

# Get Wild: Charms of the Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness

*Mike Browning*



## **A recent view from Ptarmigan Trail in Summit County.**

*Karn Stiegelmeier/Get Wild*

Summit and Eagle counties are home to three well-known wilderness areas — Eagles Nest, Holy Cross, and Flat Tops. But Summit County also hosts a smaller and less famous Wilderness — the Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness. Containing just 12,760 acres, it's the fifth-smallest of Colorado's 44 wilderness areas. Though humble, Ptarmigan has charms that make it well worth a visit in any season.

The Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness is located in the Williams Fork Mountains, which rise from the Blue River Valley east and north of Silverthorne. Traveling north up Colorado Highway 9, the Ptarmigan is in the western range of mountains to your right. Your eyes may be drawn to the more impressive peaks of the Gore (Nuchu) Range that rise dramatically to your left (west). The peaks in the Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness consist of the more rounded Ptarmigan Peak (12,458 feet) near its southern end, and Ute Peak (12,297 feet) near its northern end. A rather gentle-looking ridge runs between them just above tree line.

Congress, which designates federal wilderness areas under the terms of the 1964 Wilderness Act, designated the Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness in 1993. Environmentalists had sought a larger Wilderness Area containing 74,770 acres, extending eastward over the ridge into the Williams Fork Valley and farther down the western flank of the Williams Fork Mountains. Nevertheless, because the Denver Water Board opposed inclusion of any portion of the Williams Fork drainage due to the Board's water-collection system there, including Williams Fork Reservoir, the Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness ends on the ridge top. Timber interests insisted on shrinking the western side of the Ptarmigan to allow future timbering. This left Wilderness supporters with the relatively small, but precious, sliver of wilderness that survived the political process.

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The CORE Act, which has yet to pass through both houses of congress, would include environmentally important additions to the Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness into the lower elevations and extensions farther north along the Williams Fork Ridge.

The Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness has many charms. A typical lodgepole fir forest rises to Engelmann spruce and sub-Alpine fir and then to Alpine tundra above tree line. The lower slopes have lovely aspen groves and open sagebrush meadows. Because much of the Wilderness Area is west or south facing, carpets of Alpine wildflowers emerge here earlier in the year.

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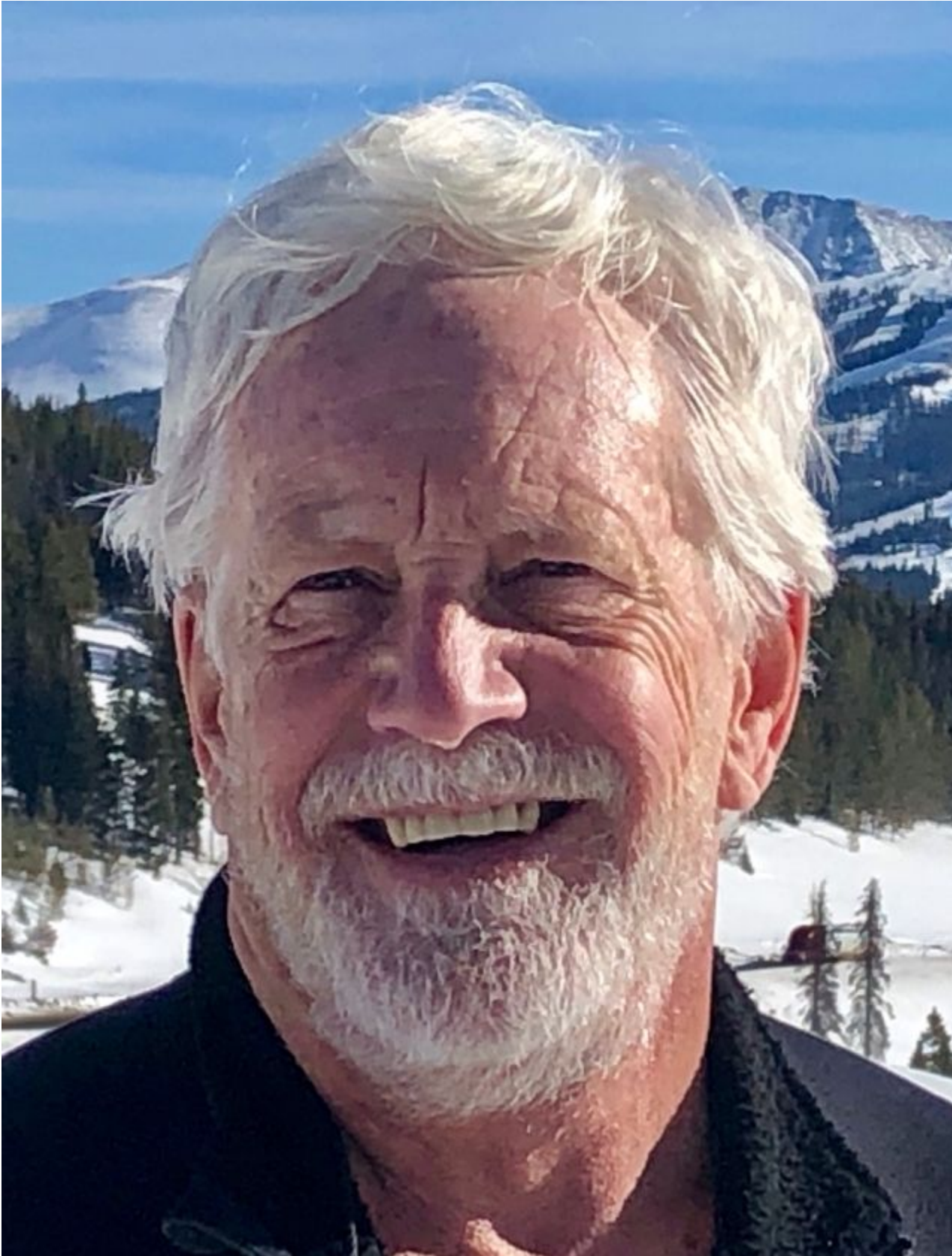


Climb Ptarmigan Peak, which straddles the line between Summit and Grand counties, by either the Ptarmigan Peak Trail or Angler Mountain Trail. These two trails merge after several miles to reach the summit, providing spectacular views of several 14ers, the Gore (Nuchu) Range, the lower Blue River Valley, and Dillon Reservoir. You may spot the resident elk herd on the north ridge — and of course watch for ptarmigan birds, those masters of camouflage that change colors with the seasons. Dogs are welcome but must be leashed.

Another interesting point along the trail is the burned area from the 2021 fire above Silverthorne. It is heartening how this area is recovering. New lush green undergrowth carpets still-standing blackened aspen trees. Look for many aspen “suckers” already pushing up through the new undergrowth. Aspen forests, arguably the world’s largest plant, have extensive connected root systems enabling them to regenerate quickly after a wildfire. Contrast this with areas dominated by lodgepole, which take much longer to reestablish.

Connect the Ptarmigan Peak Trail to the Ute Peak/Pass trail, and run the Alpine ridge for 12 miles, almost entirely above tree line. This offers both a great getaway from crowds and unsurpassed views.

Although small, the Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness offers year-round rewards and fine vistas for those willing to explore its reaches.



**Mike Browning**

*Mike Browning/Courtesy photo*

**Mike Browning is on the board of the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance, a local nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect, preserve and maintain the four Wilderness Areas in Eagle and Summit county, including Ptarmigan.**

**More information about the alliance can be found at [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org)**