or one pot washed in an Alpine lake might seem inconsequential, but when combined with hundreds or thousands of other such acts can result in permanent scars and destruction.

Visitation to our local wilderness areas has increased tenfold in the past 20 years and will likely double again in the next 20.

If you want to let your dog run loose, build a campfire on a lake, play your boom box or ride your mountain bike, there are other places in the national forest to do so. Be respectful of wilderness. It is the last best place. We need to keep wilderness wild for ourselves and future generations.

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Mike Browning is the 2021 chair 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](http://EagleSummitWilderness.org).