

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

McKenna Peak

McKenna Peak, with its unique wildlife, geology and rugged beauty, is a great example of Western Slope wildlands that deserve more protection.

Jon Broholm, Durango

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 33,467 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 19,398 acres
BLM Field Office: San Juan Field Office (Durango)
Location: McKenna Peak rests above the Disappointment Creek Valley along the San Miguel-Dolores county line, approximately 25 miles east of Slick Rock and 25 miles south of Naturita.

Wilderness Qualities

McKenna Peak's eroded adobe badlands, presided over by imposing sandstone cliffs which rise 2,000 feet above the plain, present a remarkable opportunity to add a unique landform to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Gentle, barren shale flats broken by the occasional mesas and buttes of eroded shale highlands comprise the lower elevations of the western and southern portions of the area.

McKenna Peak itself is a highly symmetrical, denuded, gray-colored cone with radiating ridge-spines and gullies. Vegetation here is sparse, composed of scattered grasses and colorful wildflowers, with widely separated pinyons and junipers lining the ridges. North and east, an impressive ridge of sandstone cliffs forms a towering backdrop rising 2,000 feet above the shale badlands. Atop these cliffs there is a lush forest of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir, providing a cool refuge in summer from the shimmering heat of the lower badlands.

McKenna Peak provides important winter wildlife habitat for large numbers of deer and elk. The Peak borders North Mountain, now considered to have one of the largest deer and elk herds in all of Colorado. The Division of Wildlife places winter numbers of deer at 500 to 600, with up to 150 wintering elk. The favorable habitat for deer and elk naturally draws many hunters. Over 30,000 recreation user days are recorded annually during hunting season in the game management unit of which McKenna Peak is a part.

A wild horse herd numbering about 100 roams the western reaches of McKenna Peak, within the designated Spring Creek Wild Horse Herd Management

Area. Bald eagles winter in the lower reaches of the area, and peregrine falcons have been sighted as well.

Mountain lions, bobcats, and black bear are also known to inhabit McKenna Peak. Other natural features of interest include rich fossil beds containing Cretaceous era (100 million years ago) clams and brachiopods.

McKenna Peak's appeal is for more than visual. Both scientific and recreational opportunities abound. The diverse topography of the area creates interesting hiking up any of the numerous draws and arroyos, with the rim-rocked ridges and buttes posing challenging obstacles for those pursuing the summits. These huge sandstone cliffs induce a tremendous sense of isolation. Richly fossiliferous formations offer outstanding possibilities to paleontologists, both amateur and professional. McKenna Peak's adobe badlands offer scientific interest to the geologist interested in weathering and erosion processes. The wild horses have a uniquely western appeal, adding history and charm as well as zoological diversity.



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Resource Information

No Oil and gas leases exist within McKenna Peak. While BLM considers the area to have poor economic potential for oil and gas due to the underlying Dakota Sandstone. Lands in the western portion of the unit were leased for oil and gas development.

No mining claims exist within McKenna Peak. Deeply buried deposits of uranium could potentially exist in the underlying Morrison Formation, and some core drilling has taken place to ascertain the possible existence of such deposits. Any deposits would be extremely expensive to mine and would likely be low-grade in nature.

Portions of six grazing allotments cover McKenna Peak.

There is no commercially valuable timber within the area.

Motorized vehicles are limited to designated routes within the area.

Several of the creeks in the eastern portion of the area discharge high amounts of salts into Disappointment Creek. BLM has proposed control structures on several of these creeks that could conflict with wilderness designation.

McKenna Peak is essentially a headwaters area. No perennial streams flow into the unit. The majority of watercourses in the area are intermittent; only one or two flow year-round in wet years.



Natural arch on Brumley Point. (Mark Pearson)

Boundary Issues

The major addition proposed by citizens encompasses about 12,000 acres in Spring Creek Basin, west of the WSA. Recent field inventory revealed that numerous old vehicle routes have revegetated and returned to a natural condition.

Citizens propose the addition of approximately 1,362 acres of BLM land on the northern side of the area to include a number of small parks surrounded by dense woodland in Cacklebur Draw. This addition would dramatically enhance the ecological diversity of McKenna Peak by contributing vegetative zones strikingly different from the barren shale of the lowlands or the ponderosa-Douglas fir forests of the cliff rims. An existing vehicle way in this area is impassable due to washouts and is rapidly revegetating. Several small stockponds are visually unobtrusive and do not mar the addition.

State land of 640 acres in the same area, containing the majestic sandstone cliffs behind McKenna Peak proper, should be included within the wilderness. The inclusion of state lands poses no problem since the Colorado Department of Natural Resources has stated its willingness to pursue exchanges of wilderness-suitable state lands

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