

Get Wild: Reconnecting Vail Pass

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On the west side of Vail Pass, wildlife crossings are in the works as a part of the expansion of Interstate 70 from four to six lanes.
Summit Safe Passages/Courtesy illustration

At 10,622 feet elevation, Vail Pass is well known to Colorado drivers and visitors as an amazingly scenic route skirting the southern Gore Range. Construction of this iconic transportation corridor in the late 1970s was a remarkable achievement and marked a turning point in the interstate's construction from Denver to Utah. Amid growing environmentalism across the nation, the interstate's design over Vail Pass incorporated environmental and aesthetic considerations for the first time. This shift in mindset resulted in the construction of naturalized and landscaped retaining walls, erosion control measures to protect streams, colors that blended into the landscape, and sculpted bridges to span natural drainages in the interstate's path.

Long before the interstate, [Vail Pass served as important summer hunting grounds for native Ute people](#). The remnants of their hunting camps, dating as early as 4,800 B.C., are testimony to the wildlife populations that have inhabited this landscape since time immemorial. Today, despite its more environmentally sensitive design, portions of Interstate 70 over Vail Pass present a near-impenetrable barrier to wildlife.

[Interstate 25 south of Denver](#) are generating public awareness and increasing political support and funding for wildlife-highway mitigation projects.

On the west side of Vail Pass, wildlife crossings are in the works as a part of the expansion of I-70 from four to six lanes. Two large underpasses and four smaller crossings will provide passageways for wildlife like the elusive Canada lynx, summering herds of mule deer and elk, coyotes, badgers, weasels, and other small fauna. These new crossings will increase the permeability of the highway on West Vail Pass.

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A reconnected landscape is also envisioned for East Vail Pass. Here, the eastbound and westbound lanes run along opposite sides of the broad West Tenmile Creek valley. The eastbound traffic lanes rise above the tributary creek drainages – Wilder Gulch, Smith, Stafford, Guller and West Tenmile creeks. In contrast, the westbound lanes cut across the valley's side slopes and animals seeking to cross must navigate through vehicles passing by at high speed every 30 seconds or less.

Despite this interstate barrier, East Vail Pass remains an important landscape for many wildlife, encompassed by the White River National Forest, with the Eagles Nest Wilderness to the north. In 2018, Summit County Safe Passages completed a connectivity assessment identifying I-70 over East Vail Pass as the top priority for wildlife crossings in the county.

A subsequent engineering feasibility study was completed in 2020 with funding from Vail Resorts, Arapahoe Basin, and the Center for Large Landscape Conservation. This study developed and evaluated preliminary engineering designs for two wildlife underpasses and a novel hourglass-shaped overpass. Combined with the existing bridges under the eastbound lanes and the new crossings being built on the west side of the pass, these three new wildlife crossings on East Vail Pass would produce a resilient and connected landscape across the entirety of Vail Pass. Summit County Safe Passages and its partners are working to raise private and public grant funds to complete this vision. For more information or to donate, visit SummitCountySafePassages.org/initiatives/vail-pass

After being passed with bipartisan support last week, The Safe Crossings for Colorado Wildlife and Motorists bill is headed to Governor Polis. This law brings state funds to help leverage federal dollars for wildlife crossings. Thank you to Representative Julie McCluskie and her co-sponsors for ushering this important bill through the state legislature.



Julia Kintsch is the founder of ECO-resolutions ecological resource consulting and chair of the board for Summit County Safe Passages.

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