

Uncovering 'Gems' in the backcountry

Wilderness effort seeks explorers for areas proposed for protection

Janet Urquhart
The Aspen Times

Advocates of new wilderness areas in western Colorado are seeking area residents who are willing to tromp around in the backcountry and take notes.

The Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign is launching a volunteer program to help finalize mapping and check various areas proposed for protection — including sites around the greater Roaring Fork Valley — in preparation for legislative action in Congress.

The campaign is advocating several new wilderness areas in and around the White River National Forest, which surrounds Aspen and the valley, as well as expansion of existing wilderness areas, including the Maroon-Bells Snowmass and Hunter-Fryingpan areas.

"We've got a relatively short field season in which to check our proposal areas and make sure we haven't missed anything important in our mapping," said the campaign's Roaring Fork Valley organizer, Lisa Moreno of the Carbondale-based Wilderness Workshop.

Inventory Corps recruits must attend an initial training on field-checking protocols and equipment. The first training is scheduled Saturday, June 13, in the Grizzly Creek area east of Glenwood Springs. One and perhaps two more training sessions will be held this summer.

"We're inviting the backcountry-loving public to be part of the on-the-ground work of this campaign. It's a way to hike with a purpose," Moreno said.

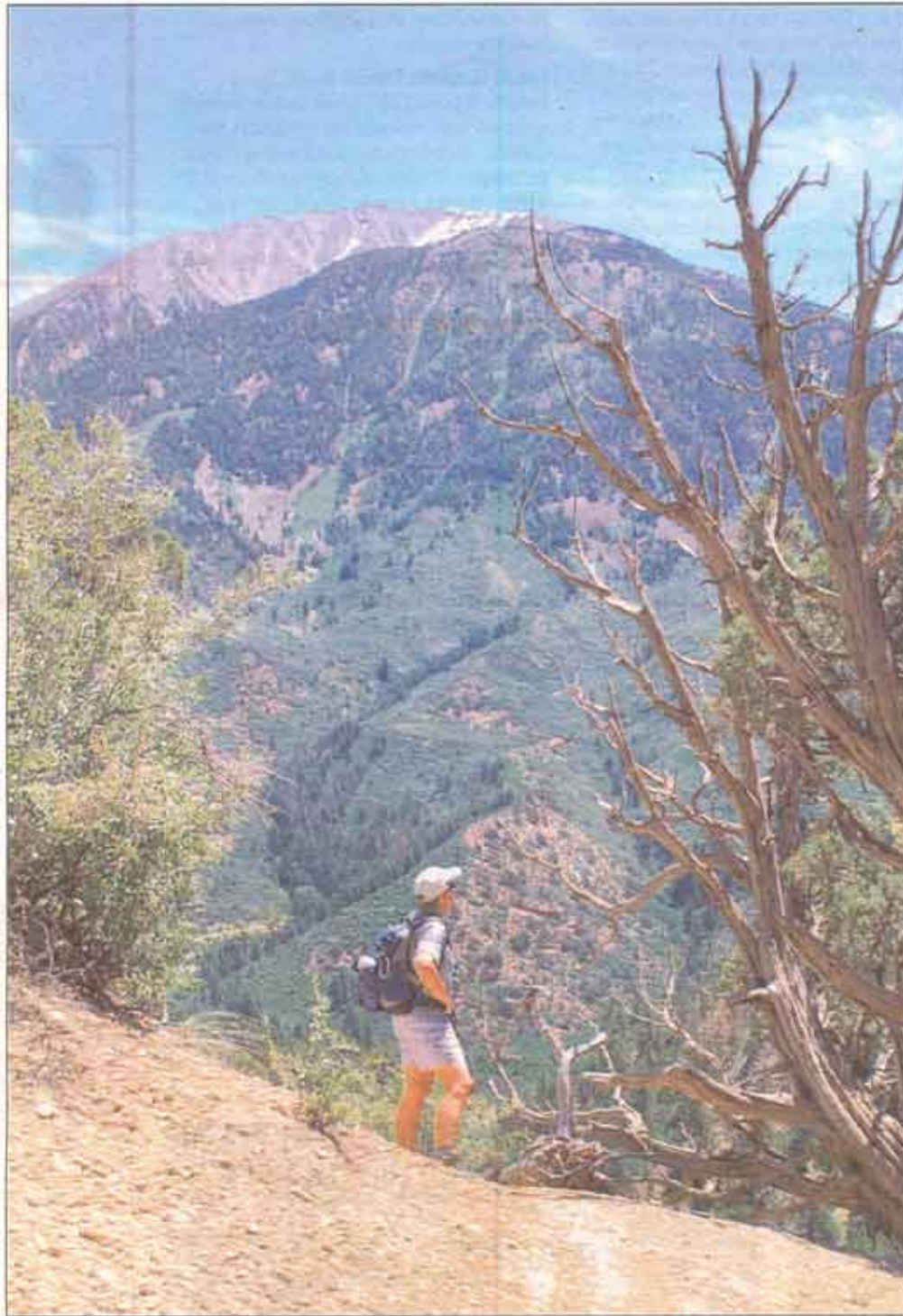
"Where people go is going to completely depend on their abilities and what they feel comfortable doing," added Zoe Osterman, the campaign's hike and field coordinator for Pitkin County. "We're really just looking for anyone who's willing to go out and explore these areas."

The goals of the inventory effort are two-fold, Osterman said. The campaign is hoping to get better information about some of the areas it is proposing as wilderness, and organizers hope to broaden public interest in protecting the areas simply by getting people out there.

Clear Fork, northwest of McClure Pass, is among the proposed areas where organizers would like better information about what's on the ground. Red Table Mountain north of the Fryingpan Valley is another.

"Some areas we know well and some we don't really know well," Moreno said. Volunteers will be asked to take photos and pinpoint features on a map or GPS that may play into an area's wilderness potential — maintained roads and other signs of human impact such as irrigation systems, fencing and buildings, for example.

In all, about 400,000 acres — backcountry "gems" that don't currently have wilderness protection — is being proposed for the wilderness designation. The



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The Perham Creek Trail climbs Assinuation Ridge south of Carbondale, offering views of Mount Sopris. The area is proposed for a wilderness designation and an organized hike of the trail is scheduled June 13.

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Lisa Moreno, Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign organizer

Hidden Gems campaign, a partnership of the Wilderness Society, Colorado Mountain Club, Colorado Environmental Coalition and Wilderness Workshop, will be seeking sponsors of the proposal from within the Colorado congressional delegation, Moreno said.

In the greater Aspen area, the areas under consideration include parts of Basalt Mountain, Red Table Mountain, Woods Lake, Mormon Creek, Wildcat Mountain and Sloan Peak, all in the vicin-

ity of the Fryingpan Valley; Part of the Hunter Creek Valley and Independence Pass area outside of Aspen; Treasure Mountain near Marble; and parts of the Hay Park, Thompson Creek, Hayes Creek and Clear Fork areas south of Carbondale and west of the Crystal River Valley. A number of Hidden Gems hikes are scheduled this summer to give the public a chance to explore the areas.

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Hidden Gems summer hikes

Hidden Gems wilderness campaign volunteers will again lead hikes to various locales in the Colorado backcountry to give the public a chance to explore areas that have been proposed for wilderness designation.

Hikes are planned from Summit County to far western Colorado. Go to www.whiteriverwild.org and click on hikes/events to see the full calendar of hikes and locales, and to register to take part in the hikes.

In the Aspen and Roaring Fork Valley area, a number of hikes are planned. As outlined by the campaign website, they are:

Saturday, June 13, Perham Creek — A moderate, short but steady ascent up to Assinuation Ridge with stunning views of Mount Sopris.

Saturday, June 20, Crystal River/Gallo Hill — A somewhat strenuous ascent out of the Crystal Valley into the existing Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, passing through these two proposed wilderness additions en route.

Saturday, June 27, Woods Lake — This relatively easy ramble in the upper Fryingpan Valley starts at Woods Lake (the actual lake) and traverses the proposed wilderness addition of the same name to Eagle Lake, just inside the Holy Cross Wilderness.

Friday-Saturday, June 26-27, Red Table — A long ascent up the Ruedi Overlook Trail to a flat campsite and 360-degree views from the top of this long, little-visited ridge that's one of the flagships of the Hidden Gems proposal.

Sunday, July 5, Thompson Creek headwaters — An exploration of the remote yet surprisingly gentle terrain of the Thompson Creek headwaters, southwest of Carbondale; this loop entails some bushwhacking and makes for a fairly long day.

Tuesday, July 7, Hay Park — A repeat performance of last year's popular full-moon hike up the Thomas Lakes Trail, at the northern base of Mt. Sopris.

Sunday, July 12, Basalt Mountain — A hike up Seven Castles Creek in the Fryingpan Valley.

Wednesday, July 15, Thompson Creek headwaters — See July 5.

Sunday, July 19, Huntsman Ridge — A fairly steep-ascent ending with panoramic views. Be prepared to bushwhack down to loop back to the trailhead.

Saturday, July 25, Hunter Creek — A fairly easy ramble past the popular lunch-ride loop of lower Hunter Creek into the less-frequented terrain that is proposed to be added to the Hunter-Fryingpan Wilderness.

Sunday, Aug. 2, Red Table — A steady ascent on the Ruedi Overlook Trail leading to a forested shoulder of Red Table with views of the reservoir.

Saturday, Aug. 8, Treasure Mountain — A challenging ascent of a rugged, hard-to-access thirteener that's proposed to be added to the existing Raggeds Wilderness, near Marble.

Saturday, Aug. 22, Ruby Lakes — The drive in is brutal, but the hike to Petroleum Lake and the string of lakes above it is fairly easy, and the rugged alpine scenery — almost all of it above treeline — is phenomenal. (High-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicles needed; if you have one, let trip leader know.)