



Alliance hike highlights Columbine-Hondo

By Matthew van Buren

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A small group of hikers headed up Columbine Canyon July 21 with further protection for the area in mind.

The trail, which heads south from Columbine Canyon on State Highway 38, lies within the approximately 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area. It has held “wilderness study area” status for about three decades, and local groups have been seeking permanent protection for the Columbine-Hondo.

To help further that goal, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance organizer John Olivas has been arranging hikes into the Wilderness Study Area for the past several years.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, DNM, introduced legislation earlier this year to bring fullfledged wilderness status to the Columbine-Hondo. The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act has been referred to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

A half-dozen people joined Olivas July 21 for a hike up Columbine Creek. The trail led to the beginning of a series of high alpine meadows and entailed a six-mile round trip. Over the three-mile trip in, the trail rose moderately a total of about 1,000 vertical feet. Though the trail crosses Columbine Creek at various spots, several nice bridges extend over the wider crossings.

The group hiked through primarily spruce and aspen forest, though cottonwoods and Ponderosa pines are present at times. Wildflowers and wild raspberries grow along the trail. Butterflies were a common sight, and the group came upon a family of grouse at one point along the trail.

After a brief hike up Columbine Creek, a side trail leads up a rock pile on the left to the site of an old mine. A round entrance leads into a straight tunnel; members of the Wilderness Alliance hike explored it to its terminus, looking at the flaky minerals and calcium deposits that lined its walls. It is a good idea to bring a flashlight or headlamp. An archaeologist with Carson National Forest said the mine is not identified in the materials she uses and could not provide further information about its history.

The Columbine Creek Trail is among the most moderate in the steep, rugged Columbine-Hondo. It is well-maintained and rises mildly from the Columbine Campground, at about 8,000 feet in elevation. However, it steepens as it goes deeper into the Wilderness Study Area.

After about two miles on the Columbine Creek Trail, the Deer Creek Trail breaks off to the left, and the Columbine-Hondo National Recreation Trail follows it over Gold Hill, at about 12,700 feet in altitude, and down Long Canyon to Taos Ski Valley. Those who continue to follow Columbine Creek past its

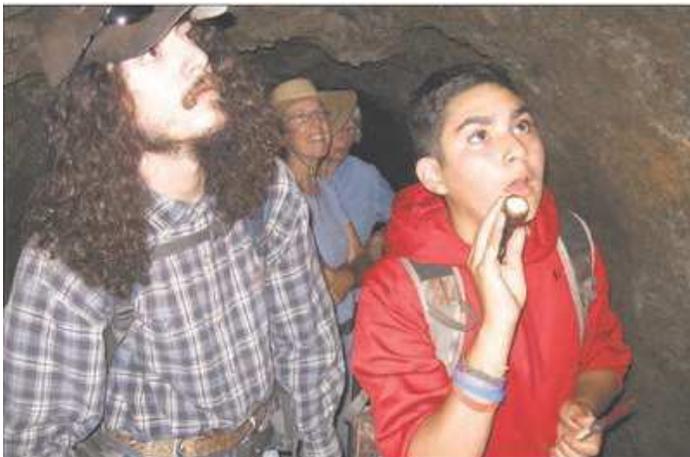
intersection with the Deer Creek Trail will find another split in the trail after about half a mile. A sign on the left points to the Placer Fork Trail, which also leads toward Gold Hill. About 1.5 miles down the Placer Fork Trail, the Willow Fork Trail splits off to the right; Willow Fork leads to the Lobo Peak Ridge, just below Gold Hill.

After the Placer Fork split, the Columbine Creek Trail continues about two miles until the Cow Lake Trail meets it on the right. Rivers and Birds Executive Director Roberta Salazar said she tried to follow it a couple of years ago and found it to be overgrown.

After 1.5 more miles, the Columbine Creek Trail hits the ridge that runs between Lobo Peak and Gold Hill. Here the Gavilan Trail — a steep, 2.5-mile-long stretch — meets the Columbine Creek Trail and leads down to State Road 150 just outside Taos Ski Valley.

Multiple maps of the Columbine-Hondo can be purchased locally. The Carson National Forest field office on Cruz Alta Road offers the Forest Service's map of the Wheeler Peak and Latir Peak wildernesses, which includes the Columbine-Hondo; and a map by Dharma Maps of the Taos Wild Rivers area also includes the Columbine-Hondo and can be purchased at Mudd 'N' Flood on Bent Street.

The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition touts the wide support full wilderness protection of the area has received, including from local governments, Taos Pueblo, recreationalists, ranchers and the Taos Cycling Coalition, which can be reached through its website, www.taoscyclingcoalition.org. Though bicycles will not be allowed on trails, such as Long Canyon, in the Columbine-Hondo area, new cycling trails will be created by a Wheeler Peak boundary modification that is included in the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act. The Act also allows traditional uses, such as grazing, to continue in the Columbine-Hondo.



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In the foreground, Daniel Rael, a BLM park ranger, left, and John Olivas Jr. explore a former mine site along the Columbine Creek Trail.