

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Cow Ridge

Though its boundaries are bordered by roads, this steep walled mesa in the Roan Creek Valley remains isolated and seldom visited. The ranchers who graze cattle on top have been good stewards and the mesa top remains a wild, isolated area with tremendous views in all directions.

Bill Hamann

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 15,668 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: not studied
BLM Field Office: Grand Junction Field Office (Grand Junction)
Location: Cow Ridge is located five miles north of DeBeque in Garfield County.

Wilderness Qualities

Cow Ridge looms precipitously above the wide floor of the Roan Creek valley, rising almost 3,000 feet to an elevation of 8,200 feet. Verdant, heavily forested glades slope down to stands of thick-trunked sage. A creek turns through meadows flecked with wildflowers and supports communities of bittercress, willow, and box-elder.

The view south looks out on Horse Mountain and South Shale Ridge, with the Roan Cliffs and Grand Mesa flanking to the southeast; to the north, Kimball Mountain displays fluted columns of pale sandstone that buttress sheer cliffs and an ancient pinyon-juniper woodland. Just over the Cow Ridge boundary stands Castle Rock, a yellow sandstone spire that rises prominently above the surrounding fir forest.

Outstanding opportunities for backpacking, horseback riding, bird watching, and hunting exist throughout the unit, but are of particularly high quality in the many narrow draws that transect the ridge.

Meyser Gulch, a steep-sided montane shrubland provides important habitat for a number of species. As the valley floor climbs toward a near-vertical slope of Douglas-fir capped with striated sandstone, the nature of the flora changes. The sage- and wildflower-studded meadows give way to gambel oak, serviceberry and snowberry, skunkbrush, westernchokecherry, and mountain mahogany. The air is cooler, more fragrant. Signs of deer, elk, mountain lions, and coyotes appear. Lazuli buntings and Virginia's warblers sing from the trees; deer mice and rock squirrels forage among the dead leaves and pine cones. Just minutes within the unit boundary, you feel isolated, removed from the

frenetic world of human endeavor. This is wilderness at its finest, a serene pocket universe where you can lose yourself for a few hours or a few days.

With its proximity to the quickly developing Grand Valley and its outstanding opportunities for solitude and unconfined hiking, backpacking, and hunting, the value of Cow Ridge as a designated wilderness area is incalculable.

Bald eagles frequent Cow Ridge. River otter may occur in nearby Kimball Creek and Dry Fork. Cow Ridge provides suitable habitat for burrowing owls, which have been observed in the vicinity of the CWP unit. Four globally rare plants are found in Cow Ridge. Uinta Basin hookless cactus (*Sclerocactus glaucus*) is a federally-listed plant species along with Debeque phacelia (*Phacelia scopulina* var. *submutica*) also a candidate for listing. They are all regional endemics and, with the exception of *S. glaucus*, they are all also Colorado endemics (meaning they occur nowhere other than in Colorado).

Cow Ridge was inventoried by the BLM in 1980 and was not recommended for wilderness status because the BLM found it lacked outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.



Cow Ridge looms 3,000 above the wide floor of the Roan Creek valley

According to the BLM inventory, the narrow configuration of the unit, its steeply sloped hillsides and flat-topped ridges, and a lack of screening vegetation force users into close proximity and make seclusion from the sights and sounds of others difficult. Citizens disagreed, however. In recent inventories, citizens found that the vegetation and varied topography do indeed allow for solitude, as well as outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation



Rugged hillsides of Cow Ridge CWP. (Kurt Kunkle)

Resource Information

The rolling meadows and sagebrush along Cow Ridge's summit receive the bulk of the area's grazing use.

Cow Ridge is open to motorized recreation, but the area's imposing escarpment and lack of public access from the perimeter roads means little actual vehicular recreation occurs at present.

A number of oil and gas leases exist within Cow Ridge. No wells have been drilled inside the unit.

Boundary Issues

Cow Ridge's southern boundary follows County Road 222 and private property boundaries. The eastern portion of the southern boundary follows an unnumbered oil and gas road and excludes gas drilling impacts. The western boundary follows an unnumbered vehicle route that climbs to the top of Cow Ridge. The northern boundary follows private property boundaries along County Road 202. A road is cherrystemmed to a private property, also excluded from the unit. The eastern boundary follows private property along County Road 204.

