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Big Guns Want 230,000 Acres Of Gallatins Near Yellowstone Protected As Wilderness

FOUNDER OF PATAGONIA JOINS FORMER U.S. INTERIOR SECRETARY AND DOZENS OF EMINENT SCIENTISTS WHO SAY CAPITAL "W" ESSENTIAL TO SAFEGUARDING WILDLIFE IN CORE OF GREATER YELLOWSTONE

by **Todd Wilkinson**



The Gallatin Mountains, stretching between Yellowstone and Bozeman, are wilder than most national parks in the Lower 48 and renowned for their wildlife, yet they lack the landscape protection that other parts at the core of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem enjoy. Photo courtesy George Wuerthner

It's considered one of the most important land protection questions involving the core of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in a few generations.

Now, some of the biggest and most influential names in American landscape conservation are calling upon the U.S. Forest Service to protect a wide swath of the Gallatin Mountains in southwest Montana—a biological puzzle piece considered central to the health of the most iconic large mammal ecosystem in the Lower 48 states.

newspaper strongly encouraging the Custer-Gallatin National Forest to adopt a management alternative that safeguards 230,000 acres as new wilderness. The ad features a letter sent to Congress which was organized by Reed Noss, a pioneer of conservation biology and a researcher who has studied the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, even delivering a report decades ago to The Nature Conservancy on biological hotspots in the region.

Among those supporting joining Noss: Patagonia clothing company founder Yvon Chouinard, Dr. Cathy Whitlock, a climate change scientist and member of the National Academies of Sciences, former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, and a list of prominent others—including eminent ecologists and retired federal public land managers. As one signee said, "given the importance of the Gallatins to the health of Yellowstone, this ought to be a national issue, just as protection of national monuments and trying to keep oil and gas development out of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge are issues of national importance to the conservation legacy of our country."

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With Custer-Gallatin officials receiving public comments through early June, the signees believe that given a number of converging forces steadily whittling away at the wild fabric Greater Yellowstone, the decision involving the Gallatins is momentous.

Stretching from the rugged northwest corner of Yellowstone National Park northward to the outskirts of bustling Bozeman, the Gallatins, which have no roads crossing their crest, have long been recognized essential habitat for a wide range of species. From migrating elk herds to grizzly bears, wolves, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, moose and someday soon, maybe even wild bison moving out of Yellowstone, they hold an extraordinary roster.

The Gallatins, which function as a crossroads, are wilder than most national parks and vulnerable to being impacted by growing numbers of people moving to the region and others using it as a playground. Moreover, researchers note that going forward the Gallatins will play a vital role in serving as a refuge for species struggling against the effects of encroaching development and dramatic alternations to habitat brought by climate change. As far back as 1910, Gifford Pinchot, then chief of the Forest Service, wanted to turn the southern Gallatins into a special wildlife refuge.

How much of the Gallatin Range should receive wilderness protection is a source of passionate debate. Motorized recreationists and mountain bikers want less landscape placed under the umbrella of capital W wilderness.



The Porcupine drainage, hub of an expansive wilderness study area, is considered an untrammelled crown jewel and will be increasingly important as a refuge for wildlife stressed by climate change. Writes the Montana Wilderness Association: "this corner of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is one of the few places left with nearly the full complement of species that were here when several tribes hunted in the area and when Lewis and Clark made their journey west." Photo courtesy George Wuerthner

Those who gave their imprimatur to the newspaper advertisement, however, favor a plan far more ambitious than one being advanced by three conservation groups, the Wilderness Society, Greater Yellowstone Coalition and Montana Wilderness Association which, along with mountain biking clubs, came together to form an entity called "the Gallatin Partnership."

Critics call the partnership's plan "wilderness lite" and say it favors the desires of growing numbers of outdoor recreationists over the needs of wildlife and solitude. Montanans for Gallatin Wilderness want 230,000 acres protected while the Sierra Club is calling for 164,500 acres to become wilderness.

Ground zero in the disagreement is how to protect a breathtaking sweep of the Gallatins known as the 151,000-acre Hyalite-Buffalo Horn-Porcupine Wilderness Study Area coming under increasing pressure from user groups in the nearby resort town of Big Sky on the west side of the mountains.

During the 1990s, Congressional legislation achieved consolidation of public land ownership and eliminated "checkerboarded" private holdings being targeted for industrial logging and real estate development. The intention of conservationists who successfully worked toward that end say the primary objective was to get the Buffalo Horn-Porcupine protected as wilderness.

Not long after, the Forest Service was taken to court for failing to uphold Congressionally-mandated legal requirements obligating it to manage the wilderness study area in a condition that would not jeopardize it becoming a full-fledged wilderness. Despite illegal trespass happening by motorcycle-ATV-snowmobile users and mountain bikers blazing illegal trails—both are not allowed in wilderness—the Forest Service did nothing to halt the incursions until forced to address it.

The agency also has recently acknowledged that today in Greater Yellowstone it has a poor understanding of what swelling numbers of outdoor recreationists mean for sensitive species such as grizzlies, wolverines, elk in their calving grounds and other animals with a low tolerance for human disturbance. The Custer-Gallatin has recommended setting aside less than 100,000 acres of the Gallatins as wilderness.



Some 61 years ago, in 1958, the renowned Jackson Hole elk biologist Olaus Murie wrote a letter to the Forest Service following a camping trip he took with his wife, Mardy, and others via horseback into the Gallatin mountains. Murie, who had been national director of The Wilderness Society, reminded that the Forest Service had historically been central to safeguarding wilderness for future generations and none ever regretted it.



the view north from Ramshorn Peak—terrain breathtaking even to Olaus Murie, a leader and charter member of The Wilderness Society

limits to traditional multiple use management. I have traveled in many wilderness areas, and while I feel that public wilderness use is a perfectly legitimate use of national forest lands and needs no apology, this Gallatin area impressed me strongly as being preeminently suitable for such

designation without encroachment on other interests.”

A major advocate for creation of The Wilderness Act, Murie died in October 1963, just months shy of that landmark bill's passage and signing into law in 1964.

Mountain Journal soon will be publishing a multi-part series on the importance of the Gallatin Range and how it represents a national bellwether for foresighted public land management. Meantime, below is an incomplete list of those individuals whose names appeared in the letter to Congress and newspaper ad.

Text of letter to members of Congress and signees below

Dear Member of Congress:

As biologists, wildlife advocates, and members of the scientific community, we are writing to express our strong support for maintaining the ecological integrity of the Gallatin Range by establishing a 230,000-acre or larger wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Wilderness designation is recognized as the “Gold Standard” for preserving wildlands and ecological values.

The scientific community recognizes that large protected areas with connectivity to other large protected patches is the best way to preserve high-quality wildlife habitat and permit the continued influence of ecological processes like wildfire, predation, migration, and other natural influences.

The Gallatin Range is the most significant unprotected wildlands in the northern Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. In particular, the Buffalo Horn and Porcupine (BHP) drainages that lie immediately north of Yellowstone National Park are critical to the biotic fidelity of the Yellowstone Ecosystem.

The Buffalo Horn-Porcupine was recognized early on for its wildlife values. In 1910 Forest Service Chief Gifford Pinchot advocated protecting the southern Gallatin Range as a wildlife refuge. A year later, the state of Montana created a wildlife refuge in the Buffalo Horn and Porcupine portion of the Gallatin Range. In recognition of the inherent wildlands values of the range, in 1977, some 155,000 acres, including the BHP drainages, were designated the Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area by Congress.

These drainages also support bighorn sheep, moose, mountain goat, wolverine, cougar, wolf, and mule deer. Both of these drainages also possess native Westslope cutthroat trout, a species once proposed for listing under the ESA. According to the Montana Heritage Program, 18 birds, eight mammals, three fish, three amphibians, and one reptile as "at risk" or declining in numbers, demonstrating the need to provide the most durable protection possible for this area.

It has long been recognized by the scientific community that protected areas in isolation fail to preserve species and ecosystem processes adequately. Wildlife corridors provide connectivity, sustaining vital natural processes, wildlife populations, and biodiversity while allowing species to move in response to climate change. The Gallatin Range is a recognized wildlife corridor linking YNP to the Northern Continental Ecosystem.

Signed:

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Todd Wilkinson is an American author and journalist proudly trained in the old school tradition. For more on his career, click below.
(Photo by David J Swift).

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