

Two gems in a week

Group pushing for wilderness designation leads two hikes in Vail's Spraddle Creek area



SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

Paragon Guides will lead a free hike to Bald Mountain on Saturday to show off land a group hopes to have protected as federal wilderness.

t By Susie Kincade
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The Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign is hosting two free, guided hikes this week in the Spraddle Creek area.

This area is the closest to Vail and would bring wilderness into the resort's backyard, making it accessible and enjoyable to more people while also protecting this scenic landscape from logging, mining and other activities that can scar the landscape.

On Wednesday, the Spraddle Creek hike will be hosted by the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens and led by the gardens' director of horticulture, Nicola Ripley, who was recently elected president of the American Gardens Association, an honor usually reserved for directors of the nation's largest gardens.

This easy hike meanders through meadows and aspen and fir forests, with frequent stops to look at wildflowers. Expect about four miles of hiking over about three hours, plus a lunch stop. The hike will begin at 9 a.m., leaving from the trailhead parking lot at the base of Spraddle Creek Road (north side of Interstate 70 at the main Vail exit). Register online for this hike at www.whiteriverwild.org.

On Saturday, the Bald Mountain hike offers a bigger challenge in the same area. This hike is sponsored by Paragon Guides, which has led outdoor adventures in summer and winter for more than 30 years.

Donny Shefchik, a veteran guide for Paragon, will lead this eight-mile, eight-hour hike. Because there is no trail for part of the way, this is a strenuous hike, gaining 3,736 vertical feet. It begins in aspen forests and moves into a mature lodgepole forest.

As the route climbs beyond the Bald Mountain meadows, the forest becomes a mature spruce/fir mix. The steepest segment of the hike gains the summit ridge, going through a high-alpine environment of grasses and alpine plants.

"Bald Mountain is a special place," Shefchik said. "It is one of the few remaining quiet areas accessed right from Vail. I love sharing the joy and delight people find when they discover beautiful places like Bald Mountain."

Register online to hike the Hidden Gems. Visit www.whiteriverwild.org, click on Hikes/Events, and register for these two and other hikes in Eagle, Summit and Pitkin counties.

The Hidden Gems Wilderness Proposal is led by local residents and outdoor enthusiasts in collaboration with the Wilderness Workshop, the Colorado Mountain Club, the Colorado Environmental Coalition and The Wilderness Society. The goal is to protect the last, best roadless places in and around the White River National Forest for future generations as well as for the value they provide to our air, water, wildlife, scenic landscape and economic base.

As the campaign gains momentum this summer, Eagle County campaign coordinator Susie Kincade is reaching out to all stakeholders with informational presentations. If you have questions or would like her to address your community, contact her at 970-328-5472 or susiek@whiteriverwild.org.



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Wildflowers should be a highlight of Wednesday's Hidden Gems Spraddle Creek hike north of Vail.