



## **My Turn**

### **Wilderness designation critical for wildlife**

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**The Taos News, 3/15/2012**

Over the past 37 years, I've spent considerable time hiking, camping, skiing, photographing and radio tracking wildlife in the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area (WSA) and surrounding mountains.

The entire Columbine-Hondo WSA needs full permanent Wilderness status because of the recreation it supports year round, the clean water it provides to the R'o Hondo and Red River, and wildlife.

Overall, the area is good habitat for game species such as elk and deer in summer, and bighorn sheep, bear, turkey and grouse year-round. The area also provides habitat for many non-game species such as American marten, White-tailed ptarmigan, lynx and raptors.

The east end of the area (Gold Hill to Bull-of-the-Woods, and Long's Canyon) is the most critical portion for wildlife because of the special habitat and the high elevation movement corridor it provides.

The east end also receives very heavy recreational use year-round including hiking, snowshoeing and skiing. It is critical that the east end of the Columbine-Hondo WSA be protected from mechanized and motorized development.

The east end of the WSA is a key wildlife movement corridor. It is part of the crest of the Sangre de Cristo Range, connecting the Culebra range, Big Costilla Peak, Latir Peaks to the north with Wheeler Peak and the high country to the south.

This corridor is important to the movement and distribution of high country mammals such as bighorn sheep, American marten (state Threatened), Canadian lynx (federal listed), snowshoe hare, yellow-bellied marmot and white-tailed ptarmigan (state endangered and petitioned for federal threatened status), as well as being an un-fragmented corridor for other species.

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep were restored to the Wheeler Peak/Gold Hill mountain complex a number of years ago and the population has done very well. While the rams spend most of the year near Vallecitos Peak to the south, most of the ewes, yearlings and lambs stay in the Gold Hill area of the eastern WSA. The rams move north via Wheeler Peak, Bull of the Woods, and the connecting ridge to Gold Hill in the fall.

The rut occurs on Gold Hill with the rams returning south for the winter after the rut.

Apparently lambing occurs near Gold Hill, probably in the cliffy escape terrain above the tarn Goose Lake on the east flank of Gold Hill. Ewes, yearlings and lambs stay in the Gold Hill area year round.

Opening the east end of the WSA to mechanized/motorized vehicles would negatively impact bighorns. Potentially mechanized disturbance could eliminate the sheep population in this entire complex of mountains if the ewes were unable to find suitable yearround habitat elsewhere.

Canadian lynx (federal threatened) were restored to Colorado several years ago and have been documented moving south in the Sangre de Cristo Range as far south as Santa Fe. It is very likely they move through the Columbine-Hondo area.

Lynx are primarily dependent on snowshoe hares, a spruce-fir forest species, which occur in the WSA. Wilderness status for the WSA will ensure management of the area as relatively undisturbed and may facilitate restoration of lynx to NM. The Wheeler Peak and Columbine-Hondo area is the primary habitat for American marten (state threatened) in New Mexico. They formerly occurred in the Pecos Wilderness but efforts to document them there in recent years have failed.

Marten are rare in the San Juan Mountains making this the only good population in New Mexico. The area will become more critical to survival of this species in New Mexico as the climate warms reducing spruce-fir forest.

White-tailed ptarmigan (state endangered; petitioned for listing federal threatened) are rare in New Mexico. They use Gold Hill as a resting area for movement between populations on Katchina and Wheeler Peaks, and alpine tundra to the north. Mechanized disturbance of Gold Hill will further isolate the New Mexico populations adding to their already precarious situation.

Wilderness designation for the entire WSA is critical for wildlife. Removing any portion from wilderness protection, especially the Gold Hill to Bull-of-the-woods and Long's Canyon portion, would greatly reduce the value of the area for wildlife.

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