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Get Wild: This trail is in big need of our help

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Get Wild



The remnants of a bridge on the Meadow Creek Trail are pictured in the summer. Crews will replace it and also help restore heavily used areas in Summit County.

Jim Alexander/Courtesy photo

How do hikers get into the Eagles Nest Wilderness? For many visitors, the gateway to the Wilderness is Interstate 70 at exits 203 (Meadow Creek Trail) and 201 (North Tenmile Creek Trail). As it turns out, these trails are among the most used wilderness trails in the nation. And it shows! They are overused and worn.

Worn trails are a danger to hikers and to the wilderness. They become uneven and rocky with dangerous footing, making travel hazardous. Hikers and runners tend to detour around bad parts, making the trail ever wider. Native plants are destroyed, and trails become rivers or swamps. These new social trails further destroy native vegetation. Steep trails, like Meadow Creek, turn into rivers during snow melt and in the rainy season, and precious soil is washed away.

The U.S. Forest Service works hard to keep national forest trails in Summit County in good condition. It's a huge job. With so many visitors to the county, the U.S. Forest Service needs help with budget and resources.

This summer, as part of the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance is launching the Wilderness Gateways program. Our goal is to repair or improve Eagles Nest Wilderness trails along I-70 over the next



10 years, including in Eagle County.

The first Wilderness Gateways project will be the Meadow Creek Trail. The Forest Service estimates this trail has 50,000 visitors a year! Last summer, when we were scouting out the work, we saw families hiking, solo hikers, and even runners who had started in Silverthorne and come over Eccles Pass. Those who travel that trail know it is a steep, eroded chasm at the bottom, and a veritable flume for runoff in the spring. The junction to Lily Pad Lake is a worn-out area the size of a baseball diamond. And, last summer, a bridge collapsed 3 miles up the trail. Good luck to those who want to visit Eccles Pass early this season!

What does it take to fix a trail like that? Planning. Equipment. Bridge materials. Lumber. Money. And volunteers!

Beginning last summer, the Forest Service's Dillon Ranger District and Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance worked closely together to plan needed repairs. These will include building "check steps" at the bottom of the trail, regrooming the Lily Pad intersection, and building a whole new bridge. Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance applied for a grant to fund the project, while the Forest Service spent the winter planning the equipment, materials and labor that will be needed.

Work on the Meadow Creek Trail will begin after the trails dry this summer. Many hands will help: Rocky Mountain Youth Corps work teams, Forest Service personnel, Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteers, and volunteers like you!

After carrying the lumber, equipment, and tools 3 miles towards Eccles Pass by hand — it's the wilderness, so nothing mechanical can be used — the teams will build a new bridge. Once that is done, the check steps will be built using a mechanical grader and lumber (this part is just outside the Wilderness, whew!).

Day projects with volunteers will do less technical work to improve the Lily Pad Trail intersection and other damaged locations. Most of the work should be completed by the end of the summer, leaving a bit for 2025.

It's a lot of work, but it's fun and the results will be rewarding. In addition to field work, there's always need for organizational work. Join us on March 20 for our kick-off discussion. Email jimofcolorado@gmail.com for more information.

Come give back to wilderness and celebrate the Wilderness Act's 60th Anniversary!

"Get Wild" publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. This column is written by supports of the 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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