

Wilderness.net's West Elk Wilderness Fact Sheet



Introduction

The United States Congress designated the West Elk Wilderness in 1964 and it now has a total of 176,431 acres. All of the wilderness is in Colorado and is managed by the Forest Service.

Description

The West Elk's most attractive offering may be a large and untamed area with little visitation. Only during fall hunting season do the trails and campsites fill. Elk and deer number in the thousands. You'll find many mountain passes leading to secluded and seldom-seen valleys filled with beaver ponds and lined with trembling aspen that turn a fantastic and indescribable gold in September. Volcanic activity has produced long lava flows, sometimes pushing mud before them. Ridges were crumbled and carved by wind and water into fantastic turrets, pinnacles, and crenellated bulwarks. The topography is reflected in many of the area's geographic names: Castle Pass, Castle View, Castle Creek, the Castles. About two hundred miles of trails offer opportunities for extended loop hikes through the West Elk, the fifth largest Wilderness in Colorado. Most of the trails provide excellent pathways for horse traffic. The Mill Castle Trail travels up to Storm Pass at 12,460 feet offering extravagant vistas and the best look at the castle like formations of this area.

Leave No Trace

How to follow the seven standard Leave No Trace principles differs in different parts of the country (desert vs. Rocky Mountains). Click on any of the principles listed below to learn more about how they apply in the West Elk Wilderness.

1. [Plan Ahead and Prepare](#)
2. [Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces](#)
3. [Dispose of Waste Properly](#)
4. [Leave What You Find](#)
5. [Minimize Campfire Impacts](#)
6. [Respect Wildlife](#)
7. [Be Considerate of Other Visitors](#)

For more information on Leave No Trace, [Visit the Leave No Trace, Inc. website.](#)

Area Management

The West Elk Wilderness is part of the 109 million acre National Wilderness Preservation System.

This System of lands provides clean air, water, and habitat critical for rare and endangered plants and animals. In wilderness, you can enjoy challenging recreational activities like hiking, backpacking, climbing, kayaking, canoeing, rafting, horse packing, bird watching, stargazing, and extraordinary opportunities for solitude. You play an important role in helping to *"secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness"* as called for by the Congress of the United States through the Wilderness Act of 1964. Please follow the requirements outlined below and use Leave No Trace techniques when visiting the West Elk Wilderness to ensure protection of this unique area.

General Wilderness Prohibitions

Motorized equipment and equipment used for mechanical transport is generally prohibited on all federal lands designated as wilderness. This includes the use of motor vehicles, motorboats, motorized equipment, bicycles, hang gliders, wagons, carts, portage wheels, and the landing of aircraft including helicopters, unless provided for in specific legislation.

In a few areas some exceptions allowing the use of motorized equipment or mechanical transport are described in the special regulations in effect for a specific area. Contact the Forest Service office or visit the websites listed below for more specific information.

These general prohibitions have been implemented for all national forest wildernesses in order to implement the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Wilderness Act requires management of human-caused impacts and protection of the area's wilderness character to insure that it is "unimpaired for the future use and enjoyment as wilderness." Use of the equipment listed as prohibited in wilderness is inconsistent with the provision in the Wilderness Act which mandates opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation and that wilderness is a place that is in contrast with areas where people and their works are dominant.

Wilderness-Specific Regulations

Wilderness managers often need to take action to limit the impacts caused by visitor activities in order to protect the natural conditions of wilderness as required by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Managers typically implement 'indirect' types of actions such as information and education measures before selecting more restrictive measures. When regulations are necessary, they are implemented with the specific intent of balancing the need to preserve the character of the wilderness while providing for the use and enjoyment of wilderness.

The following wilderness regulations are in effect for this area. Not all regulations are in effect for every wilderness. Contact the Forest Service office or visit the websites listed on the 'Links' tab for more specific information about the regulations listed.

ALL VISITORS

- Group size is limited to no more than 15 people.
- Camping is prohibited within the vicinity of Sheep Lake (as depicted in Exhibit B, posted at trailhead and District Ranger Stations) and within 100 feet of any lake, stream, or trail.
- Campfires are prohibited at the following locations:
 1. within 100 feet of any lake, stream, or trail

2. above treeline

3. within the vicinity of Sheep Lake (as depicted in Exhibit B, posted at trailheads and District Ranger Stations)

-- Caching equipment, personal property, or supplies for longer than 7 days is prohibited.

-- Dogs must be under direct verbal control or leashed at all times.

STOCK USERS

-- Group size is limited to no more than 25 heartbeats, including people and pack or saddle stock, with no more than 15 people.

-- Riding, hitching, tethering, hobbling, or fencing pack and saddle stock is prohibited within 100 feet of any lake, stream, or trail and within the designated area at Sheep Lake (as depicted in Exhibit B, posted at trailheads and District Ranger Stations). Exceptions include: riding pack or saddle stock on trail 848 and hitching in the designated area northwest of Sheep Lake.

Contacts

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Links to Other Websites

[Grande Mesa, Uncompagne, Gunnison National Forest, West Elk Wilderness](#)

Links on Wilderness.net

[National, Regional and Local Wilderness Organizations \(NGOs\)](#)

A listing of societies, organizations, coalitions and other wilderness-related advocacy and stewardship groups.

[Career and Volunteer Opportunities](#)

A listing of sites providing information about wilderness- and environmentally-related career and volunteer opportunities.

Applicable Wilderness Law(s)

Law	Date	Acreage Change (in acres)
Public Law 88-577	September 3, 1964	62,000
The Wilderness Act - Public law 88-577 (9/3/1964) To establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes		

— [download 88-577](#)

Public Law 96-560	December 22, 1980	133,000
Colorado Wilderness Act - Public Law 96-560 (12/22/1980) To designate certain National Forest System lands in the States of Colorado, South Dakota, Missouri, South Carolina, and Louisiana for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System		

— [download 96-560](#)