

# Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

## Browns Canyon

Browns Canyon is one of the last pristine canyons in Colorado. My river company runs thousands of people down the Arkansas River and their eyes light up as they can still see the evidence of mountain lions and big horn sheep roaming up and down the canyon.

Duke Bradford, Arkansas Valley Adventures, Granite

**Citizens Wilderness Proposal:** 20,025 acres  
**BLM Wilderness Study Area:** 6,614 acres  
**BLM Field Office:** Royal Gorge Field Office (Cañon City)  
**Location:** The proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness is located in Chaffee County, six miles southeast of Buena Vista, and is bounded on the west by the Arkansas River.

### Wilderness Qualities

Browns Canyon is topographically and ecologically one unit of wild land divided in its administration between the BLM and the Pike-San Isabel National Forest. The BLM recommended the WSA in the westerly portion for wilderness designation. In its RARE II process, the Forest Service did not recommend the Aspen Ridge unit for designation, but in viewing the proposed wilderness as a whole, it becomes clear that Aspen Ridge is an area with outstanding wild qualities. This opinion is shared by an overwhelming majority of citizens who commented during the two agencies' wilderness study processes.

Streams have cut steep gulches through the pinkish granite and metamorphic rock of the area. Pinyon-juniper forest dominates the arid lands in Browns Canyon along the Arkansas River. The vegetation changes dramatically as elevation increases, giving way to Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and the stands of aspen for which Aspen Ridge is named. Aspen Ridge at 10,000 feet affords magnificent views of the 13,000 and 14,000-foot peaks of the Sawatch Range to the west.

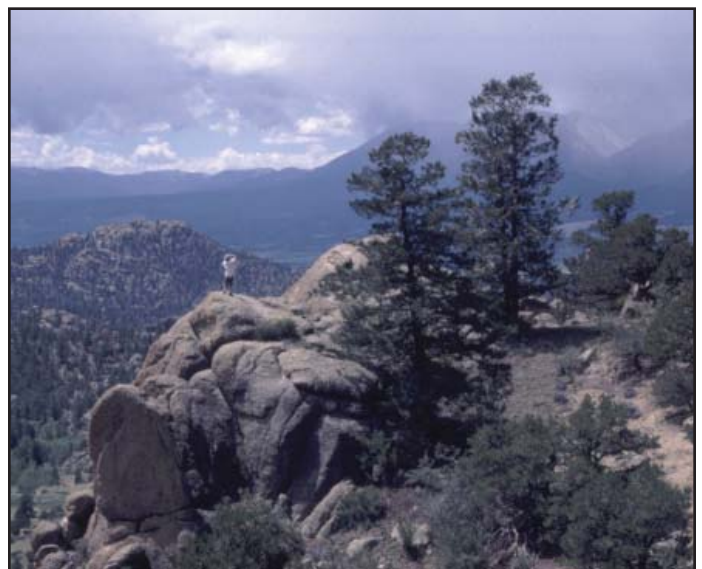
The area is an important wintering ground for deer and elk, according to the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Twenty bighorn sheep were reintroduced into Browns Canyon in 1980, with an additional 20 in both 1982 and 1985. It is estimated that there is currently a herd of bighorns whose range includes Browns Canyon and portions of Aspen Ridge. Other mammals found within the area include mountain lions, black bears, bobcats, foxes, coyotes, pine martens and many

smaller animals. Eight species of raptors have been sighted in the area, including golden eagles, prairie falcons, and great-horned owls.

Browns Canyon of the Arkansas River is widely known among whitewater boating enthusiasts. It is the busiest stretch of the river, totaling more than 90,000 user-days annually, according to figures compiled by BLM. Protection of the wild country surrounding the river canyon will be appreciated by these visitors and the tourist industry which they support. Hunting, hiking, fishing, and backpacking are among the other numerous recreational pursuits possible in the area.

### Resource Information

Timber is not a valuable commercial resource of Browns Canyon. The trees of the higher Aspen Ridge unit are mainly ponderosa pine and Douglas fir in spotty stands. Topography and low volumes per acre limit commercial opportunity. There have been no past timber sales in Aspen Ridge and none are planned for the future. The lower unit, Browns Canyon, contains



Hiker on an overlook. (Kurt Kunkle)

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only low value pinyon-juniper woodlands in extremely rugged terrain.

Browns Canyon contains portions of several allotments. Very little grazing occurs within the proposed wilderness due to rugged terrain and lack of forage. The Forest Service manages most of Aspen Ridge with a wildlife emphasis and but allows limited livestock grazing on the remainder.

There is no potential for oil and gas resources within the proposed wilderness owing to the igneous nature of the geologic strata.

The GEM mineral evaluation of Browns Canyon by BLM reports that the area has little or no mineralization of commercial value. There are currently no active patented or unpatented mining claims within Browns Canyon.

The boundaries of Browns Canyon do not include the Arkansas River owing to the railroad on the east bank of the river. The area is largely a headwaters area containing several ephemeral streams.

## Boundary Issues

The wilderness area proposed by citizens includes both the BLM's Browns Canyon WSA and the major portion of San Isabel National Forest's Aspen Ridge Roadless Area. Citizens' proposed boundaries for Browns Canyon extends south along the Arkansas River's east bank to incorporate additional BLM lands in Railroad Gulch.

Citizens' proposed wilderness boundaries for the Aspen Ridge portion of the unit necessitate the closure for about three miles of the historic Turret Trail Route. This route is closed to vehicles at the BLM land boundary and has been mapped as closed by the Forest Service in the past. The closure of this vehicle route is necessary in order to retain the integrity of the wilderness. The closure point for the road would be north of the access required by cabin owners at Green Mountain, thereby



Hikers in the CWP in early spring. (Kurt Kunkle)

meeting their need for access.

## Browns Canyon Proposed Wilderness Area

Royal Gorge Field Office

July 1, 2008

