

Wilderness group brings attention to Ute Mountain

By Matthew van Buren

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To bring attention to a proposed Northern New Mexico wilderness area, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance arranged a hike up Ute Mountain, June 2.

Ute Mountain, a volcanic formation that rises nearly 2,500 feet from the surrounding plateau to just under 10,100 feet, sits just south of the Colorado border and is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Congress is considering a bill that would create the 13,420-acre "Cerro del Yuta Wilderness" as part of the 236,000-acre R'o Grande del Norte Conservation Area. If the bill is passed, the 8,000-acre "R'o San Antonio Wilderness" would also be created around San Antonio Mountain.

BLM park ranger Daniel Rael said Ute Mountain is currently roadless, and game trails and trenches formed by forestry skidders when the mountain was being logged in the early to mid-20th century form the principal hiking paths. He said, were the area designated as wilderness, management would not change significantly. It would, however, protect the area from future development.

Outfitter, Mora County commissioner and traditional community organizer for the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance John Olivas said he has been taking groups up Ute Mountain annually for each of the last three years. He said the trips are taken in an effort to highlight the R'o Grande del Norte area in general and the proposed Cerro del Yuta Wilderness in particular.

"We're working on showcasing the area," he said. "Ute Mountain was designated specifically because of its roadless characteristics. There's no development. There are no roads."

Rael, who is studying geology at New Mexico State University, said Ute Mountain was formed about 2.1 million years ago, making it the youngest of the volcanoes on the Taos Plateau. It sits within the San Lu's Basin and R'o Grande Rift. As the mountain gains in elevation, prairie grassland becomes primarily Ponderosa pine forest.

Rael said the BLM acquired the property from a local rancher (though a section of it remains privately owned) and uses it only for wildlife purposes.

"Pronghorn, deer and elk thrive in the area," he said.

Rael said elk commonly migrate through the Ute Mountain area, as they often come in from Colorado and go through the Valle Vidal area before heading west to Ute Mountain, the Wild and Scenic Rivers area and San Antonio Mountain.

“Hunting is, well, more popular than hiking,” he said of recreational use of the area.

Olivas said over the last three years of trips up Ute Mountain, he hasn’t encountered other groups. However, a visitor log at the top of the mountain shows hikers are active on Ute.

“We don’t see a lot of active groups,” he said. “Actually, I don’t think we’ve seen any.”

The group Olivas took up Ute Mountain June 2 did not reach the top, as late-morning thunderstorms moved in while the hikers were still a few hundred feet away from the summit.

Legislation that would create the National Conservation Area, including the two wilderness areas, was introduced by Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, and U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, at the end of March 2011. According to information from the Library of Congress, the bill has been placed on the Senate legislative calendar, and the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands held a hearing regarding the matter March 29.

Olivas said Congress may approve the legislation by the end of this year, as Bingaman will be retiring at the end of 2012.

“That’s definitely the hope,” he said.

Bingaman has also introduced legislation to give full wilderness protection to the 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo area in Taos County.

Olivas provided *The Taos News* with polling data that shows wide support for protection of the R’o Grande del Norte area in Taos and R’o Arriba counties, based on 400 telephone interviews conducted in April.

According to the polling report, 83 percent of Taos County residents support the idea, and 12 percent oppose it. In R’o Arriba County, 69 percent favor protecting the R’o Grande del Norte area, while 26 percent oppose it. Voters in both counties who hunt several times a year favor the proposed Conservation Area 68 percent to 30 percent, and those who fish several times a year favor it 77 percent to 20 percent.

“By a 70 to 22 percent margin, likely voters in Taos and R’o Arriba think this would be good for the local economy rather than bad,” the report states.

For more information about the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, visit nmwild.org.

For an audio-visual Soundslide of the June 2 hike up Ute Mountain, visit taosnews.com.

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Views from Ute Mountain extend well into Colorado. Stormy conditions met a group of hikers on the mountain June 2, preventing them from reaching the summit. Matthew van Buren

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John Olivas Jr., left, looks through binoculars at a pronghorn sheep prior to a June 2 hike up Ute Mountain.

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Wildflowers such as castilleja, otherwise known as "Indian paintbrush," can be found growing on Ute Mountain.