

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Black Mountain-Windy Gulch

The undisturbed nature of Black Mountain and Windy Gulch offers great opportunities to view Colorado's unique mountain vegetation, interesting rock formations, and rare wildlife sightings in peaceful seclusion.

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Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 22,439 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 22,206 acres
BLM Field Office: White River Field Office (Meeker)
Location: The proposed Black Mountain-Windy Gulch Wilderness is approximately 10 miles west of Meeker in Rio Blanco County and consists of both BLM's Black Mountain and Windy Gulch WSAs.

Wilderness Qualities

Black Mountain and Windy Gulch WSAs are contiguous areas that protect 10 miles of the Smith Gulch drainage and its tributary Windy Gulch. High ridge tops and steep, narrow canyons where Douglas fir cling to the rugged walls provide crucial wildlife habitat adjacent to the Piceance Basin. Extensive mineral exploration and development has occurred in recent years in this region of Colorado. The resulting maze of roads, power lines, and pipelines has severely diminished the available habitat for wildlife, putting ever increasing pressure on it if unroaded areas shrink. If oil shale is ever developed in this region, a protected Black Mountain-Windy Gulch would remain the only untracked area in oil shale country.

All of Black Mountain-Windy Gulch is prime mule deer habitat, and several thousand acres are considered severe winter range for as many as 3,000 deer. According to the Colorado Division of Wildlife, a major mule deer migration corridor also crosses the area, with up to 8,000 animals using it annually. As mule deer habitat in the Piceance Basin is destroyed by oil shale development, deer will be forced into the remaining undeveloped areas such as Black Mountain-Windy Gulch. If this area is also developed, the mule deer population there will decline by an estimated 350 animals, according to BLM. Black Mountain-Windy Gulch also provides winter range for elk, and year-round habitat for a small population of mountain lions. Because of the abundance of wildlife, big game hunting is the primary recreational use of the area.

Black Mountain-Windy Gulch offers one of only three opportunities for preservation of a portion of the White River's lower basin as the river traverses the Piceance Basin. The boundary of Black Mountain parallels the White River for approximately two miles. Bald eagles wintering in cottonwoods along the river frequently visit Black Mountain-Windy Gulch on hunting excursions. The area's steep cliffs and deep canyons provide ideal niches for other birds-of-prey as well, including red-tailed hawks, northern harriers, great horned owls, and golden eagles. Eleven golden eagle nests are known to exist within Black Mountain-Windy Gulch.

Black Mountain-Windy Gulch can be considered an extension of the Grand Hogback, which slices through northwest Colorado. Colorful badlands in shades of red, pink, yellow, tan, gray, and green denote upper Smith Gulch. Elevations range from 6,100 feet along the White River to 7,205 feet on Black Mountain. Dense stands of pinyon-juniper, scrub oak, and sagebrush are broken by steep-sided valleys. Open meadows and expansive vistas enhance feelings of solitude within the area.



Hiking along the canyon. (Kurt Kunkle)

Resource Information

BLM identified no resource conflicts with wilderness designation for this area. BLM's energy and mineral resource evaluation concluded Black Mountain-Windy Gulch has minimal to no mineral potential.

No oil and gas leases or mining claims of any kind exist within the area. Black Mountain-Windy Gulch has low potential for coal development, and is considered to be a low priority for potential oil shale development because any formations which contain potentially rich oil shale zones have been eroded from the area.

Black Mountain-Windy Gulch does not contain any commercial timber resources. The predominant pinyon-juniper woodlands could supply fence posts and fuel wood for local use, but other more accessible supplies exist in close proximity.

Black Mountain and Windy Gulch WSAs contain portions of three grazing allotments. Ten earthen stock ponds exist within Windy Gulch WSA and nine in Black Mountain WSA, many of which are silted in and are revegetating naturally.

The area is currently closed to motorized recreation.

Black Mountain-Windy Gulch contains no perennial surface streams, but several springs exist. Smith Gulch drains through the area from the north.



Clambering over boulders in the CWP. (Kurt Kunkle)

Boundary Issues

Citizens propose a boundary almost identical to BLM's Wilderness Study Area boundaries for the two areas and, additionally propose closing the cherrystemmed road on the south side of Black Mountain WSA. Since the two WSAs are contiguous and encompass the upper and lower sections of the same landform, it makes sense to consider them as two units of a single wilderness.

