

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

Rio Grande

The rim of the canyon drops straight to the Río Grande hundreds of feet below. A lizard skitters among the lichen covered volcanic rock and in the distance a small band of pronghorn disappear into an arroyo. Hiking the wilderness boundary is like touching eons of time.

Art Smith, Denver

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 10,863 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: not studied
BLM Field Office: Royal Gorge Field Office (Cañon City)
Location: The proposed Rio Grande wilderness is located in the southern San Luis Valley along the Colorado-New Mexico border, approximately 10 miles east of Antonito. New Mexico citizens propose a wilderness to the south, where the Rio Grande is designated a Wild and Scenic River.

Wilderness Qualities

The most dramatic feature and primary wilderness value of the area is approximately eight miles of the Rio Grande corridor. This segment of the river has been studied by BLM for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system because of its remarkable raptor population and outstanding recreational opportunities.

The river cuts a canyon with steep cliffs and lush riparian vegetation. These cliffs and the adjacent food source from the river draws raptors by the hundreds, including hawks, falcons, and eagles. The bald eagle, for example, is a common winter resident of the area, and as many as 300 have been sighted during a single winter.

Wildlife biologists have counted more than 40 occupied raptor nests, including at least 11 prairie falcon and four golden eagle aeries. This short stretch of canyon creates a miniature replica of the world famous Birds-of-Prey area along Idaho's Snake River.

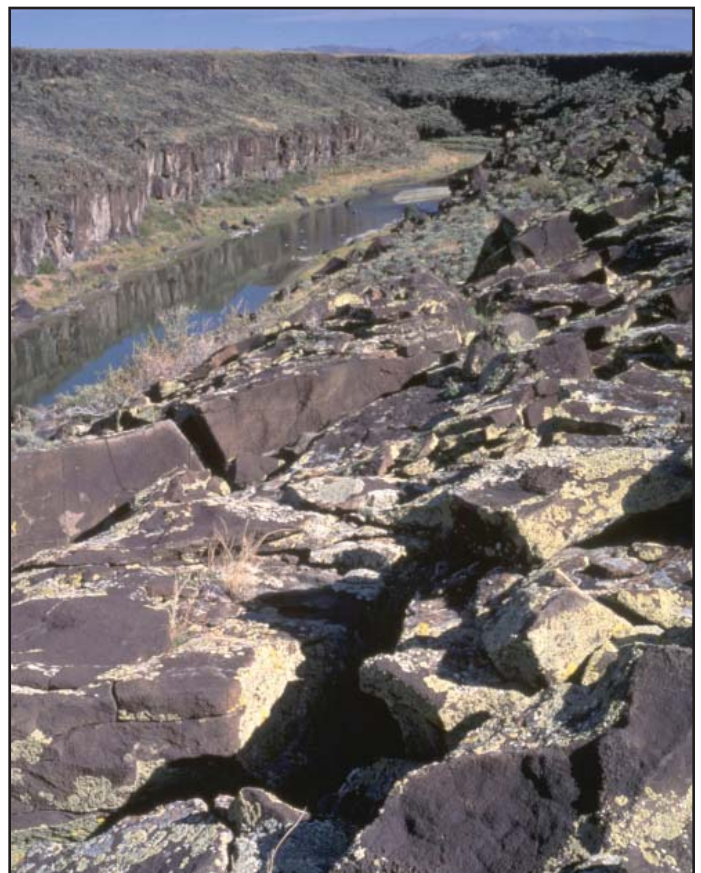
The combination of rare plants, raptor nests, and wild river values led BLM to designate the river corridor as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern in 1991.

This designation carries some restrictions on vehicles and other uses but lacks the over-arching permanence of wilderness protection.

Recreational activities include floatboating, raptor viewing, fishing, hiking, and camping. BLM estimates

that 500 float trips are taken annually from the Lobatos Bridge south into New Mexico. BLM has designated this stretch of river as part of the longer Rio Grande Corridor Special Recreation Management Area.

Elevation within the proposed wilderness ranges from 7,000 feet along the river to 8,700 feet on Punchas Peak, the highest point in the area. From higher ground there are views of the San Luis Valley, the Rio Grande corridor, the Sangre de Cristo Range, the San Juan Mountains, and the Twin Peaks – Ute Mountain and San Antonio Peak. Rio Grande also offers yearlong habitat for pronghorn antelope and mule deer.



Along the Rio Grande River.

Resource Information

There are no mineral leases or mining claims within the proposed wilderness. The volcanic nature of the underlying strata makes the potential for economic mineralization very remote.

Portions of three grazing allotments overlap the area, primarily for spring and fall grazing of cattle. No timber resources are found in the proposed Rio Grande wilderness.

BLM manages the area as a Special Recreation Management Area with semi-primitive motorized use.

The sensitive riparian ecosystem along the river is subject to trespass by cattle wandering across the river from the east bank, but the BLM proposes to eliminate this problem through administrative measures.

No existing water rights occur within the area. The Rio Grande flows adjacent for the length of the area, but is not included within the wilderness boundary.

Boundary Issues

The proposed wilderness boundary includes an additional 7,040 acres north of the original area listed by BLM during its 1979-1980 wilderness inventory, as well as 640 acres of state land. BLM noted that the Rio

Grande corridor possessed outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, but BLM decided that a road separated the river corridor from a small roadless area. Recent field research has found this vehicle route to be deteriorating and unmaintained so that the river is in fact a contiguous feature with the adjacent roadless lands.

The wilderness boundary is delineated on the west by the Punche Valley Road and small tracts of private land. On the north, the Kiowa Hill Road defines the boundary, and to the east the boundary is the Rio Grande

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

