

# Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

## Redcloud Peak

Majestic peaks, unblemished tundra, and aspen groves define this unsung, high alpine treasure.

Vera Smith, Golden

**Citizens Wilderness Proposal:** 38,594 acres  
**BLM Wilderness Study Area:** 35,018 acres  
**BLM Field Office:** Gunnison Field Office  
**Location:** Redcloud Peak is located in Hinsdale County, approximately five miles southwest of Lake City.

### Wilderness Qualities

Redcloud Peak contains some of the most spectacular alpine country in Colorado. Redcloud Peak WSA includes two of Colorado's fourteeners: 14,034-foot Redcloud Peak and 14,001-foot Sunshine Peak. The lower valleys are steep-sided and of glacial origin, lined by spruce-fir forests broken by stands of aspen.

Three main drainages dissect Redcloud Peak. Of these, Alpine Gulch is the largest, its tributaries collecting runoff from the northeastern slopes of the area. Silver Creek and Cooper Creek drain the western flanks of the high peaks, and Cooper Lake nestles high at the head of Cooper Creek. Trails traverse each of these drainages, providing recreational access to the high peaks and alpine tundra for hiking, climbing, backpacking, and hunting. Several hundred climbers each year scale the two 14,000-foot peaks, as recorded by peak registers maintained by the Colorado Mountain Club.

Redcloud Peak contains extensive elk and bighorn sheep summer ranges, supporting roughly 200 elk and 20 bighorn. An additional 120 mule deer summer in the eastern sections of the area. In winter, approximately 30 elk and 15 bighorns range at the lower elevations of the area. The area's streams support the state endangered Colorado River cutthroat trout.

The endangered Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly has been found to exist only on the wet cold northeastern slopes of Redcloud and Uncompahgre Peaks. The

Redcloud Peak Natural Area is a largely alpine site which includes extensive high-quality wetlands dominated by snow willow (*Salix nivalis*). This extensive area (almost 6,000 acres) provides habitat for the endangered butterfly. The Rio Grande cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki virginalis*) can be found in Cooper Lake.

Wilderness designation of Redcloud Peak will ensure protection for a portion of Lake City's domestic water supply that is drawn from wells. The watershed of Redcloud Peak is partially responsible for the recharge of this groundwater supply.

Redcloud Peak WSA forms the core of the scenic Alpine Loop Backcountry Byway. BLM estimates a half million visitors annually travel the rough jeep roads to Engineer and Cinnamon Passes, marveling at Redcloud's enticing beauty.



Fall foliage in Redcloud Peak CWP. (Mark Pearson)

## Resource Information

Portions of three grazing allotments cover about 65% of Redcloud Peak. However, two of these allotments are inactive and will be retired because of impacts to bighorn sheep. No range improvements are needed for this grazing use.

There is little productive commercial timber in Redcloud Peak. Fully 96% of the forested land within the area is unsuitable for timber harvest due to steep slopes and noncommercial species.

No active mining claims exist within the WSA although it is situated between the Henson Creek and Silverton mining districts. Despite this proximity, the activities of the Silverton mining district end abruptly around the Continental Divide, with relatively little historic activity in and around Redcloud Peak. BLM considers Redcloud Peak to have moderate potential for base and precious metals. The area contains approximately two dozen patented mining claims that comprise the private property within the area's boundary.

A deposit of alunite underlies Red Mountain on the eastern edge of the WSA. Alunite ore is a lower grade alternative to bauxite for producing aluminum, with co-products of sulfuric acid and potash. Since the alunite is part of a potassium deposit, it falls under the Mineral Leasing Act. Earth Sciences, Inc. was issued a prospecting permit in 1974 and filed for a preference right lease in 1979. A condition of the prospecting permit was that no lease would be issued if it were shown that mining would result in significant, adverse environmental impacts.

BLM's 1983 assessment of the environmental impacts of mining the Red Mountain alunite in 1983 indicated that Earth Sciences intended to remove the top 2,000 feet from Red Mountain, and also planned to turn the

upper end of Alpine Gulch into a huge tailings pile. The Red Mountain deposit could only be expected to supply a tiny fraction of the United States' need. The sulfuric acid co-product would have severe impacts on the pure quality of Lake City's municipal water supply. Lake City is on record as opposing the alunite mine.

Due to a subsequent Congressional ban on mineral leasing in WSAs, BLM never issued a final decision on the lease application, although it probably would have been denied because of the adverse environmental impacts.

Redcloud Peak contains 1,750 acres of minerals owned by the state of Colorado and 240 acres of patented mining claims.

Motorized vehicles are limited to designated roads. The only such route within the proposed wilderness is the 0.8 mile route up Red Mountain Gulch.

Redcloud Peak is a headwaters area situated at the top of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River drainage. State records indicate the existence of a three cfs ditch on Williams Creek on the area's southeast side.

## Boundary Issues

Citizens propose the WSA boundaries plus a 720-acre addition west of Williams Creek. BLM concurred with this addition which would close an abandoned jeep trail that was cherrystemmed in BLM's original WSA boundary.

The 0.8 mile long vehicle route in Red Mountain Gulch below Grassy Mountain is claimed by the county as a maintained vehicle route, but is included within the proposed wilderness boundary.

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