

Solitude

Broad valley, twin mountains are hallmarks of Buffalo Peaks Wilderness

By DEB ACORD THE GAZETTE TELEGRAPH, COLORADO SPRINGS, CO FRIDAY, AUGUST 20TH, 2004



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO - LONG TRIP: Pack llamas head through a meadow in the Buffalo Peaks Wilderness Area during a three-day, two night hiking tour of the region.

In September 1964, the Wilderness Act became law, protecting 9.4 million acres of wild land throughout the United States. Today that act protects more than 106 million acres. In this four-part series, Out There looks at wilderness areas near the Front Range and the past, present and future of Wilderness with a capital W.

Steve Sunday, a ranger with the U.S. Forest Service, oversees more than 246,000 acres of wilderness with high mountain lakes, dark canyons and eight of the state's highest peaks.

But Sunday feels most protective of a region that has none of those things. The Buffalo Peaks Wilderness, covering 43,410 acres, lies southwest of Fairplay. Its signature mountains are thirteeners, not fourteeners. Its water runs in bubbling creeks that beavers have diverted into ponds. Instead of mysterious canyons, it has miles of meadow green with willows and aspen and decorated with yellow cinquefoil, coral-colored paintbrush, purple asters and pink fireweed.

Buffalo Peaks lacks the cachet of nearby Collegiate Peaks Wilderness. It also lacks something else — crowds.

That's one reason Sunday appreciates Buffalo Peaks and hopes it stays the way it was on a recent Saturday morning — virtually empty, nearly silent, and wild.

Crows called to each other and squirrels tossed pine cones from Douglas fir and Engelmann spruce. A breeze ruffled the aspen leaves. Water hissed as hand-sized brook trout jumped in tiny pools created by fallen branches in Fourmile Creek.

"Going to Buffalo Peaks is my vacation from the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness," says Sunday, who works as a wilderness ranger out of the Leadville Ranger District office.

Sunday isn't denying that Collegiate Peaks is breathtaking. He believes all the designated wilderness lands that he patrols are valuable. And he sees firsthand the draw of wilderness areas that feature fourteeners.

A recent Colorado State Parks report said that last year a halfmillion people climbed at least one of the 54 14,000-foot peaks in Colorado. Parks officials predict that will rise another 10 percent in the next year.

But Sunday is one of only two people responsible for a huge swath of wild land. Taking care of those overrun fourteeners and all the land surrounding them is a daunting task.

Colorado's wilderness areas are protected under the Wilderness Act, passed 40 years ago by Congress. Today there are 106 million acres of wilderness in the United States, including 3.4 million acres in Colorado.

According to the act, written by wilderness advocate Howard Zahniser, "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

There are no viable roads in wilderness areas; motorized travel and even bicycles are prohibited. So is the building of structures.

Long before the Wilderness Act became law, noted conservationist Aldo Leopold defined wilderness as "the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization."

That civilization has brought with it inherent problems, says John Stansfield, of Larkspur, coordinator for the Central Colorado Wilderness Coalition, a Colorado Springs group that has identified 11 areas in the region that have wilderness potential but aren't yet protected under the Wilderness Act. One of those 11 areas would form a collar around the existing Buffalo Peaks Wilderness Area.

Stansfield believes the Wilderness Act has been successful at protecting wild lands. But there's an inherent flaw, he says: "The managing agencies aren't as diligent as they should be in protecting wilderness values."

Wilderness is intrinsically tied to recreation, Stansfield says. Leopold even noted that, saying, "wilderness areas are first of all a series of sanctuaries for the primitive arts of wilderness travel, especially canoeing and packing."

But that tie between recreation and wilderness has something to do with its current state, Stansfield says.

"There has been a tremendous reduction in recreation spending, which means wilderness management has lost a substantial part of its funding," he says. "That goes against the very reason a wilderness area is created — to protect the inherent wildness of the place."

Still, the passage of the Wilderness Act allowed parts of Colorado such as Buffalo Peaks to remain healthy ecosystems that are vital to the health of wildlife, and to a lesser extent, people.

If the Wilderness Act never had been passed, Stansfield says, "there would have been opportunities for slow degradation, taking the areas apart piece by piece — this timber cut here, that ATV trail there, this patented mining claim turned into a small subdivision there."

With the preservation of Buffalo Peaks and other wilderness areas, Stansfield says, "we have that opportunity for a heightened experience for people who visit them simply because they are special."

Especially in places such as Buffalo Peaks, where there are no ATV trails and no fourteeners to climb, Stansfield says, "people don't just recreate, they venerate."

The gentle slopes of Buffalo Peaks are perfect for venerating, meditating or just plain loafing. East Buffalo Peak, at 13,300 feet, and West Buffalo Peak, 13,326 feet, offer rewarding climbs.

At one time, 25 million to 30 million years ago, the valley was filled by volcanic ash and lava flows. Today it's a wide, flat area that's the southern boundary of the Mosquito Range.

Elk, bighorn sheep and beaver live there, along with a healthy population of black bear.

The most southern slopes have stands of ancient bristlecone pine; other slopes hold dense stands of aspen, Engelmann spruce, Douglas fir and lodgepole.

Like most wilderness areas in Colorado, Buffalo Peaks sits at or above 9,200 feet. Only 18 miles of established trails — some little more than narrow game paths — wind through the valley, true to the wilderness values held by Sunday.

"A lot of the trails in there are intermittent," he says. "They make people pull out their maps and think about the terrain and where they are. They don't really take people by the hand as much as some other parts of Colorado."

When Sunday gets out on the narrow Rich Creek-Rough & Tumbling Creek loop trail that winds through Buffalo Meadows, he says, "I thank God someone had the foresight to protect it. I don't think it would be like this if they hadn't."

As the predictable afternoon thunderstorm moved over West Buffalo Peak, the meadow's carpet of green darkened. A hawk screamed overhead, and the wilderness got a little wilder.

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BUFFALO PEAKS

Location: 10 miles northeast of Buena Vista, 15 miles southwest of Fairplay

Acres: 43,410

Miles of trails: 18

Designated as wilderness: 1993

Highest point: 13,326 feet

Popular hikes: Rich Creek-Rough & Tumbling Creek loop, 12 miles, rated moderate; West Buffalo Peak, 7 miles to 13,326 feet, rated moderate

Information: Leadville Ranger District, 1-719-486-0749



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DEB ACORD, THE GAZETTE - WEST BUFFALO PEAK