

# LANDSCAPES



## Wild Connections

FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE PRAIRIES

DECEMBER 2019

## Save Our Wildlands: Everyone's Future



**Wildcat Canyon**  
Photo: Curt Nimz

### You Have Made a Difference

*by Jim Lockhart, Wild Connections President*

For 25 years, as volunteers, explorers, advocates, donors and partners, you have worked with Wild Connections to protect the lands of the South Platte and Arkansas River watersheds from the mountains to the plains:

- As volunteer mappers, you found hundreds of thousands of acres on the Pike-San Isabel National Forest and Bureau of Land Management lands that had no roads and therefore indicated potential wilderness.
- As workday volunteers, you brought your muscles and determination to protect streams and wetlands and to reconnect large landscapes by rehabilitating and revegetating illegal or obsolete roads and motorized trails.
- As hike participants, you visited some of the wildest places in central Colorado, and your first-hand experience has made you a powerful voice for protection of these areas, for wilderness legislation, and for sensible government policies to protect wildlife, clean air, clean water, and non-intrusive quiet use recreation.
- You helped craft the Wild Connections Conservation Plan, the guiding vision for our past, present and future work. It undergirds practical work on the ground and sparked our climate change initiative.
- Over these years you have supported conservation across our region with donations, letters to the editor, and comments on numerous agency actions: most recently on the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan, the Forest Service Pike-San Isabel Travel Management Plan, and the Browns Canyon National Monument Draft Management Plan.

In this issue of *Landscapes*, we want to share some of these milestones and talk about the future. Wild Connections intends to be a strong force for conservation in our region for the next 25 years, and the 25 years after that. ☺



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**Mission:** Wild Connections, a science-based conservation organization, works to identify, protect and restore lands of the Upper Arkansas and South Platte watersheds to ensure the survival of native species and ecological richness.

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# BLM Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan Revision

By John Sztukowski

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan (RMP) revision draft was finally released in June 2019, after over a year delay with much back and forth between BLM National and the local Royal Gorge Field Office (RGFO). Unfortunately, the draft plan that was finally released was just a skeleton of the plan the local BLM field office had spent years constructing, as BLM National gutted over 230,000 acres of RGFO proposed protections.

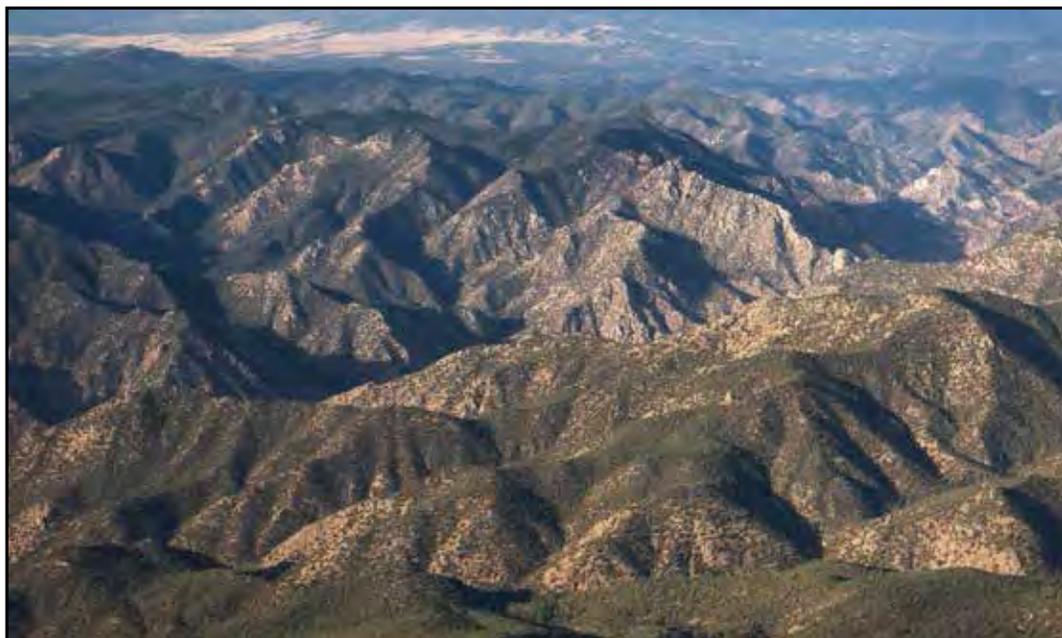
This was part of a larger systematic attack on our public lands in 2019 by BLM National & the US Department of Interior (DOI). They dismantled locally produced BLM management plans across the west, ignoring public and cooperator input and even their own local BLM field offices' expertise, zeroing out conservation in these plans, to make way for oil and gas and other development.

*Your comments do matter....the more support we show for our local public lands to the state, the more cover they will have to support these lands to the DOI.*

The Eastern Colorado Revised Management Plan (ECRMP) revision is not over, as a final plan and public comment period is expected in early 2020. Thanks to everybody who commented this past summer on the bogus ECRMP draft plan that was finally released. BLM will produce a report compiling these public comments, and we can expect similar results as the 2015 and 2017 comment periods, which showed our local communities' and leaders' overwhelming support conservation and quiet recreation.

Your public comments do matter, despite these attacks on our public lands from this current administration. Before this plan is finalized, it has to go through a Governor's review, and fortunately we have a strong public lands proponent in Governor Polis. And the more support we show for our local public lands to the state, the more cover they will have to support these lands to DOI.

We have already seen the Colorado Department of Natural Resources get involved in this plan, submitting recent public comments that support BLM RGFO's 2018 Draft Plan and the over 278,000 acres of proposed protections in RGFO's balanced approach alternative that was formed by local cooperator and public input. This plan is not over and we will continue to fight for conservation and a balanced management approach moving forward. ☞



EcoFlight flew decision makers over the rugged wilderness lands of Echo Canyon and Table Mountain.

Photo: Mason Cummings, The Wilderness Society

# Reflections on Participation Over 25 Years

By Dave Jones, Alison Gallensky, and Naomi Yoder



Mapping Kauffman Ridge.

Photo: Deb Callahan

## Dave

Our remaining wildlands sometimes feel like the last patches of high mountain snow in the spring. Melting so slowly, drip by drip, that we sometimes fail to notice what we are losing. Day by day, week by week, year by year. Drip, drip, drip. But each time I drive over Trout Creek Pass on US 285 I remember mapping the Kauffman Ridge Roadless area with Deb Callahan back in the late 1990's. In particular I remember one cold day when we had an important recognition: *This place is larger and more important than we imagined!* And by putting it on a map, and putting that map forward along with many others, Wild Connections stopped the melt. Hope persists. And for that I am grateful. ☺

## Celebrating 25 years of Wild Connections

## Alison

When I moved to Colorado as a young software developer, it was important to me to help protect the natural beauty that drew me here. Mapping roadless areas with Wild Connections was a perfect match. Working with Wild Connections also showed me a way to put my software skills to use to help conservation. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software is an essential tool for mapping wild places and wildlife. Wild Connections inspired me to change careers. After training, volunteer work, and freelancing, I now have a full-time job at Rocky Mountain Wild supporting the conservation community with mapping and geospatial analysis. Thanks Wild Connections! ☺



Alison shows off her mapping skills.

Photo: Neil Gallensky

## Naomi

I grew up in the Southern Rockies, on Ute, Cheyenne and Arapahoe lands. I lived in the foothills, just where the mountains meet the prairie. My family moved to the region from elsewhere, but for me, the Southern Rockies was indelibly home. My field mapping work at Wild Connections allowed me to delve into the concept of "home" and clarify my connection to that word and that concept and to make a tiny contribution to a larger effort. Home is not only where we live, but it is where we feel a connection to a place and all of its inhabitants. Home is a location I have a mutual nourishing relationship with, where there is a meaningful, lasting exchange of care. Exploring and documenting the Southern Rockies was an extraordinary opportunity to care for and tend to my home. I photographed and made record of trees and grasses and fences and streams and fields and peaks and valleys for future generations of policy makers and caregivers. I found out that while my contribution might seem small to me, it is also an essential puzzle piece in caring for our home. The puzzle is not complete if there are missing pieces. This understanding serves me every day in my life, and I am grateful to Wild Connections for deepening my relationship with the concept of home, and for providing the opportunity for contribution. ☺



Naomi led the mapping team in Purgatoire roadless area.

Photo: Deb Callahan

# Draft Plan Comment Period for Browns Canyon National Monument is OPEN until January 2, 2020

By John Sztukowski

Agency planning for the 21,586-acre Browns Canyon National Monument, co-managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), began in May 2019 with the scoping period and 60-day public comment period. Now the next step in the process – the draft plan – is underway. The BCNM draft plan and alternatives were released in October, with a 90-day public comment period that is open until January 2, 2020.

This plan will take about a year to complete in total and will guide management of the Browns Canyon National Monument for the foreseeable future.

Wild Connections was part of a greater collaborative group that submitted a “sustainable alternative” during the scoping comment period. The sustainable alternative had overwhelming local public support, however the BLM & USFS did not include it in the draft, citing that it was too close to Alternative B—while ultimately choosing Alternative C as the preferred alternative. Important wildlife and quiet recreation provisions, however, can still be added to the preferred alternative.

Please submit a comment to the BLM in support of prioritizing the protections of wildlife:

- oppose new trail development in big game winter habitat
- support seasonal closures remaining in place for motorized use
- support the BLM continuing to manage for Lands with Wilderness Characteristics found at Railroad Gulch and Ruby Mountain, as well as the Browns Canyon Area of Critical and Environmental Concern, all located within the monument.

For more information, see [www.wildconnections.org](http://www.wildconnections.org). 



**Rugged canyons in the Monument send rainfall toward the Arkansas River.**

Photo: Friends of Brown Canyon

# Dreaming of a “Wild” Wildcat Canyon

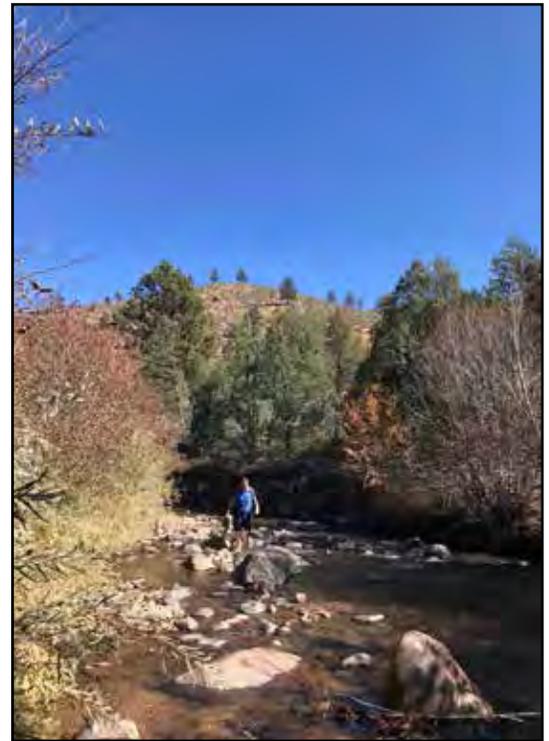
By Misi Ballard

A recent Wild Connections hike into Wildcat Canyon gave our hikers a rare and hopeful look into what we believe is the future of this spectacularly beautiful section of the South Platte River. The group included several hikers familiar with the area, along with a new transplant from the Western Slope anxious to explore the wilds of the Front Range. We fully expected to spend the day documenting illegal motorized activity in Wildcat, but we were in for a lovely surprise.

It wasn't long into our hike to the Big Rock Candy Mountain lookout before some ATV's came tearing down the track behind us (illegally), only to stop, consult with one another, and turn around to head back west, uphill, and, we hoped, out of the canyon. In fact, that was the last we saw of any motorized traffic the entire hike.

We enjoyed an unexpected, soul soothing day in Wildcat breathing in the fresh autumn air. (Note: no dust or exhaust from illegal motorized vehicles.) We experienced quiet worthy of the Wild and Scenic River qualities the canyon has been found to meet. (Note: no loud engines racing up and down steep hillsides.) We made wildlife sightings in and out of the canyon. (Note: deer and elk grazing without fear of wildlife harassment.) The canyon provides refuge for migrating flocks of birds. Lofty, protective cottonwoods along the river's edge still held some fall color. The river ran clear enough to spot a few trout in the deep pools beside the trail.

Our new Wildcat hiker was thrilled to have found such a wildlands gem so close to the urbanized Front Range. We explored the river up and downstream, scrambling over massive granite boulders to discover future climbing adventures and campsites. We rested peacefully along the banks of Tarryall Creek while eating lunch and dreaming of Wildcat Canyon protected forever from the damaging effects of illegal motorized vehicles, and of Wildcat Canyon providing the safe, quiet haven wildlife need to thrive. We dreamed of this stretch of river that provides most of Denver's water supply safe from motor vehicles leaking gas and oil just upstream from the intake system.



**Hiker in Tarryall Creek at Wildcat Canyon.**

Photo: Misi Ballard



**Wildcat Canyon hikers.**

Photo: Misi Ballard

This is the Wildcat experience Wild Connections works tirelessly to ensure by offering educational hikes into the canyon, encouraging the public to comment on travel planning. We consult with the US Forest Service (USFS), Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Park County Commissioners, Trout Unlimited, and other groups and individuals to stop illegal motorized traffic in the canyon.

With the recent close of the USFS Travel Planning comment period, we now look forward to a final planning decision that we believe will include permanent and effective closure and obliteration of the old tracks in Wildcat Canyon and the return of this high

*Continued on page 10*

# Obliteration and Restoration at Green Mountain

By Jean Smith

In my 25 years with Wild Connections, I've seen some bad roads. Roads that run through streams and ATV trails crushing tundra flowers. The jeep road in the Green Mountain Roadless Area was another. (see map on page 10) At Stoney Pass, it went east through the pines, up a steep slope, sloughing off gravel to the down side, then made a turn south along the ridge to end on the edge of a large montane meadow.

But it didn't end. The marshy center of the meadow was deeply rutted by vehicle tracks. Another two-track circled the meadow, leading to bare camp sites at the edge of the forest. A rocky track continued down into Pine Creek.

In the middle of a 14,000 acre forest sweeping eastward from Lost Creek Wilderness across the 10,000' Green Mountain summit and on to the South Platte River corridor, vehicle misuse was brazen.

## Restoration begins

In 2011, Wild Connections and the Forest Service mounted a restoration project to obliterate the entire 3.5 mile route, repair the meadow, and clean up the abandoned mine in Pine Creek. The S. Platte Ranger District decommissioned the route, and by July the cultural and biological surveys were completed.

The Forest Service ripped the road bed and cut small trees to be used as barriers. During two September workdays, 30 volunteers and Forest Service staff seeded, raked, installed erosion mat, and covered the whole route with logs and brush.

Beginning on the south near Pine Creek, teams worked back through an aspen stand and across the meadow. The mine shaft had been filled with rubble and dirt. A bat gate was fabricated on site to block a dangerous adit. The meadow team scattered and raked in many pounds of native grass seeds across the center ruts, around the perimeter and up the spurs to the camp sites. Some of the deepest ruts were left to become seasonal water holes and elk wallows.

Then teams worked from the meadow back down toward Stoney Pass. The worst steep slope was seeded and blanketed in hundreds of feet of erosion mat with rocks and brush to hold it securely. The last section at Stony Pass became a labyrinth of logs and brush. The teams debriefed, took photos, and the gate was locked. Done!

## Six years later

Wild Connections' teams have returned four times, most recently in 2107, to check on the results. Most of the route is now covered with grass and forbs. Some of the areas of granitic soil will take more years to heal. The meadow is now an expanse of waist high grasses, with elk and deer tracks around the small ponds.

The Forest Service has thinned trees along Stoney Pass road for fire mitigation, and the Pawnee montane skipper butterfly census continues in the transects near Wigwam Creek. The area is open to foot or horse travel and may attract backcountry hunters or hikers.

## Challenges

While Green Mountain no longer has motorized access into the interior, it is bounded by roads on all sides, a threat to migrating wildlife. A recent proposal is to build mountain bike trails through the area. ☹

(Photo to the left) Placing logs through the aspen in 2011. Photo: Scott Patterson



Deep ruts in the meadow in 2011. Photo: Lee Patton



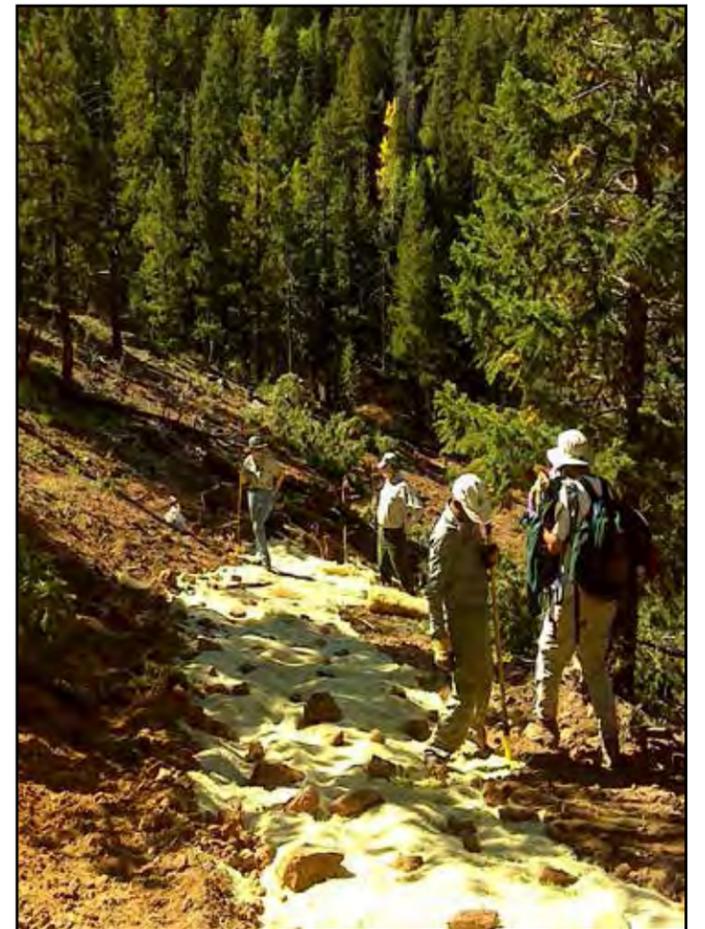
The meadow in 2011 (below right) is now covered in waist high native grasses (above). Photos: Jean Smith, Lee Patton



Seeding the meadow in 2011. Photo: Jean Smith



Volunteer teams. Photo: Vickie Smith



Erosion mat protects steep slopes in 2011. Photo: Jean Smith

# Wildlife Corridors are Getting Attention

By Karl Ford

One of Wild Connections' core values is preserving safe corridors (connections) for wildlife movement. Young animals (and even plants) move to find new places to live away from their parents. Animals migrate between summer/breeding and winter ranges. More recently, wild things have to move to find suitable habitat as the climate changes. While roads are major obstacles for wildlife movement, Colorado is moving to locate and construct more road crossings friendly to wildlife.

On August 21, Governor Polis signed an executive order, Conserving Colorado's Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors. Board member Karl Ford represented Wild Connections at the signing and personally thanked the Governor for his foresight. The Order states:

- The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) shall compile a status report on Colorado's big game migration patterns for the Governor by April 1, 2020.
- DNR shall identify policy, regulatory, and legislative opportunities to ensure the ongoing conservation of seasonal big game habitat and migration corridors.
- DNR shall compile a report by July 1, 2020 that includes:
  1. opportunities to include big game migration corridors in new or existing division policies and regulatory permitting processes
  2. opportunities to work with private landowners, local governments, public landholders, and tribes through existing or other voluntary, non-regulatory programs to sustain migration corridors.
- There are additional provisions for CDOT to enable safe wildlife passage and reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions, and incorporate consideration of big game migration into all levels of its planning process.

While the Order emphasizes big-game species, the Order will also protect many smaller, other species as well with constructed highway overpasses and underpasses.

Speaking of corridors, Wild Connections has made progress with its Climate Initiative. Our readers will recall we have mapped ecologically sensitive areas (including wildlife corridors) and also cold air pools (CAPS) on the central Colorado mountainous landscape. CAPS will remain cooler and wetter with the coming warming and drying of the landscape. Our final products should identify key climate "refugia" (refuges) to help native ecosystems persist during climate change. These refugia need further protection by our land management agencies.



**Polis Signing an executive order, Conserving Colorado's Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors.**

Photo: Karl Ford

We expect to have these identifications completed in advance of the Pike San Isabel Forest Planning process. Stay tuned for previews of these products and notices of Wild Connections climate education hikes in 2020. We plan to gather citizen science data in these areas to demonstrate to land managers the importance of climate refugia to wildlife. We are hoping to deploy temperature data-loggers in specific areas to document the CAPS. These data loggers cost \$100 apiece, so donations to help with this are greatly appreciated. We hope to see you in the field in 2020! ☺

# Long Wild Journey Nearing its End?

By John Stansfield

Ed Zahniser speaks from experience. “Be persistent, be consistent, be actively patient in working for wilderness,” he says—and he should know. He grew up watching his father, Howard, the author of the Wilderness Act of 1964, writing and revising 65 drafts of the legislation over nine years time.

Howard Zahniser’s struggles and those of other wilderness visionaries throughout the United States have paid off richly through the ensuing years. Since 1964, the National Wilderness Preservation System has grown to 803 areas, 111,375,657 acres, in 44 states and Puerto Rico.

The system is a wild natural treasure chest for present and future generations of humans, wild animals, and plant communities. However, nationwide there are millions more acres of lands and waters with wilderness characteristics still unprotected, facing threats from industrial development, a growing population, and the ravages of climate change.

Colorado hosts some of the nation’s finest natural scenery, biological richness, and ecosystem services on its public lands. Currently, Colorado hosts more than 40 Congressionally-designated Wildernesses protecting better than 3.5 million acres. Nearly 90% of the designated areas lie on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service. Only five Wildernesses reside within the eight million acres the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administers in Colorado. All five are located on the Western Slope of the Rockies.



**Fall hiking in Beaver Creek proposed Wilderness.**

Photo: John Stansfield

*Continued on page 10*



**Sangres over Badger Creek.**

Photo: Chris Walters

## Long Wild Journey Nearing Its End?

*Continued from page 9*

After passage of the Wilderness Act, Congress directed the Forest Service, Park Service, and other federal agencies (though not BLM) to inventory their properties for wilderness characteristics. Legislation in 1976 enabled the BLM to undertake a wildland inventory across its own huge holdings in the West.

Concurrent with the agencies, hundreds of conservation groups and thousands of wilderness enthusiasts began their own public land inventories. They produced detailed reports and maps to influence Congress in passing Wilderness designations.

Following Ed Zahniser's advice, wilderness activists waded through legislative processes with great success, influencing creation of more than 30 Colorado Wilderness designations from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Almost all of the areas are in National Forests.

Reporting on their wilderness inventories in 1992, BLM recommended many Wilderness Study Areas to Congress for consideration. The recommendations stirred an upwelling of interest in BLM Wilderness bills. The Colorado Wilderness Network approached U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette with their proposal. As her staff describes events, "This group of citizens gathered input from communities across the state and eventually presented their proposal. Rep. DeGette, understanding the need to preserve Colorado's public lands, took the group's proposal and introduced it as a bill in Congress in 1999."

Showing great persistence and active patience, Rep. DeGette has reintroduced the Colorado Wilderness Act (CWA) in every House session for 20 years. Currently, the bill contains 33 areas across the state, including six rugged gems in the Arkansas Canyon. For the first time, the bill is moving out of Committee to the House floor for potential passage.

Wild Connections is working closely with Rep. DeGette on the CWA. You can help to bring the Colorado Wilderness Act's long wild journey to a successful end. Just call or email your Representative in support of the bill. Details at [degette.house.gov](https://degette.house.gov) or at <https://degette.house.gov/legislative-issues/protecting-colorado-s-wilderness>. 📧

## Dreaming of a "Wild" Wildcat Canyon

*Continued from page 5*

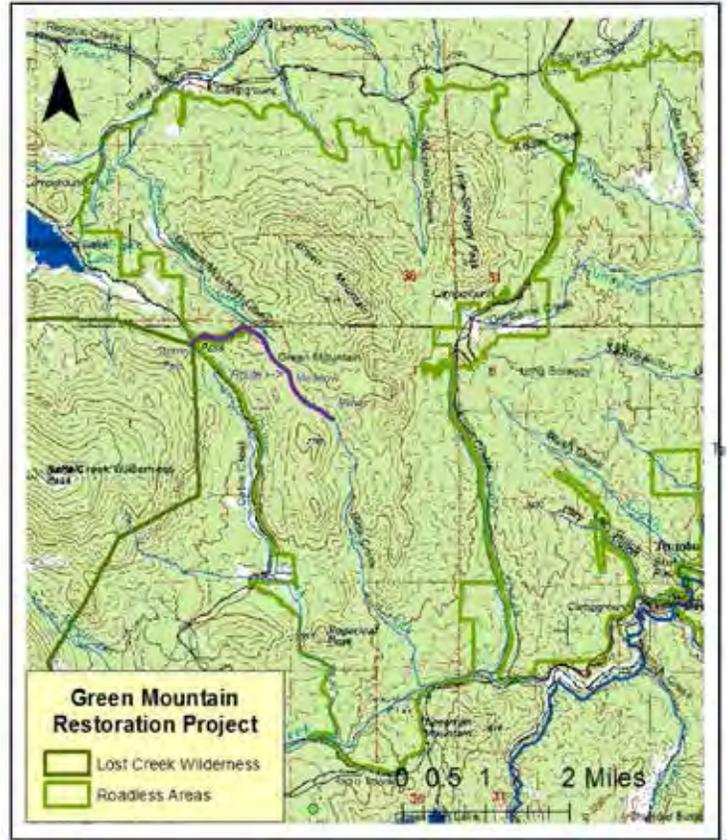
value habitat to the four-footed and winged critters who have long called it home. Wild Connections is ready to support the Forest Service in this much needed work and will be recruiting volunteers to help as plans develop. Stay tuned for next season's Wild Connections restoration plans to help ensure the return of peace and quiet to Wildcat Canyon. 📧

**(Photo on right) Tarryall Creek at Wildcat Canyon.**

Photo: Misi Ballard

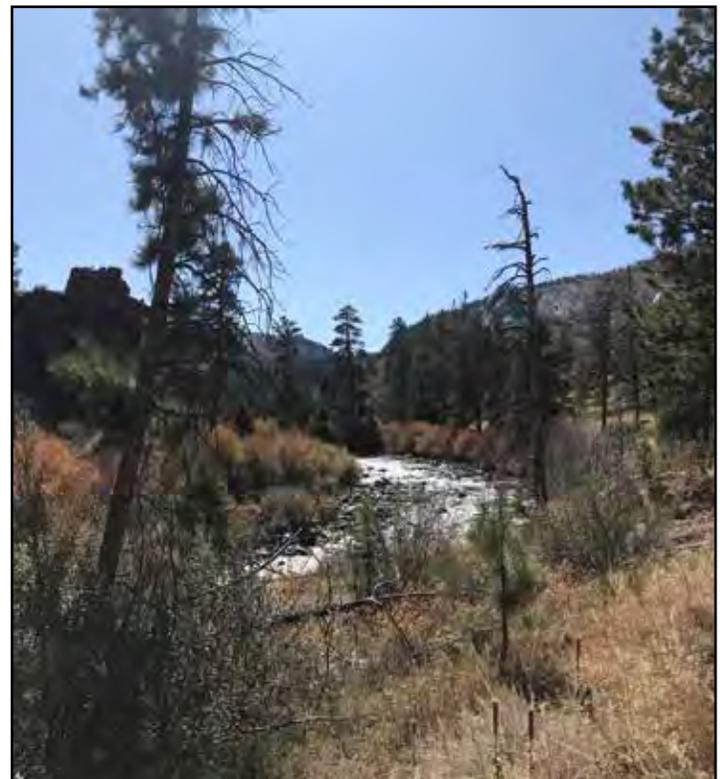
## Obliteration and Restoration at Green Mountain

*See story on page 7*



**Green Mountain Restoration Project Map.**

Photo: Wild Connections





**Your donation counts...**

- ✓ \$10 - 2 lunches & snacks for workday volunteers
- ✓ \$35 - 5 bags of concrete mix
- ✓ \$50 - 5lbs native grass seed
- ✓ \$100 - 10 sq yards of erosion mat
- ✓ \$100 - 1 public slide show venue
- ✓ \$250 - 3 motion cameras for project monitoring
- ✓ \$250 - 4 hours GIS modeling for climate change
- ✓ \$500 - 50 ft of post and cable

The year 2020 will mark Wild Connections' 25th anniversary. We are grateful to our many volunteers, partners, and donors for their support over the past quarter century. In coming years, Wild Connections will continue to do what we do best: help people like you learn about and take action to protect our public lands. "Save Our Wildlands" is more than a slogan. It is our mission and our vision.

What makes Wild Connections unique is our long-term vision of creating and maintaining a network of protected and connected wildlands in central Colorado.

**Do you share this vision? One thing you can do right now is to make a donation.** Your financial support will help us to address the unprecedented conservation challenges facing us today. **If you have given to Wild Connections in the past, please consider increasing your donation. If you have not yet given, will you send your first gift today?**

Sincerely,

Jim Lockhart, President

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