

High Mesa Grassland Wilderness Study Area proposed Expansion

23,559 acres, managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Located in BLM's Royal Gorge Field Office, Rocky Mountain District



High Mesa Grassland Background

BLM designated the 682 acre High Mesa Grassland Wilderness Study Area (WSA) an Instant Wilderness Study Area in 1976. BLM stated that the designation was made “ because of the unusual diversity of grasses here; 17 native grass species have been identified within a small geographic area. In addition to grass, you’ll find flowering forbs, oakbrush, conifers and mountain shrubs and could spot elk, mule deer, black bears, bobcats, coyotes, and other wildlife roaming the landscape. Activities include hiking, horseback riding, and photography.”

This Resource Natural Area is locally known as Sommerville Table and sits atop Table Mountain of the Arkansas River Canyonlands.

General Description

The High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion is located in Bighorn Sheep Canyon, directly north of the Arkansas River and US Highway 50 in Fremont County, approximately 11 miles west of Cañon City, CO and 32 miles east of Salida, CO.

The no longer active Union Pacific Railroad separates this unit from the Arkansas River and defines the majority of the southern boundary, along with the Parkdale State Trust Land block and private property to the southeast. The western boundary consists primarily of BLM designated routes. The northern and eastern boundaries are completely bounded by BLM public land or private property.

This unit ranges from an elevation of approximately 9,500 feet atop the Table Mountain mesa to below 6,000 feet at the southern drainages. This expansive area is quite diverse, bolstered by ecosystems consisting of high elevation mixed forests, montane grasslands, steep rocky mid-elevation woodlands, and riparian drainages. This unit supports a diversity of plant and wildlife habitats, due to its topographic variety and varying ecosystems. Montane grasslands are common in this unit, supporting an array of wildflowers, shrubs, and native grasses. The high elevation areas also consist of mixed forests of Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, Colorado blue spruce and quaking aspen, with bristlecone pine mixing in at the higher elevations. A pinyon-juniper woodland and Gambel oak scrubland make up the rugged lower elevation areas. Creeks, tributaries and gulches – including East Gulch, Hindman Gulch, Sulphur Gulch, Spike Buck Gulch, Bootlegger Gulch, Tallahassee Creek, and Currant Creek – drain the unit.

Table Mountain proposed Wilderness

Table Mountain is under consideration as Wilderness under the Colorado Wilderness Act (CWA), and was first proposed as Wilderness under the CWA in 2007. The proposed boundaries and acreage (23,559) in the High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion match that of the Table Mountain proposed Wilderness.

For the Table Mountain proposed Wilderness, the Colorado Wilderness Act Book notes that “together with McIntyre Hills to the south, they comprise one of the steepest Arkansas River canyons. Table Mountain acts as a wildlife corridor along the Arkansas River and to other regions to its north, and it also serves as the home and nesting ground to a variety of

raptors, including bald eagles in the winter. There is also a broad array of habitat in the area of Table Mountain including arid shrubland, woodlands, and meadows.”

BLM Land with Wilderness Characteristics

In 2015, the BLM RGFO found this unit (CO-020-019), labeled Echo Canyon, to have Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC). The BLM found 31,661 contiguous roadless acres, well surpassing the minimum size criteria of 5,000 acres to qualify for wilderness, as specified in BLM’s Manual 6310 for ‘Conducting Wilderness Characteristics Inventory on BLM Lands’. BLM also found this unit to meet the additional criteria for LWCs: naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude, outstanding opportunities for primitive and unrefined recreation, and supplemental values.

Size, Roadlessness, and Naturalness

The High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion is primarily affected by the forces of nature, with human impacts considerably unnoticeable within the unit. Motorized public access to the unit is limited to BLM routes that border the western boundary of the unit. Other routes found within the unit showed a lack of motorized use and an overall apparent lack of regular use, with the forces of nature reclaiming many of the former routes.

Motorized public access to the WSA proposed expansion is quite limited. Portions of the western unit are bounded by BLM route 6060, a high-clearance four-wheel drive road in BLM’s Arkansas River Travel Management Plan, accessed north of Texas Creek. A short BLM route, T6065, open to ATVs, motorcycles, and non-motorized use, located just north of Texas Creek and accessed by BLM 6060 has been excluded from the proposed WSA boundary. Similarly, an administrative route and radio tower, in the northern portion of the unit atop Table Mountain, have also been excluded from the proposed WSA as a cherry system. The BLM notes in their LWC report that the radio tower is noticeable when within the vicinity of it, however is not seen from other areas of the unit.

The BLM went on to state in their LWC report that all other routes within this unit that are identified in BLM’s Arkansas River Travel Management Plan were designated for administrative access only, limiting motorized access to BLM personnel and grazing permittees. Otherwise access is only on foot in a few sections.

The BLM found naturalness here in their 2015 report, stating that “the overall size and vastness of the area diminishes the scattered man-made features contributing to its natural condition.” Human impacts that were observed in the unit were minor and diffused throughout this expansive area and do not affect the natural integrity or the apparent naturalness of the unit overall.

Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude and Primitive Recreation.

Opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation are abundant in the 23,559 acre contiguous roadless area that forms the High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion.

The rolling hills and steep ridges, mid-elevation forests, vegetated gulches, and montane grasslands provide extensive opportunity for solitude in the forms of isolation, remoteness, lack of visitation and vegetative and topographic screening. The BLM identified in their LWC report that, “the topography screens the highway and railroad tracks since they are situated in the river valley on the southern edge. The rugged terrain limits access to those visitors who are seeking solitude.”

The BLM also found outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation in the forms of hiking, backpacking, hunting, birdwatching, wildlife viewing and studying geological features. The Colorado Wilderness Act Book also identifies horseback riding and rock climbing as available recreational activities at Table Mountain.

Supplemental Values

The High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion has extraordinary biological values. Much of this unit aligns with BLM’s Arkansas Canyonlands Area of Critical Environment Concern (ACEC), a nearly 24,000 acre area recognized for outstanding recreation, scenic views, and critical and valued species. This ACEC extends south to encompass the northern portion of BLM’s McIntyre Hills WSA. The Arkansas Canyonlands ACEC also contains the current 682 acre High Mesa Grassland WSA, a Research Natural Area also known as Sommerville Table, atop Table Mountain.

The Colorado National Heritage Program (CNHP) recognizes two very high biodiversity areas in the unit as Potential Conservation Areas (PCA). Much of the unit contains the greater McIntyre Hills PCA, a very high biodiversity significant area that extends along the

Arkansas River and offers habitat for several globally rare plant communities and species, including the largest known concentration of the globally imperiled species, including the Arkansas Canyon Stickleaf (*Nuttallia densa*), Degener beardtongue (*Penstemon degeneri*), Fendler cloak-fern (*Argyrochosma fendleri*), and jeweled blazingstar (*Nuttallia speciosa*). The Arkansas Canyon Stickleaf is endemic to this region, with this PCA representing the largest known concentration in the world.

CNHP also recognizes a 6,200 acre PCA, East Gulch at Bull Ridge, that overlaps with much of the northwest portion of the unit. This PCA offers high biodiversity significance due to an excellent to good occurrence of a globally vulnerable riparian natural community, narrowleaf cottonwood / river birch (*Populus angustifolia* / *Betula occidentalis*) woodland and a good occurrence of the globally vulnerable narrowleaf cottonwood -Douglas-fir (*Populus angustifolia* - *Pseudotsuga menziesii*) woodland. It also has an excellent to good occurrence of the apparently globally secure narrowleaf cottonwood/coyote willow (*Populus angustifolia* / *Salix exigua*) woodland and a good occurrence of the globally secure coyote willow/mesic graminoids (*Salix exigua* - *mesic graminoids*) shrubland.

The Conservation Science Partners (CSP) recognized 7,641 acres of Table Mountain, overlapping the High Mesa Grassland WSA, as a core area possessing conservation values: important ecologically based indicators of high biodiversity, resilience to climate change, and landscape connectivity. This is one of only six core conservation areas that CSP identified in BLM's expansive RGFO region.

High habitat and range values for many wildlife species can be found in the High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion, including Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, black bear, elk, mule deer, pronghorn, mountain lion, coyote, the Colorado critically imperiled species, Brazilian free tailed bat and species of most concern and Colorado BLM sensitive, Gunnison's prairie-dog.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife has identified High Priority Habitat throughout the area. A large portion of the area is identified as winter range and production (lambing) areas for bighorn sheep and as severe winter range for mule deer. Smaller portions of the area are identified as winter concentration areas for elk and mule deer and as severe winter range and production (calving) areas for elk. Streams flowing through the area are identified as

sportsfish management waters. The portion of the Arkansas River that flows adjacent to the area is identified as Gold Medal waters.

Many critical and valued bird species have also been identified in the WSA proposed expansion. Of note, this unit provides winter forage, winter range, winter concentration and roost sites for the Colorado BLM sensitive bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). There are nesting sites for the endangered American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*). Additionally this unit provides proposed critical habitat for the endangered Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*). There is overall range for the species of concern, scaled quail (*Callipepla squamata*). Wild turkey and Canadian goose have also been identified for this area.

Table Mountain provides outstanding scenic views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range, the Arkansas River Canyonlands, the iconic Royal Gorge, and Pikes Peak. This area also possesses outstanding cultural, historical, and geological values.

Manageability

The High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion does not have any conflicts that would compromise its manageability as a Wilderness Study Area. The current boundaries and 23,559 acres of the High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion match that of the Table Mountain proposed Wilderness of the 2022 CWA.

The BLM found Lands with Wilderness Characteristics here in 2015 and has included it in their range of alternatives (2017 Preliminary Alternatives and 2019 Draft Alternatives B) for the ongoing Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan (ECRMP) revision.

Wilderness Study Area designation is not only deserved but needed at Table Mountain. As outlined above, it is one of the premiere intact Colorado backcountry public lands areas and needs corresponding protection.

Even with BLM ACEC designation and BLM LWC findings, this area is constantly at risk of impairment. Uranium mining development has historically been a threat to the eastern portion of Table Mountain, which has been reignited in 2022. And in 2020, the BLM approved a quarry expansion (from private land) of nearly 700 acres onto BLM's Echo

Canyon (Table Mountain) Lands with Wilderness Characteristics area, despite the ongoing ECRMP revision, which could have protected these wilderness values through the management planning process.

This is the largest contiguous roadless area in BLM's Royal Gorge Field Office, where they found 31,661 acres in 2015. However this and other concerns have diminished the proposed Table Mountain wilderness over time as well, from the 27,888 acres first proposed in 2007, to the current 23,559 acres proposed in 2022. The area cannot be impacted further and expected to retain its exceptional wildlife, recreation, and naturalness values.

Wilderness Study Area designations protect climate resources

Wilderness Study Areas are BLM's most durable and important administrative designation to maintain wilderness character on certain high value public lands. These wild and undisturbed BLM-managed lands not only harbor important wildlife habitat and enhance species connectivity between nearby roadless and protected lands, but serve as climate refugia for species adapting to a changing planet.

Rocky Mountain Wild, in coordination with Wild Connections, is in the process of a multi-year climate modeling project for central Colorado to identify climate corridors and refugia, or areas where biodiversity, a healthy natural variety of animal and plant species, will persist as the climate changes. The High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion area is identified as one of the areas that scores highly for climate resiliency and climate refugia in the face of changing climatic conditions.

The area scored above average in all four components of the model. Areas with above average scores are ranked in the model as fair, good, better and best. The High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion area is ranked good for the Ecological Connectivity and Resilience components of the model, based primarily on The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Landscapes model, ranked as better for the Current Biodiversity portion of the model, based on many of the factors described in the Supplemental Values section above, and ranked as better for the Natural Landscapes portion of the model based on large areas of undisturbed habitat within and surrounding the area according to Colorado Natural Heritage Program's Landscape Disturbance Index model.

Furthermore, the High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion area is the central linkage that connects other nearby wildlife and climate corridors: connecting the Thompson, Gribble, Twin Mountains LWC, Upper Red Canyon LWC, Cooper Mountain LWC and Beaver Creek WSA to the east, which is only separated by Highway 9 and a handful of county and BLM roads. It connects to BLM's McIntyre Hills WSA and Grape Creek WSA to the south, only separated by the Arkansas River and Highway 50. It connects to Bear Mountain LWC and Badger Creek LWC to the west, which then connects northwest to Browns Canyon National Monument or south across the River to the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness. All of these aforementioned areas are either protected as Wilderness, managed as WSA, or identified for its LWCs. Table Mountain is at the heart of this region, and needs adequate protection to safeguard the greater east/west and north/south wildlife and climate corridors in central Colorado.

These lands also sequester significant amounts of carbon, help conserve scarce water resources and safeguard cultural landscapes and artifacts.

Wilderness Study Area designations help achieve 30x30

In order to meet the ambitious conservation goals of the Biden administration and the state of Colorado, pursuant to conserving 30% of the nation's lands and waters by 2030, BLM must consider Wilderness Study Area administrative protection for qualifying areas like the High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion.

BLM has Authority to Designate Wilderness Study Areas

BLM has the authority and obligation to inventory and protect wilderness-quality lands in land use planning processes. Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), the Interior Department is directed to maintain current inventories of the resources it manages—including areas that qualify for wilderness designation. Under section 202 of FLPMA, once such inventories have been completed, the Department can and should designate lands as Wilderness Study Areas to ensure their durable conservation management.

We urge the BLM to consider the designation of new Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) in Colorado as a key tool for BLM to protect wilderness-quality and undisturbed public lands through collaborative land use planning processes.

Additional Information

This High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion was prepared by Wild Connections' Conservation Director, John Sztukowski.

The below map was produced in 2023 by Rocky Mountain Wild for this High Mesa Grassland WSA proposed expansion.

References

[BLM High Mesa Grassland Wilderness Study Area](#)

[BLM's 2012 Manual 6330 - Management of BLM Wilderness Study Areas](#)

[2021 Colorado Wilderness Act Book](#)

[BLM's 2015 Lands with Wilderness Characteristics Report for Echo Canyon \(COF-202-019\)](#)

[Wild Connections' 2015 Table Mountain, Echo Canyon LWC report](#)

[The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976](#)

[Rocky Mountain Wild's Climate Corridors and Refugia Modeling for Central Colorado 2022 Report](#)

