

# Get Wild: A short history of the Eagles Nest Wilderness

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | 22 hrs ago

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Get Wild



The Eagles Nest Wilderness is pictured.  
*Mike Browning/Get Wild*

Eagles Nest Wilderness soars above Summit County, luring us into its embrace. Although the towering mountains, rushing streams and lush meadows have existed for hundreds of thousands of years, Eagles Nest’s history as federal wilderness area is much more recent.

The original Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 (the first of its kind in the world), but the Eagles Nest was not added by Congress until July 12, 1976. When it was established it contained over 80,000 acres in Summit County and 50,000 acres in Eagle County, and it gained another 160 acres in the Slate Creek drainage in 1997. It currently totals over 134,000 acres. The U.S. Forest Service’s Dillon Ranger District manages the Eagles Nest in Summit County, while the Eagle/Holy Cross Ranger District manages the Eagle County side.

No roads are allowed in wilderness areas, but roads have shaped Eagles Nest’s boundaries. In the 1960s, CDOT proposed that I-70 be built, not up Tenmile Canyon and then over Vail Pass, but rather up South Willow Creek, through a new tunnel under Red Buffalo Pass and down Gore Creek. Fortunately, then-Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman rejected that proposal, based in part on his finding that “the public benefits of preserving this priceless Wilderness area far outweigh any other consideration.”



to build the Eagle-Piney Collection System in Eagle County to collect water from streams along the area's western flank. Fortunately, both projects were ultimately defeated, in large part because of local opposition to the catastrophic damage the wilderness area would have suffered.

The size of the proposed Eagles Nest Wilderness also was highly controversial. In the early 1970s, the Forest Service proposed that only 87,775 acres be included, most of it above timberline and free of old wagon roads and logging from the 1920s and 1930s. Local environmentalists, like Bill Mounse, and Colorado's Sen. Floyd Haskell and Rep. James Johnson, proposed upwards of 136,000 acres. As mentioned earlier, the Denver Water Board sought to exclude the Booth, Pitkin, Bighorn, and Gore creek drainages to allow construction of its Eagle-Piney Collection System, but these areas were, thankfully, retained in the final designation.

The area's dominant geographic feature is the Gore Range, which forms the north-south spine. Lord St. George Gore was a Scottish aristocrat who undertook an infamous hunting expedition through central Colorado, the Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming in 1854. This was no small affair, utilizing 30 wagons and 50 servants. Gore slaughtered thousands of animals for sport, leaving their carcasses on the ground to rot, and depriving the local Ute Indians, or Nuchu, of essential food. Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Alfred Cumming, criticized Gore for wasting a precious resource that the Utes needed to survive.

George Gore never set foot south of the Colorado River into the range. It is an anomaly of old maps that these beautiful mountains received his name. Before white people ventured into what is now the Eagles Nest Wilderness, Utes hunted and gathered sustainably on the land for millennia, until their forced relocation in 1881. There is a movement afoot to change the name to honor the Utes to whom it was a true homeland.

Let us continue to draw nourishment from and reconnect our spirits to the wild by protecting and preserving the Eagles Nest Wilderness.



**Mike Browning**  
*Mike Browning/Courtesy photo*

Mike Browning is a director and former chair of the [Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance](#), a local nonprofit that helps preserve, protect and maintain the Faales Nest and other wilderness areas in Summit and Faale counties. The author drew in part on historical

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