

YOUR AD HERE »

Get Wild: The do's and don'ts of campfires in the backcountry

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | Aug 11, 2023

Stasia Stockwell
Get Wild



At Brady Lake in the Holy Cross Wilderness, pictured here, campfires are prohibited.

Stasia Stockwell/Get Wild

It might feel like a night spent outside in the mountains isn't complete without a campfire. There's something about that mesmerizing, glowing orange flame that we humans love — but just because we love them, that doesn't mean they're always a good idea. Campfires take a toll on the environment, especially in our delicate Alpine ecosystems.

The past couple summers in Summit County have given us enough moisture that we've avoided the strict summertime fire bans we've become accustomed to in the West. Those restrictions are more common now because things are getting hotter and drier, and wildfires are becoming more dangerous for humans and our environment. So, of course, if there's a fire ban in place, you should not be gathering kindling and lighting matches. But what about when fire danger lingers on the low end? There are still plenty of reasons

time to recover from this damage. Some backcountry areas allow fires when a fire ban isn't in place, while others – like protected watersheds and certain parts of designated wilderness areas – restrict them at all times.

Backcountry watersheds, especially in Alpine areas, are particularly sensitive to campfires. That's why when you head into our surrounding wilderness areas, like the Eagles Nest and Holy Cross, you'll see signage prohibiting fires and camping near Alpine lakes, streams and trails. Sadly, it's quite common to see fire rings constructed right up against the lakeshore. When you head into the backcountry to camp, be sure you've checked all the regulations. Just because you see a fire ring that someone else built doesn't mean it's a place where you should be building a campfire.

That's why volunteer groups like the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance work with the U.S. Forest Service every summer to remove and rehabilitate hundreds of illegal fire rings in our wilderness areas.

There's a reason for the restrictions – they're meant to keep our gorgeous mountains, lakes and streams intact for both the animals that live there and the humans that visit. The debris left behind from campfires contaminates clear Alpine lakes and mountain streams. It affects the fish in the water and the animals that drink from it, and these fires leave scars on delicate tundra that will take decades to recover. Also, human presence near lakes and streams makes it hard for wildlife to come down for a drink. On top of that, there isn't a lot of wood near, at, or above treeline. Some of the small trees in high-mountain areas are hundreds of years old and will take a similar amount of time to regenerate if you burn them.

The next time you're out in the backcountry, think twice before having a fire. Did you read the signage at the trailhead, along the trail and on the back of the permit you filled out at the trailhead? It's usually quite clear whether campfires aren't allowed. For instance, in the Eagles Nest Wilderness, campfires are prohibited above treeline and within 1/4 mile of lakes or within 100 feet of streams or trails. Skip the fire and instead enjoy the Alpenglöw and starlight. The ecosystem will be better off for it.



Stasia Stockwell
Stasia Stockwell

Stasia Stockwell is a Breckenridge resident and avid backcountry skier. A true mountain dweller, she feels most at home in the Alpine. Stasia writes primarily for the outdoor adventure realm, with the desire to connect readers from all backgrounds with nature in a meaningful way

Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Summit Daily is embarking on a multiyear project to digitize its archives going back to 1989 and make them available to the public in partnership with the Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection. The full project is expected to cost about \$165,000. All donations made in 2023 will go directly toward this project.

Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

[DONATE](#)