

Vail Daily Editor Don Rogers: Hidden Gems have my vote

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Snapshots of my best moments this summer so far:

n The wind batters you unless you find a nook in the crumbling rock. Then it's pure peace, wide views and quiet enough to call the wife on the cell phone. It's Father's Day, and I've hiked and climbed up to Castle Peak for the first time. Stunning! My daughter sits a few feet away, braced against the wind. She's smiling.

n We're huffing and puffing up the trail toward Mt. Thomas, along the Red Table ridge south of Sylvan Lake, overlooking the "Sound of Music" country south of us. Damn, I don't remember the switchbacks going on and on and on like this the previous weekend. Daughter mostly is staying with Dad. Son is long gone. He'll run miles beyond Mt. Thomas, and we'll crest the steepest part of the climb before hitting our hour turnaround point.

I discovered both trails by hiking with Hidden Gems. Met some great people and scouted for future family hikes and runs. The kids -- Rachel, 18, and Ben, 21 -- love trail running. I'd best suck it up for this kind of quality time with them. Have I mentioned they are nuts? Must come from their mother's side.

But there's another, higher purpose for these hikes into proposed wilderness areas this summer besides my family time and seeing some new country. The Hidden Gems campaign seeks to expand designated wilderness in the White River National Forest and nearby Bureau of Land Management areas. A bunch of conservation and recreation groups, along with Aspen Ski Co., are aboard.

The Web site alone is worth exploring: www.whiteriverwild.org/ or google "Hidden Gems" "Eagle County." There you will find reports and the case for bringing more land below timberline into the designated wilderness fold.

Less than 2 percent of our public lands have wilderness protection, so it's not as if we've locked up huge swaths of land from mining, drilling, off-roading and such.

The areas up for wilderness in Eagle County would ban your ATV, mountain bike or helicopter. But there is no shortage of places elsewhere for all of that.

The advocates make compelling cases for how the wilderness designations would help the economy as well as environment and recreational uses such as hunting, backpacking and, yes, trail running for those families like mine with crazy kids.

So I like it. I like it a lot. And I hope the politicians from our county to Washington, D.C., agree.

I'll tell 'em, with a smile, to go take a hike. That should do it.