



## ***Browns Canyon Wilderness Act*** **Fact Sheet**

The Browns Canyon Wilderness Act, HR 4235/S 1971, introduced by Congressman Joel Hefley (R-CO) and Senator Wayne Allard (R-CO), will protect 20,000 acres of pristine Colorado canyon country, and the dramatic scenery of the Arkansas Valley, as wilderness. Wilderness designation for this area will provide for a balance of recreational activities in the region, as well as preserve a spectacular backdrop to the most popular whitewater rafting destination in Colorado.

### **Location**

The proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness area is located in central Colorado's Chaffee County, between the outdoor sport hubs of Buena Vista and Salida. From the Arkansas River flowing just outside the western boundary, this wild canyon country rises eastward to the forested areas of Aspen Ridge. Browns Canyon is topographically and ecologically one unit of wild land although it is administrated by two federal land agencies, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Royal Gorge Resource Area, and the Pike and San Isabel National Forest.

### **Progress toward Wilderness**

Conservation groups and local citizens have been advocating wilderness designation for Browns Canyon for over a decade. In 1991, the BLM recommended a portion of the proposed wilderness for protection, making it a Wilderness Study Area (WSA). Since 1994, citizens have proposed the WSA, as well as surrounding BLM and National Forest land, for wilderness designation. This expanded area is included in Congresswoman Diana DeGette's Colorado Wilderness Act of 2005 (HR 4587).

Friends of Browns Canyon, a local grassroots group based in Salida, Colorado, has led the effort to involve the local community and local businesses in preserving the stunning natural scenery of the proposed wilderness. Due to the energy of this dedicated group, numerous local organizations and stakeholders have endorsed the Browns Canyon Wilderness proposal, including the Chaffee County Commissioners, Arkansas River Outfitters Association, Buffalo Peaks Back Country Horsemen, Collegiate Peaks Trout Unlimited, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Colorado Wilderness Network and the Central Colorado Wilderness Coalition.

### **Natural, Cultural and Recreational Values**

In Browns Canyon, streams have cut steep gulches through the pinkish granite and metamorphic rock leading down to the Arkansas River. Aspen Ridge affords a magnificent, sweeping view across the canyon to the 13,000 and 14,000-foot peaks of the Sawatch Range. River recreationists enjoy this landscape, as well as sightings of bighorn sheep and other wildlife, from their boats and rafts.

Elevations in the proposed wilderness area range from 10,000 to 7,300 feet, dropping dramatically from Aspen Ridge down to the Arkansas River. As elevation increases, the vegetation changes noticeably. The pinyon-juniper trees that dominate the arid lands along the river give way to Douglas fir, ponderosa and limber pine, and large stands of aspen. These lands are important wintering ground for deer and elk. There is a herd of approximately 150 bighorn sheep in the area, increased from a small population reintroduced in the 1980's, as well as eight raptor species, including golden eagles, prairie falcons, and great-horned owls. Mountain lions, black bears, bobcats, foxes, coyotes and pine martens also call Browns Canyon home.

In addition to providing permanent habitat for the above species, the proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness will help preserve a lengthy portion of the historic Turret Foot and Horse Trail within its boundaries. The trail was created in the late 1800's and used by miners and prospectors traveling from Nathrop to the old mining town of Turret.

The proposed wilderness will also help secure a diversity of recreational opportunities in the Arkansas Valley, providing areas for solitude and primitive recreation such as hiking, skiing, backpacking, hunting, fishing, snowshoeing, birding, climbing and horseback riding. These forms of recreation and exploration will complement the wide range of ways visitors and local residents explore the region and its natural resources.

Mountain bike trails to the west of the river and fantastic Class II-V whitewater, including the popular Browns Canyon section, draw thousands of visitors to the area every day of the summer. The proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness also complements the recently designated Four Mile Travel Management Area to the north which provides over 100 miles of routes and trails to accommodate off-road vehicles, including all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles.

The scenery and wild character of Browns Canyon provide a pivotal backdrop for visitors to the region, the clients of local businesses and river outfitters. The Arkansas River is one of the more popular whitewater rafting destinations in the nation. The regional rafting industry accounts for over \$23 million in direct expenditures for a total economic impact of over \$60 million in the Arkansas Valley annually.

### **Why Wilderness is Important**

The permanence of wilderness designation will ensure that the natural legacy of Browns Canyon remains intact for future generations of boaters, hikers, hunters and explorers. Wilderness designation provides guidance for forest management and preserves opportunities for scientific research. Non-mechanized recreation and trail maintenance will continue, as will emergency vehicle access. Wilderness designation will protect the Browns Canyon bighorn sheep population as well as the many other important wildlife species in the area. It will preserve high alpine forests, shimmering aspen groves, and wild vistas. Without wilderness protection, it is uncertain how long these landscapes will remain undeveloped, or how long the mountain lions, black bears and pine martens will be able to roam and reproduce in their natural territory.

### **Status of Legislation**

Congressman Hefley and Senator Allard introduced wilderness legislation for Browns Canyon in November of 2005 (HR 4235/S 1971). Citizens are eager to see the wilderness proposal move quickly through Congress to protect a much-loved piece of Colorado's rugged canyon country.

### **For More Information**

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