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December 05, 2018

Wild Connections protects and restores Colorado wildlands

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By Bridgett Harris

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Jim Lockhart

Protecting Colorado's wildlands takes many hands.

The public lands we all consider part of our personal playground here in Colorado won't stay pristine and protected on their own. They rely on the collaborative efforts of local, state and federal agencies, the stewardship of everyday citizens and the hard work of conservation organizations like Wild Connections. This all-volunteer organization is a vigilant defender of our open spaces, racking up 23 years of protection and restoration of the wildlands throughout the Arkansas and Platte river basins.

"Restoration work tends to focus on closing illegal routes," says Jim Lockhart, president of Wild Connections. "We budget about \$15,000 per project, and a lot of the work is done by volunteers or in cooperation with government agencies."

But the group's efforts aren't restricted to toiling in the great outdoors. Wild Connections' working board advises and works as part of a coalition to influence wilderness management plans drafted by entities such as the Bureau of Land Management; monitors key legislation for potential impact, such as the proposed oil and gas leasing and mining in BLM lands; creates awareness about these issues and tells the public how it can make a difference.

Wild Connections' range is ambitious. While Lockhart and the group's website simplify the areas worked on into two parts known as the Arkansas and Platte river basins, it's worth trying to put into perspective just how extensive that area is. It encompasses the wildlands around Mount Evans, the Sangre de Cristo mountains, Rampart Range, Culebra Range, the Continental Divide, Holy Cross Wilderness, the Wet Mountains and Spanish Peaks. If you love to hike, bike, hunt, fish, four-wheel, dirt bike or snowmobile, you've absolutely been through the wildlands it supports.

The wide swath Wild Connections covers is even more impressive when you realize that its conservation efforts include surveying and evaluating those areas. Volunteers collect data on thousands of acres of land to create a detailed document that can be used to drive planning, fire management, recreational usage, threat management and recommendations for a variety of agencies.

"More than 100 people get out onto the land and start walking," says Lockhart. "They follow the roads, walk the boundaries and make note of changes to the environment, like illegal roads and other damage." They combine the information into different resources, including the Wild Connections Conservation Plan, which will be updated in the near future. Lockhart says they'll be looking for volunteers for that in the new year.

A restoration project in one of these areas might include tearing up an illegal or obsolete road and reseeding the area, repairing damage caused by humans cutting switchbacks on trails, or putting up wildlife-friendly fences to prevent the creation of new illegal routes.

A recent example of the group's work is two South Park alpine restoration projects, completed in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service South Park Ranger District, Mosquito Range Heritage Initiative and Wildlands Restoration Volunteers. The projects reclaimed area in which illegal roads had negatively impacted the headwaters of North Tarryall Creek and Beaver Creek.

Lockhart says that such work benefits everyone.

"After all," says Lockhart, "Colorado's outdoor spaces are what draw a lot of people here in the first place. We have to protect them to enjoy them."

— Bridgett Harris

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