

GET OUT - OUTDOORS & RECREATION

Great Old Broads take a Broadwalk in the Crystal Valley



Immediately behind Mary McCracken from La Grande, Ore., is Devorah Lanner of Nebraska, Karen Meadows of Santa Fe, N.M., and Ruthanne Gartland of Boulder, Colo.

Photos courtesy of Great Old Broads

By Sue McEvoy, Echo staff writer

The famous actress Bette Davis once said, "If you want a thing done right, ask a couple of old broads to do it."

This seems to be the consensus of a group of women camping at Bogan Flats near Marble during the weekend of July 9-12.

The Great Old Broads for Wilderness, a national conservation organization based in Durango, recently hosted one of their semi-annual Broadwalks in the Crystal Valley. In doing so, they aimed to draw attention to Carbondale-based Wilderness Workshop's effort to gain support for a proposal in the area called the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign.

There are now more than 4,000 active members in Great Old Broads in all 50 states and several foreign countries. The three main issues that Great Old Broads voice concerns over are damage by off-road vehicles; oil, gas and mineral development; and improperly managed livestock grazing on public lands.

Two views: Sheep rancher Joe Sperry and Great Old Broad Rose Chilcoat talk on the trail

On the way back down from hiking Drift Creek Trail near McClure Pass, Rose Chilcoat, associate director of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness, met up with Joe Sperry, a longtime local rancher who has a permit to graze 3,000 of his sheep in the Clear Fork area. Rose asked Joe what his opinion was of the proposed designation of the Clear Fork area as wilderness.

"I think it's a disadvantage because if it's a wilderness you can't do stuff to it," Joe said. "You can't manipulate an aspen grove to regenerate itself."

Joe said the wilderness designation would allow diseases that are threatening much of Colorado's aspen trees to destroy groves.

"To me, nature's dynamic," Rose said. "You can't say this grove of trees is always going to be there because historically there would have been a fire."

Joe also felt that adding wilderness designation to this area would bring more use, at least for the first few years.

"The major heavy use in this area will alter this ecosystem way beyond what you people think," Joe said. "Because of the initial pressure, you'll see the elk leave and end up on this guy's private land who is trying to make a living with livestock."

About why the area is in the Hidden Gems proposal, both also had their own thoughts.

"To me [these are] not breathtaking views," Joe said. "You can walk for six hours before you can see more than 50 feet." Rose countered.

"For me what's breathtaking about this is it's not rock and ice, high-elevation," she said. "This is habitat. This is what the wildlife and ecosystem need."

However, both were in complete consensus that oil and gas development would harm the area beyond repair.

— Sue McEvoy

How it started

According to Great Old Broads Executive Director Ronni Egan, Great Old Broads for Wilderness was founded by a small group of women backpacking in Escalante, Utah in 1989 in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. On returning out of the canyon lands they saw a headline in a newspaper quoting then-Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah saying, "We can't designate anymore wilderness in Utah because the old people won't be able to get there. They need roads, don't you know." These ladies decided there needed to be a group of older people that value wilderness.

For their Crystal Valley event, the Great Old Broads focused on Hidden Gems located in the White River National Forest, reportedly the most visited national forest in the U.S. According to Wilderness Workshop materials, Hidden Gems are parcels of public lands "existing at the more ecologically diverse middle elevations that provide some of the most important habitat for imperiled species."

Most of the congressionally-designated wilderness in Colorado exists at higher elevations containing more rock and ice. Overall, the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign would add 470,000 acres of wilderness designation to the White River National Forest and nearby BLM lands.

A visit from Connie

The event kicked off on Thursday night with a visit from Connie Harvey of Aspen, one of the three Maroon Belles who in 1967 founded what was originally named Aspen Wilderness Workshop, from which Carbondale's Wilderness Workshop grew. The nonprofit works to protect public lands, and was instrumental in designating the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness Area.

On Friday, the group of 30 women and one man — Tom Pringle, a Great Old Bro — had their choice of working on a service project in the Clear Fork area of the Hidden Gems proposal or accompanying Aron Ralston, a Wilderness Workshop board member and author of "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," on a more strenuous hike near McClure Pass.

As part of their Broadwalks, Great Old Broads contacts one of the local public land agencies and asks what their needs are.

"That's what makes Broads different," says Great Old Broads Associate Director Rose Chilcoat. "Even though we may criti-

SOME GREAT OLD BROAD TERMS

Broader Horizons: a program designed to take children, primarily young girls, out to experience nature

Broadband: a local Great Old Broads chapter, as in Roaring Fork Broadband

Broadfloat: a river trip of the same nature as a Broadwalk

Broadwalk: a Great Old Broads educational and recreational event held across the U.S. with a wilderness or public-lands issue such as the Hidden Gems Wilderness Proposal

Jog Broad: a Broad who runs to stay fit

Support Broad: a Broad who doesn't do strenuous hikes or outings anymore, but still supports Broads with donations or other types of fundraising

Training Broad: a Broad who is under 40-ish

cize some of their approaches, we want to be part of the solution, to share information and to help."

Hiking with the Broads

On Saturday, I accompanied a group of the Broads led by Zoe Osterman, the Pitkin County's field coordinator, and Katie Fales, a Wilderness Workshop intern and native of the lower Crystal River Valley, on an inventory of Forest Service Trail #815, or Drift Creek Trail, located on the Paonia side of McClure Pass. It was the first time I had heard of this trail after 30 years of hiking in the Crystal and Roaring Fork valleys.

The women used GPS, digital cameras and standardized charts to record trail conditions, signage, wildlife use, human and livestock use, vegetation and wildlife sightings. Part of the Broads' Healthy Lands Project, this program documents wild lands abuse, as part of a database that can be shared by land management agencies, partner organizations and the media.

"I call us the hummingbirds of the wilderness movement," said Rose. "So there's a wilderness campaign that's about to bloom and we are attracted to it and we come in and hover and flutter around and we get some media attention."

Even though the name may not suggest it, Great Old Broads welcomes wilderness enthusiasts of all ages and both genders. Their Broader Horizons program encourages cross-generational sharing of nature.

"If we don't expose the younger generation to [nature] now, they'll never advocate for it in the future," said Rose.

'Gals with gumption'

On the final day of this year's Broadwalk, many of the group learned more about the history of the Crystal River Valley on a tour of the Redstone Castle. And their final hike, an out-and-back up Avalanche Creek, was led by local Broad Susy Ellison of Carbondale.

Sitting around the picnic tables at the group site at Bogan Flats, Ronni, the organization's executive director, described the Broads' members.

"Great Old Broads attracts gals with gumption, a sense of humor, of adventure and a real grasp on what really matters in the world," she said.

She asked some of them why they joined. For some, it was the name, for most it was the fascinating people involved. One of the members summed it up best saying, "You get to be an old broad in spite of yourself, but you have to work hard at being great."

For more information on the Great Old Broads for Wilderness or the campaign, go to greatoldbroads.org or whiteriverwild.org.