The Colorado Plateau of eastern and southern Utah is a unique landscape of colorful sedimentary rocks and mesas dissected by spectacular canyons of the Green and Colorado River systems. And, despite a long history of ranching, mining and the associated dirt road network fragmenting the outback, much of this spectacular realm remains roadless and wild.

In 2019, the John D. Dingel Conservation Act designated 17 new Wilderness areas in Utah’s canyon country, totaling 663,000 acres—a formidable accomplishment given Utah’s political culture. The bill also protected 3 segments of the Green River under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Fourteen of the new Wildernesses are within the rugged San Rafael Swell, which many consider to be a potential new national park. Two new Wildernesses are in the Desolation Canyon-Book Cliffs area, and the act also protected wildlands on the east side of the Green River in Labyrinth Canyon.

The 143,000-acre Desolation Canyon Wilderness is the largest new Wilderness. The Desolation Canyon country (“Deso”) is remarkable even by Utah standards. The Green River slices a 5,000-foot deep gorge through colorful layered sediments. But wilderness isn’t just about scenery. Deso harbors unusual habitat diversity, ranging from wetlands and riparian cottonwood forests to Colorado Plateau Desert of sagebrush and saltbush, to pinyon-juniper woodlands and even stands of Douglas-fir, true fir, spruce and aspen at the highest elevations. This habitat diversity, along with the area’s large size, supports unusually high biodiversity, especially for wildlife. The obvious critters are mule deer, elk, bison, black bear, bighorn sheep, coyote and mountain lion, but there are also midget faded rattlesnakes, tarantulas, ferruginous hawks, both eagle species, peregrine falcon, long-billed curlew, white-faced ibis plus wild turkey, lots of waterfowl, beaver and much more. There are 3 endangered fish species, in addition to the Green’s tasty catfish.

For us two-legged primates, Deso is known as one of the premiere wilderness float trips in North America, with over 100 miles of floatable wild river. In fact, a September 1982 80-mile Deso journey was my first of many ensuing wilderness river adventures.

The recently designated Wildernesses in Utah represent progress, yes, but it’s just a start. Take Deso, for instance.
As a kid, summer meant returning to the cabin at the bottom of a switchback road, a very small lake visible as we descended. It was the same place we spent our vacations almost every year, a place my dad went before he and my mom married, and that our family continued to visit for many years. As I got older, the lure of other lakes, mountains, deserts, or tent sites lured me around the West. And I still look for places that will have a new vista or ecosystem or culture. Every time I look at an issue of the Wilderness Watcher, I see names and descriptions of intriguing landscapes that ignite my wanderlust.

Some of these sites I probably will never visit, others I tuck away in the back of my mind and put them on my list of possibilities. Along with my imagining these unfamiliar or faraway places, I can visualize the peacefulness, the air, whether crisp and cool or dry and hot. I wonder about the wildlife and the trees, the terrain and the waterways. My mind may not always see anything near the real thing, but my enjoyment, in the moment, is as rewarding as if I were there. My experience of these places doesn’t depend on actually stepping foot within their boundaries.

When I am able to travel to any of the incredible wild parts of this country, my experience is very different than it was 10 or 20 years ago. I can no longer grasp a kayak paddle as well or trapse all day, gaining many hundreds of feet of elevation in just a couple of hours. That doesn’t diminish my experience; it just gives me a different perspective. Those wild places are still there and whether I visit them in my mind and memory or am able to walk the trails, find vistas of peaks and valleys, or observe wildlife familiar or new to me, my appreciation for them has only grown over the years.

The Wilderness Act since its inception has set aside lands that will escape the relentless push of development and the cascading impacts of humans and our need to control everything. It gave us assurance of a future with places of retreat and ecosystems functioning as nature intended. Not all of us have the capabilities necessary to experience the rugged and challenging landscapes in some of these areas, but their beauty and unhindered natural processes exist not just for our pleasure. They are a critical component of community and individual well-being just by fact of their existence.

And when I think about these wild places, whether I’ve been there or not, I know that I also must appreciate all that Wilderness Watch does to ensure that they will be there for that future envisioned by the authors, legislators, supporters, and others that believed in the Wilderness Act. When I read the Wilderness Watcher or receive notices and alerts, I not only see references to Wilderness lands that trigger my imagination or memory, but I also read of plans and proposals, lawsuits, and discussions that threaten to erode, or even destroy, the heart of the Wilderness Act and the lands it protects.

While I may never visit most of the Wilderness areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System, nor manage to trek as deeply within them as in the past, now more than ever, I value Wilderness and support Wilderness Watch’s much-needed work to protect the lands that are so important to wildlife and people alike.

—Louise Lasley
Utah’s remaining wild canyon country is a gift. That much of it still remains wild is a function of luck, topography and the hard work of conservationists in Utah and elsewhere.

The preliminary scoping period for public comments on the BLM planning process ended in January. Remember, though, that we taxpayers employ federal agency personnel, including BLM employees. They work for us, not just for ranchers and miners! And by law, they must consider public comments, even outside of timelines delineated by a particular planning process. Here is a sample of what the BLM needs to hear:

As mentioned, the BLM should create area specific wilderness stewardship plans for each designated Wilderness or Wilderness cluster. For example, there should be one stewardship plan for Deso and the Turtle Canyon Wilderness plus the Green’s three designated wild and scenic river segments. Plans should clearly specify that Wilderness areas must be managed primarily to protect wilderness character—as the 1964 Wilderness Act mandates! Plans should also prioritize wildlife, native species and overall wilderness rather than trying to mollify various user groups.

The BLM should also maintain the roadless/undeveloped character of unprotected roadless areas, and should recommend them for Wilderness designation.

In addition, vacant livestock allotments should be permanently closed, and the BLM should amend its resource management plans to curtail livestock grazing where it is damaging natural ecosystems, which is nearly everywhere in these arid environments. Then they should remove unnecessary grazing infrastructure. Motor boats are an insult to Desolation and Labyrinth Canyons and should be banned. So should aircraft landings in Wilderness. In fact, the BLM should eliminate all mechanized use of Wilderness and roadless potential wilderness within the planning area. And finally, closing off and reclaiming cherry-stemmed road intrusions would enlarge Wilderness, and create more defensible Wilderness boundaries plus more ecologically functional Wilderness with less edge and more secure interior habitat.

Utah’s remaining wild canyon country is a gift. That much of it still remains wild is a function of luck, topography and the hard work of conservationists in Utah and elsewhere. Let’s give future generations of all creatures the enduring gift of perpetual wildness. For there is no greater quest than that to protect and restore truly wild wilderness.

Howie Wolke is a retired wilderness guide/outfitter from southern Montana near Yellowstone National Park. He is on the Wilderness Watch board of directors and has also served two terms as president of the organization.
Good news for the Boundary Waters

Wilderness Watch is supporting two recent moves by the Biden administration to stop a massive underground and open-pit copper-nickel sulfide-ore mine—some of the most toxic mining on the planet—in the watershed of the fabled Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in northeastern Minnesota. In January, the administration canceled two mining leases for the proposed Twin Metals mine, and the administration is also proposing a 20-year moratorium on sulfide-ore mining on national forest land surrounding the Wilderness.

The 1.1 million-acre Boundary Waters is America’s most visited Wilderness. It’s rich with native wildlife, and its more than 1,000 lakes and 1,200 miles of streams and rivers offer a unique wilderness experience where most visitors travel by canoe. Pollution from the Twin Metals mine, which would be nearly next door to the canoe country Wilderness, would inevitably drain into and pollute the BWCAW with sulfuric acid, mercury, lead, arsenic, and other toxic pollution for decades if not longer.

In 2016, under the Obama administration, the Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) declined to renew two expired 50-year-old federal mining leases Twin Metals needs for its mine, due to the mine’s extreme and unacceptable risk to the Wilderness. However, in 2019, Trump’s Department of Interior (DOI) renewed the two mining leases after issuing a legal memorandum that reversed previous departmental policy and went against the earlier BLM and FS decisions.

On January 26, 2022, the DOI issued a legal opinion canceling the leases, stating that the Trump administration “improperly” renewed the leases and violated DOI regulations by “customizing lease terms specifically for Twin Metals.”

We are also supporting the administration’s proposal for a 20-year moratorium on sulfide-ore mining on 225,378 acres of surrounding national forest land while environmental impact studies are completed. And we’re urging the state of Minnesota to protect the BWCAW as it examines its outdated nonferrous mining rules (mining other than iron or taconite mining) following a recent court order.

Trees aren’t a “hazard”

Wilderness Watch is urging the Forest Service (FS) to exclude all Wilderness areas (and encroachment from activity on wilderness boundaries), from its Region 5 Post Disturbance Hazardous Tree Management Project. The proposal calls for cutting, logging, and removing thousands of “hazard” trees (both living and dead trees that burned over past fire seasons) along roads, trails, and facilities in 10 National Forests in California. The FS doesn’t mention Wilderness anywhere in the project scoping letter, and the maps are unclear as to whether Wilderness is included.

Wilderness visitors should be allowed to experience nature on its own terms. Fallen trees are a natural hazard that anyone who enters a Wilderness must be willing to accept—these are not “managed” forests, gardens, or city parks.

There are many trails and roads in this massive project on wilderness boundaries, making the impacts to Wilderness unclear. Potentially, the Marble Mountains, Trinity Alps, Kaiser, Ansel Adams, John Muir, Golden Trout, Monarch, Jennie Lakes, Dome land, Yolla Bolly Middle Eel, Snow Mountain, Yuki, and Bucks Lake Wildernesses could be subject to logging and other clearing.

We suggested that the Forest Service post warning signs at trailheads to alert visitors to the risk, and that dead trees be allowed to fall naturally, with crosscut saws, not chainsaws, used to clear trails of only the fallen trees that must be removed. The FS could use this as an educational opportunity to inform visitors of the values of Wilderness, including allowing natural processes to run their course and maintaining traditional skills.
Air Force targets Wildernesses in Vermont

In January, Wilderness Watch spoke out against a U.S. Air Force (USAF) request to the Federal Aviation Administration to approve a permanent Chugs Military Operations Area (MOA) in the Green Mountains in southern Vermont, which has been operating under temporary approvals since 2016. Fighter jets out of Massachusetts would continue some 340 combat-ready F-15 fighter jet sorties a year. Such activity would shatter the area’s natural sounds, ruin the wilderness experience for visitors, and stress native wildlife.

This could lead to permanent F-15 fighter jet flights in three of the eight Wildernesses in Vermont—the Lye Brook, Peru Peak, and Big Branch. A fourth Wilderness—the Glastenbury—is immediately adjacent to the MOA and may in fact extend into the MOA (the map isn’t clear enough to tell). The mature forests, wetlands, wild ridgelines, and peaks are home to moose, pine marten, bobcats, black bears, wild turkeys, beavers, whitetail deer, brook trout, rare birds, and other wildlife. The three Wildernesses total more than 32,000 acres (with Glastenbury comprised of another 22,330 acres), and include some trail-less areas important for undisturbed wildlife habitat and opportunities for solitude.

Research and studies document the serious health effects of aircraft noise on humans and wildlife—such as auditory damage and startling response, plus impacts to animals’ ability to successfully feed, mate, nest, and raise their young. And for people who seek quiet and solitude, military training exercises are always at odds with experiencing such values of Wilderness and should be prohibited. We urged the Air Force to use more appropriate non-Wilderness areas for these overflights.

Cattle ranching wreaks havoc at Point Reyes

Several conservation groups are suing the National Park Service (NPS) over its Point Reyes National Seashore management plan amendment, which violates the Seashore’s establishing law among others, by prioritizing cattle ranching over the needs of wildlife. The plan allows nearly 6,000 cattle to continue grazing at the Seashore for another 20 years, to the detriment of native Tule elk, a rare subspecies nearly extinct across California. It also allows the NPS to kill elk if their numbers grow above a few hundred, to make sure they don’t compete with cattle for forage.

Point Reyes National Seashore includes the 33,000-acre Phillip Burton Wilderness, and is an international biosphere reserve that is home to more than 100 rare, threatened, and endangered species, including Tule elk.

When Point Reyes National Seashore was established in 1962, the government paid fair market value to acquire private ranches there, but allowed permitted ranchers to continue operations for 25 years or until the death of the owner. Once the 25-year mark was reached, some of the ranchers refused to leave and were granted leases beyond the original agreement, on some 28,000 acres of public lands.

During a prolonged drought from 2012 to 2014, half of the elk population died, as they were fenced away in a confined area without water so the cattle could consume the only water available. This practice of confining elk continues, with one of three elk herds currently fenced away from the water and forage they need to survive. If all this weren’t bad enough, visitors can’t access a third of the Seashore since it’s under ranchers’ control, habitat has been bulldozed, and polluted water from the cattle grazing is flowing into the Pacific.
Grizzlies and Lynx Trapped in Idaho’s Wolf Killing Craze

On December 6, 2021, we filed suit to protect ESA-listed grizzly bears and Canada lynx from wolf traps in Idaho. Trappers have already injured and killed grizzlies and lynx in wolf traps and snares, and Idaho’s recent legislation expanding wolf trapping throughout the state exacerbates the future risk of harm. Idaho’s new law allows the killing of 90 percent of the state’s current wolf population. Many of these wolves will be targeted in Wilderness. The law permits a range of killing methods once deemed illegal, not to mention abhorrent, and it greatly expands trapping and snaring seasons and methods, a move that threatens a range of “non-target” species, including threatened grizzly bears and Canada lynx.

While the suit is in its initial stages, we have asked the judge for a preliminary injunction to protect grizzlies and lynx while our lawsuit proceeds. We expect a hearing soon on that request.

Bear Baiting in Idaho and Wyoming

Our 2019 lawsuit to stop the killing of grizzly bears over bait piles in Idaho and Wyoming is making its way through federal court after surviving two motions to dismiss.

Our lawsuit aims to eliminate a deadly but preventable obstacle for grizzly recovery throughout Idaho and Wyoming. At least eight grizzlies have been shot and killed at black bear bait stations in national forests—including the first known grizzly to inhabit the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in more than 50 years—and more have been killed at bait stations elsewhere. In Idaho recently, more grizzly bears have been documented at or near bait stations in areas that have not had documented grizzly sightings in decades. We know that the Great Bears have been making their way across highways and interstates and over the Bitterroot Divide to their wild homelands in the Selway-Bitterroot ecosystem and beyond. The area provides some of the best grizzly habitat left in the Lower 48, and we hope our lawsuit will help them on their way.

Cows in the Owyhee Wildernesses

We recently joined forces with Western Watersheds Project to challenge two Bureau of Land Management (BLM) decisions renewing grazing permits in the Owyhee region of southern Idaho. The area is failing to meet multiple standards meant to protect water quality and temperature, native plants, and wildlife, including the highly imperiled sage grouse. Yet instead of reducing or eliminating grazing in the area, BLM authorized continued grazing at current levels for one permit holder and a threefold increase in grazing for another. The decisions also authorize grazing, developments, and motorized uses in the Pole Creek and Owyhee River Wildernesses.

A judge recently granted our request for a stay on one of those decisions, noting several “eyebrow raising” components of BLM’s analysis. Both challenges will continue through the Office of Hearings and Appeals, an administrative law court within the Department of Interior.
In September 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives attached the large package of wilderness bills known as the Protecting America’s Wilderness and Public Lands package to the House version of the must-pass National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). But the Senate did not accept the wilderness package in conference committee negotiations over the NDAA, and the NDAA passed in December 2021 as Public Law 117-81 without the wilderness bills.

Still, the Protecting America’s Wilderness package remains alive in Congress. It passed the full House of Representatives early in the 117th Congress (Feb. 2021) as HR 803. The package could still pass on its own in the Senate, or as an attachment to another bill, or as part of a larger public lands bill. Wilderness Watch will continue to track the package, as well as other wilderness bills in Congress. For the complete chart of wilderness bills in the current Congress, see bit.ly/3HqNOlB.

The Protecting America’s Wilderness and Public Lands package includes:

• Colorado Wilderness Act—741,000 acres of new wilderness designations.
• Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation, and Working Forests Act—251,000 acres of new wilderness designations.
• Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act—126,000 acres of new wilderness designations in Washington. Clean bill but for buffer zone language.
• Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act—73,000 acres of new wilderness designations.
• San Gabriel Mountains, Foothills and Rivers Protection Act—31,000 acres of new wilderness designations in California.
• Central Coast Heritage Protection Act—250,000 acres of new wilderness designations in California.

While these potential new additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System look good on first blush, most of these bills are also larded up with harmful special provisions for the Wildernesses they would create, providing less protection than that provided for by the 1964 Wilderness Act. These special provisions include:

• Legalizing permanent fixed climbing anchors in Wilderness, contrary to the Wilderness Act’s ban on installations and structures.
• Authorizing motor vehicles and aircraft for wildlife management in Wilderness, for both state and federal agencies.
• Allowing installation and perpetual maintenance of weather stations in Wilderness.
• Legalizing construction and perpetual maintenance of wildlife water structures (“guzzlers”) in Wilderness (and usually serviced in perpetuity by water trucks).
• Allowing competitive equestrian and running events in Wilderness.
• Prohibiting buffer zones around Wilderness, so that the federal wilderness-administering agencies cannot voice any concerns about developments that can occur right up to the wilderness boundary.
• Preventing any regulation of military overflights above Wilderness, even those for noisy, low-level jet planes.

YES! I want to help keep Wilderness wild!

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Thank you!
Even under the Biden administration, we continue to see more and more proposals from public land managers that would harm Wilderness and wildlife. Calls for stream poisoning, wildlife collaring, burning, increased cattle and sheep grazing, helicopters, roads and other development, and more, have become the norm. Our public land managers have a severe case of wilderness amnesia.

I’m proud to say that we’re doubling down, and our resolve to defend Wilderness has only hardened. The same holds true for YOU, our members. Our membership is larger than ever, and your generosity over the holidays gave us a great push forward. Way to go, team!

We’re hitting the ground running in 2022. A long-time member in Alaska is currently matching up to $30,000 for all first-time donations. This is a great time to encourage a friend or family member to become a Wilderness Watch member.

If you’re a monthly donor, please consider switching to our secure bank-to-bank monthly program. Credit card companies and processing fees can take up to three percent of your monthly donation, whereas bank to bank transfers have no hidden fees, so 100 percent of your donation goes to Wilderness Watch. If you’d like to enroll, please contact me at (406) 542-2048 or bretth@wildernesswatch.org.

We’ve also seen an uptick in employer matching gifts. This is a growing type of philanthropy where companies match their employees’ donations to nonprofit organizations. Please inquire if your employer offers this. You’re $100 donation can become $200 in the bat of an eye. 🍁