

EAGLE POST 33

The newsletter of **Friends of Eagles Nest Wilderness**, apprising you of important activities in and around Eagles Nest, Holy Cross, and Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Areas.



February 2019

Dear *|FNAME|*
Greetings! Our topic this month is
The Good, the Bad, and the Pretty Ugly
by Jim Alexander

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, FENW will be revitalizing its program to preserve the health of the wilderness ecosystems. As part of the program, we have applied for two grants to bring professionals in to: 1) treat and control several noxious weed infestations, and 2) survey and map plant life in the Wilderness. To be successful in these projects, we need volunteers - all you amateur botanists and flower lovers - to help survey and record plant life as you hike. If you'd like to learn more about the surveys contact [contact Jim Alexander](#).

The Good, The Bad, and the “Pretty” but Ugly

By **Jim Alexander**

In 1964, the Wilderness Act created boundaries that set aside certain primeval lands to preserve their natural conditions, with minimal impact by man. These laws cordoned off the dozens of beautiful areas across Summit County, Colorado and the entire United States. The wilderness boundaries are effective at controlling the human impact upon the wilderness – because of vigilant efforts of the USFS and groups like FENW. Unfortunately, biology doesn't respect Wilderness boundaries and non-native plants cross freely into the fragile wilderness ecosystems and cause trouble. The invasive weeds may completely change the lands.

On any mid-summer stroll in Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan Peak, or Holy Cross Wilderness you'll come across a magnificent array of flowers and plants: Lupin, Fireweed, Indian Paint Brush. And who isn't thrilled to find a section of Colorado Blue Columbine swaying in an aspen grove? On that same stroll, you might see some others – pretty white Oxeye Daisy, striking red-pink



Jim Alexander

Musk Thistle, delicate yellow Dalmatian Toadflax. Those last few, however pretty they may be, are ruining the wilderness ecosystems. They are invasive species that out-compete the native flora [and fauna] creating an ecological barren that little plant life can survive within.



Invasive species are not just in the wilderness areas; you can find them almost anywhere because they are mostly spread by people. Some are decorative [garden] plants imported from distant lands for gardens. Some have been used to address agricultural problems. Kudzu is a good example. Kudzu is an effective ground cover and was brought from Japan and planted in Georgia for erosion control. And it was effective, so effective it spread everywhere across the American South, shading and

killing many stands of trees. Another problem weed, found throughout the west and Colorado, is Cheatgrass. It is a delicate grass that bends gracefully to reveal yellow or purplish seed heads – you'll see it all along Route 9 in Summit County. Cheatgrass has ruined many farms in the mid-west. It germinates and blooms much earlier than native or agricultural grasses, so it gradually takes over. [In South Dakota it has taken over entire farmlands.] Some farmlands are so infested, they are completely useless. The land can't even be sold as banks won't loan money to buy the infested lands, and they are just abandoned.

Cheatgrass has invaded at least one Wilderness Area – Joshua Tree Wilderness. Here the grass grows among the trees, without any immediately-apparent impact on the area. But in the event of a wildfire, Cheatgrass causes a terrible problem: normally, fires in that region don't burn hot enough to kill the trees, but cheatgrass makes the fires hotter, and trees die. To make matters worse, after the fire cheatgrass grows back first, further squeezing out more of the native plants. So far, we don't think there is cheatgrass in our wilderness



areas (Eagles Nest, Holy Cross, and Ptarmigan Peak). Though plant ecologists I've talked with at the Denver Botanic Gardens worry that it is just a matter of time before it works its way in. If the ground is disturbed in some way – trails being cut, hikers scuffing up the ground, horse prints, camping areas, or dogs digging in the dirt. Those disturbances are what provide the gap, the invitation for a noxious species to grow and often those hikers or animals unknowingly bring in the seeds as well,

Summit County and Eagle County lands are replete with noxious weeds; there are more than 30 types tracked by the various government agencies. (see a list below). You've certainly seen the major ones: Oxeye Daisey, False Chamomile, Musk Thistle, Bull and Canada thistle. They may even seem like a beautiful addition to the forest. A common joke is if you see an ugly thistle, it's a native thistle (not quite true, but close)! All these plants take hold in private lands and their seeds make their way to federal lands and on into the wilderness. There are hundreds of infestations now, and once an infestation takes hold, it takes years of diligent effort to remove.

Noxious weeds have a variety of bad impacts upon wilderness. Generally they reduce the food supply for the forest's inhabitants. Some invasive plants bear spines and thorns that keep animals away. Some produce nasty chemicals that irritate the animal's mouth or skin. Others are inedible, distasteful, or even toxic to many native creatures, including insects and animals. When these weed infestations spread and spread, the native food supply shrinks and shrinks. Even more than the effect on the wildlife, the weeds affect the very land. Some examples:

- Musk Thistle and Bull Thistle create monocultures that aggressively take over burned areas.
- Chamomile's odor is so unpleasant, animals won't even graze nearby.
- Orange Hawkweed produces a chemical that inhibits pollination and germination of seeds of native plants
- Dames Rocket changes the soil, so some tree species are unable to grow (by suppressing mycorrhizae (fungi that grow symbiotically in intimate association with plant roots))
- Oxeye daisy hosts tiny worms that invade and eat the roots of other plants.

Noxious weed infestations are a problem across the Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan Peak, and Holy Cross Wilderness areas – there are hundreds, if not thousands of infested areas. A good example is the Slate Creek Trail in the Eagles Nest Wilderness. As you can see from the map below, more than sixty infestations dot that valley. For many years FENW has fought to contain and fight back those infestations. We will treat that area again in 2019, and do so annually, until we eliminate the weeds.



It is critical that we treat such wilderness infestations, especially new ones. Once a noxious weed infestation takes hold, it is nearly impossible to kill. Noxious weeds drop seeds –

sometimes thousands or millions – and create a seed bank. Even if you kill this year's weeds, new weeds will pop up from the seed bank the very next year or later - sometimes decades later!

Beyond controlling existing infestations, we need to map new infestations and kill them before they gain a foothold in the wilderness. In 2019, FENW is launching a program to survey the wilderness ecosystems. The resulting data will provide a picture of the impact of weeds on our ecosystem, and guide the development of refined techniques for weed management.

Our survey work will depend on reports from hikers who love plants. For those budding botanists, we plan several educational events in 2019. The first is a private tour of the Denver Botanic Gardens on Sunday, **April 28** at 2:00 PM, focusing on plant species of Summit and Eagle Counties. Join us for this exciting event - [contact Jim Alexander](#) for more information.

9 Bad Weeds in our wilderness areas ...



Diffuse knapweed



Oxeye daisy



Dalmatian toadflax



Spotted knapweed



Plumeless thistle



Houndstongue



Chamomile



Absinth wormwood



Leafy spurge

The rest of the invaders...The U.S. Forest Service tracks 37 invasive species in Eagle and Summit Counties. Check out the Summit County Web site:

<http://www.co.summit.co.us/993/Summit-County-Noxious-Weeds>.

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... make a difference!

Join us in 2019 - There are many ways to take part!
Our **2018 Trail & Campsite Projects**, led by Trail Boss Kate DeMorest, took us to Slate Lakes, Piney Lake, Salt Lick Trail, Gore Creek, Deluge Lake, and more. We were greatly aided by two very special friends - Dom and Powell - LLAMAS! Join us in 2019 - learn more [HERE](#).

Volunteer Wilderness Rangers met more than 10,000 wilderness visitors in 2018. Become a VWR in 2019 - training will be held on **Saturday, June 8**. Learn more [here](#).

Join us! for our next **Planning Meeting**
THURSDAY, February 14, 5:30 PM,
If SHUTDOWN: Copper Mountain
Community Center ([MAP](#))
IF NO SHUTDOWN: USFS offices in
Minturn & Silverthorne (video link)
Details at www.fenw.org/

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Our Fall 2018 **hard copy newsletter** is available.

It contains two

dozen fun and informative articles, all of them about FENW - past, present, and future. If you haven't received your copy, then *we don't have your mailing address* - please send it to us at info@fenw.org.

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