

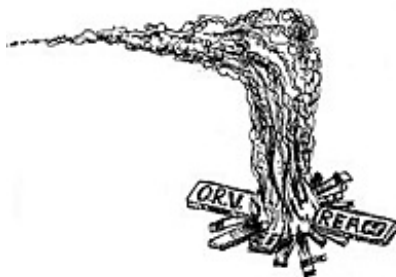


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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



A Brief History of the National Wilderness Preservation System

There are any number of books, booklets, and articles about Wilderness Areas in the United States, but little has been written about the history of how designated Wilderness Areas have grown in number of areas and in total acreage from 1924 to today. To wit, many conservationists know that New Mexico's Gila was the first such area set aside in the United States. But how many know the second, third, and fourth areas chosen for their wilderness character?

I offer here a quick look at how designated Wilderness has grown from 750,000 acres in 1924 to 112 million acres in 2015. For wilderness nerds, the background tables give some details not before offered this way. [\[1\]](#)



1924. Wilderness protection began in this year when Aldo Leopold wrote a careful proposal grounded in his knowledge of the land and then talked Southwest Regional Forester Frank Pooler into setting aside about 750,000 acres of the headwaters of the Gila River as the first Wilderness Area on the U.S. public lands. Leopold and other old-time forest rangers were worried about the boom in “motor-car” tourism and camping in the backcountry and feared that soon there would be few areas without “Ford dust.” Most of all, Leopold wanted to keep quality hunting and fishing areas free of roads and motor-cars—so wayfarers would have to rely on their own frontier skills

such as building campfires, handling a pack train of mules, and setting up tent camps.

In the ninety years since 1924, the Wilderness System has grown more than a hundred-fold. This tale is told in the five tables alongside this Campfire. Please look at them as you read. They show how the Wilderness System has grown, first as a Forest Service administrative program and then as the congressionally overseen National Wilderness Preservation System.

Table 1 gives an overview of the key dates in the expansion of the National Wilderness Preservation System and its predecessor, the administrative protection of Primitive/Wilderness areas by the U.S. Forest Service.



In 1926, two years after the Gila Wilderness was named, Leopold’s friend and fellow wilderness thinker and tinkerer, Arthur Carhart, sold the Superior National Forest in Minnesota on setting aside a lake and forest landscape of over 1 million acres, which came to be called the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.

In 1929, Chief of the Forest Service William B. Greeley looked upon these new kinds of reservations and deemed them good. He suggested that other National Forest regions should mull over New Mexico and Minnesota and then go and do likewise—but not too much. He brought out

the L-20 regulation to authorize such designations, now to be called Primitive Areas. However, the small print of L-20 didn’t truly shield such areas—they were really only put into a holding pattern of sorts.

The next year, 1930, two areas in Oregon—Mountain Lakes and Eagle Cap—were designated as the third and fourth areas of what was to become the Forest Service’s administrative Wilderness/Wild Area System (which lasted 40 years from 1924 to 1964). In 1931, the National Forest dam burst and over a score of areas in California, Wyoming, Montana, Washington, Oregon, and New Mexico were named as Primitive Areas by regional foresters. Another score or more areas were named in 1932 and 1933 in all the western states but for Nevada and Alaska. A few areas—such as the Guadalupe Escarpment in far southeastern New Mexico—were proposed but never designated as Primitive Areas. Two new Primitive Areas—New Mexico’s Black Range and Gila—came after a newly built road split the original Gila Wilderness down the middle. The building of this “North Star Road” showed how weak were the protections given these administrative Primitive Areas.

Other Primitive Areas were named during the rest of the 1930s. In 1939, real protection and some level of permanence finally came to the Forest Service’s administrative system. Bob Marshall, the greatest early champion of wilderness protection, was named as Forest Service head of recreation in 1936 by the progressive Chief of the Forest Service Ferdinand Silcox. Marshall put together new regulations—U1, 2, and 3—to better safeguard the areas. Logging, roads, cottages, and such were banned. All Primitive Areas were to be studied for additions, deletions, and new, firm boundaries. After study, areas over 100,000 acres were to be called Wilderness Areas and those under 100,000 acres Wild Areas. Table 2 tallies the 14,373,888 acres of Primitive Areas by state as of 1942. Before 1964, 31 areas were studied and named Wilderness or Wild, 22 new areas (that had not been Primitive Areas) were designated Wilderness or Wild (including one area in New Hampshire and two in North Carolina), 34 yet-unstudied areas were left as Primitive Areas, and one area was dropped.

Although Bob Marshall suddenly died before being able to oversee the carrying out of the new regulations, and the Primitive Area studies were put on hold until after World War Two, conservationists reckoned on the study of Primitive Areas to lead to bigger Wilderness or Wild Areas by taking in millions of acres of undeveloped National Forest lands contiguous to the Primitive Areas. However, in the new logging and road-building frenzy that seized Forest Service brass after the war, instead of making Primitive Areas bigger, the Forest Service began hacking away at them and designating smaller areas as Wilderness or Wild Areas. This chipping away at Primitive Areas led conservationists to ask for a Wilderness Act for better permanent protection under congressional—not agency—oversight. Among the Primitive Areas slashed by the Forest Service in the 1950s and early 1960s were the Gila, California's Yolla Bolly, Oregon's Three Sisters, and Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot. I deal with this history in greater depth in *The Great Conservation Divide*.^[2]



The Wilderness Act in 1964 put all National Forest Wilderness and Wild Areas into the new National Wilderness Preservation System and directed the Forest Service to protect the leftover Primitive Areas as if they were Wilderness Areas and to study them and make recommendations to Congress for Wilderness designation by 1974. Only the Arizona portion of the Blue Range Primitive Area has not yet been designated as Wilderness by Congress—fifty-one years after the Wilderness Act.

Table 3 lists the acreages by state that the Wilderness Act designated as Wilderness in the new National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) in 1964. Areas so named were National Forest Wilderness and Wild Areas—9,139,721 acres nationally. Also listed in Table 2 are the remaining National Forest Primitive Area acreages by state—5.4 million acres nationally. The percentage column, however, is based on the actual Wilderness Areas only not counting the Primitive Area acreage.



The Wilderness Act also mandated the National Park Service and US Fish & Wildlife Service (for National Wildlife Refuges) to inventory all roadless areas over 5,000 acres (or of size practical for management), study them, and send wilderness recommendations to Congress by 1974. The new National Wilderness Preservation System would hold federal lands beyond the National Forests such as those in National Parks and National Refuges. In 1976, the agency overseeing the biggest acreage of federal land—the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—was brought into the National Wilderness Preservation System and given a deadline of 1991 for studies and recommendations of its

lands for Wilderness designation by Congress.

Table 4 shows the same data as Table 3, but for 1985. In the twenty years after passage of the Wilderness Act, Wilderness Areas had grown tenfold from 9.1 million acres to 89 million acres. More than half of this growth—56,484,668 acres—was in Alaska, most of it from the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), perhaps the greatest one-shot land protection step ever taken worldwide. Pulling Alaska's acreage out of the picture, the NWPS had grown more than threefold to 32,534,197 acres—much of that in 1978 in big omnibus bills, and from 1980 to 1984 in single-state National Forest Wilderness bills from the second Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE II) process.



During the thirty years after 1985, big statewide Wilderness bills for BLM lands in Arizona and California came into law, as did many regional bills in Nevada, thanks to Senator Harry Reid. This growth is shown in Table 5.

Those states whose share of the National Wilderness Preservation System grew strongly since 1964 did so for one or more of three reasons: 1) A large acreage of potential (or *de facto*) wilderness; 2) a strong grassroots wilderness movement; or 3) a member(s) of Congress willing to work hard and creatively to get more Wilderness Areas for their state. Though most states today could well

more than double their Wilderness Area acreage, that will depend most of all on well-organized wilderfolks unafraid to fight like hell to gain Wilderness Area designation for all potential areas and lands that can be rewilded. Don't count on The Wilderness Society to do it for you. Don't count on Pew. It's up to wilderness lovers who know the ground of their states and who will fight with, as our legendary leader Brock Evans urges, "Endless pressure, endlessly applied."

If we all do this, I may live long enough to write about a National Wilderness Preservation System of at least 300 million acres.

Dave Foreman



© Nancy Morton, Avoiding mosquitos on the Sheenjek River, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Photo credits: © Dave Foreman, Gila Wilderness Area, first in the world, 1924, © Dave Foreman, Boundary Waters Canoe Area, second area protected, 1926, © Dave Foreman, Tiger Wall, Chama Canyon Wilderness Area, NM, Endangered American Wilderness Act 1978, © Dave Foreman, Cranberry Wilderness Area, West Virginia, Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975, © Dave Foreman, Towering Eureka Dunes backdropped by Last Chance Range all added to Death Valley NP and designated Wilderness in 1994 Calif. Desert Protection Act

[\[1\]](#) Several states and Indian Reservations have designated Wilderness Areas with protection more or less equal to the 1964 Wilderness Act. Such areas are in New York, Alaska, California, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Montana, and New Mexico. A good argument can be made that such areas should be included in this analysis, and I do that here in Table 5. It is also why I wrote above that there were 112 million acres of protected Wilderness rather than 109 million. If you know of Indian Reservations with designated Wilderness Areas comparable to federal Wilderness Areas not in the states listed, please let me know; also of any state land Wilderness Areas comparable to federal that I have not listed.

[\[2\]](#) Dave Foreman, *The Great Conservation Divide* (Raven's Eye, Durango, CO, 2014).

Table 1
Some Big Expansions of the
National Wilderness Preservation System

1924	USFS designates first administrative Wilderness Area—New Mexico's Gila
1931-33	More than 40 Forest Service Primitive Areas administratively established throughout West
1964	Wilderness Act puts Wilderness Areas under Congressional control and mandates National Park units and National Wildlife Refuges to inventory, study, and recommend areas
1973	Congress designates Wilderness Areas on National Forests in East over USFS objections
1976	Congress mandates a BLM Wilderness Review and Recommendation program
1978	Endangered American Wilderness Act, Omnibus National Park Act, Montana Wilderness Areas, Boundary Waters Wilderness Area
1980	Alaska Lands Act signed, designating about 50 million acres of Wilderness
1980-4	Many state bills pass designating new National Forest Wilderness Areas following the RARE II process
1990	Arizona Desert Wilderness Act designates many BLM areas & NWRs throughout the state
1994	California Desert Protection Act designates over 7 million acres of BLM and NPS Wilderness

Table 2
1942 National Forest Primitive Areas

State	PA Acreage	14,373,888 acres US % of Primitive Areas	% of State
Arizona	734,460 (also in NM)	5.11 %	1.01%
California	1,661,438	11.56%	1.66%
Colorado	827,845	5.76%	1.25%
Idaho	3,305,981 (also in MT)	23%	6.25%
Minnesota	1,036,550	7.21%	2.02%
Montana	1,604,500	11.16%	1.72%
New Mexico	945,140	6.58%	1.22%
Oregon	625,019	4.35%	1.41%
Utah	243,957	1.7%	.46%
Washington	959,091	6.67%	2.25%
Wyoming	2,429,967	16.9%	3.9%

This table gives the acreage of Forest Service Primitive Areas in each state as of 1942. It also calculates the percentage of the total Primitive Area acreage in each state and the percentage of each state's total acreage protected as National Forest Primitive Areas.

Table 3
1964 State Percentages of National Wilderness Preservation System

State	9,139,721 acres Wilderness	5.4 million acres Primitive Areas	%NWPS	%State in WAs
Arizona	420,796	255,281	4.6%	.5%
California	1,254,348	565,066	13.7%	1.2%
Colorado	280,104	538,831	3%	.4%
Idaho	988,688	1,642,545	10.8%	1.8%

Minnesota	1,031,871	0	11.3%	2.02%
Montana	1,482,567	417,197	16.2%	1.6%
Nevada	64,667	0	.7%	.09%
New Hampshire	5,552	0	.06%	.1%
New Mexico	679,436	336,591	7.4%	.8%
North Carolina	20,925	0	.23%	.06%
Oregon	664,652	86,700	7.3%	1%
Utah	0	237,177	0	0
Washington	594,834	801,000	6.5%	1.4%
Wyoming	1,781,034	587,930	19.5%	2.8%

This table compares those states that had the original areas included in the National Wilderness Preservation System by the 1964 Wilderness Act (National Forest Wilderness and Wild Areas), totaling 9,139,721 acres. It also lists the acreage of remaining National Forest Primitive Areas (5.4 million acres total) to be studied for recommendation to Congress for Wilderness designation. It then gives each state's percentage of the National Wilderness Preservation System (not including Primitive Areas) and the percentage of each state's total acreage that was designated as Wilderness by the Wilderness Act.

Table 4
1-1-1985 State Percentages of National Wilderness Preservation System

State	Wilderness	89,018,865 %NWPS	32,534,197 %NWPS w/o AK	%State in WAs
Alaska	56,484,668	63.45%	NA	15.46%
Arizona	2,037,265	2.29%	6.26%	2.8%
California	5,926,145	6.66%	18.21%	5.92%
Colorado	2,636,962	2.96%	8.1%	3.98%
Florida	1,420,777	1.6%	4.37%	4.1%
Georgia	417,957	.47%	1.28%	1.1%
Hawaii	142,370	.16%	.44%	3.4%
Idaho	4,000,652	4.49%	12.3%	7.58%
Minnesota	1,090,285	1.22%	3.35%	2.14%
Montana	3,431,363	3.85%	10.54%	3.7%
Nevada	64,667	.07%	.2%	.09%
New Hampshire	102,932	.11%	.32%	1.7%
New Mexico	1,533,983	1.72%	4.71%	1.97%
Oregon	2,084,720	2.34%	6.41%	3.39%
Utah	802,639	.9%	2.47%	1.52%
Vermont	58,536	.06%	.18%	.98%
Washington	2,591,818	2.91%	7.97%	6.09%
Wyoming	3,084,277	3.46%	9.48%	4.97%

This table compares Wilderness Area acreages and percentages for all Western states and for those Eastern states with high acreages that reckon out as 1% or more of the state's whole acreage. 1985 is after the large additions to the Wilderness System by the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Act, many state National Forest Wilderness bills following RARE II, and big omnibus legislation in 1978. Percentages each state has in the Wilderness System are given for the whole system (89,018,865 acres) and for the system minus Alaska (32,534,197) since Alaska had over half the total acreage (56,484,668).

Table 5, page 1

2015 State Percentages of National Wilderness Preservation System

State	Wilderness	%NWPS	52,618,692		
			w/o AK	State	Tribal
	109,201,800		%NWPS	% in WAs	WAs
Alaska	56,585,992 acres	51.84%	NA	15.48%	0
Arizona	4,517,758	4.13%	8.59%	6.2%	0
California	14,947,262	13.71%	28.48%	14.93%	3,845
Colorado	3,736,471	3.42%	7.11%	5.62%	0
Florida	1,422,247	1.3%	2.7%	4.1%	0
Georgia	486,530	.45%	.93%	1.31%	0
Hawaii	155,509	.14%	.3%	3.74%	0
Idaho	4,522,549	4.4%	9.12%	9%	0
Maine	18,625	.02%	.03%	0	0
Michigan	291,153	.27%	.55%	0	0
Minnesota	1,104,237	1.01%	2.1%	2.16%	0
Montana	3,510,519	3.21%	6.66%	3.75%	89,500
Nevada	3,444,558	3.15%	6.55%	4.9%	0
New Hampshire	138,618	.13%	.26%	2.4%	0
New Mexico	1,699,751	1.55%	3.23%	2.18%	48,000
New York	1,380	.001%	.03%	0	0
Oregon	2,475,075	2.27%	4.71%	4.02%	0
Utah	1,160,330	1.06%	2.2%	2.2%	0
Vermont	101,019	.09%	.19%	1.7%	0
Washington	4,485,266	4.1%	8.53%	10.5%	0
Wyoming	3,111,232	2.18%	5.84%	4.92%	0

Table 5, page 2

2015 State Percentages of National Wilderness Preservation System

State	State WAs	3,286,036			
		Total	%NWPS+	% w/o AK	% State
Alaska	1,133,400	57,709,248	51.30%	NA	15.79%
Arizona	0	0	4.02%	8.08%	6.2%
California	475,725	15,445,338	13.73%	27.63%	15.41%
Colorado	0	0	3.32%	6.68%	5.62%
Florida	0	0	1.26%	2.54%	4.1%
Georgia	0	0	.43%	.87%	1.31%
Hawaii	30,857	186,366	.16%	.33%	4.49%
Idaho	0	0	4.02%	8.09%	9%
Maine	204,733	223,358	.20%	.40%	1.12%
Michigan	57,733	348,886	.31%	.62%	.96%
Minnesota	0	0	.98%	1.97%	2.16%
Montana	0	3,591,907	3.19%	6.42%	3.85%
Nevada	0	0	3.06%	6.12%	4.9%
New Hampshire	0	0	.12%	.25%	2.4%
New Mexico	0	1,743,598	1.55%	3.12%	2.24%
New York	1,214,217	1,215,597	1.08%	2.17%	3.96%
Oregon	0	0	2.2%	4.43%	4.02%

Utah	0	0	1.03%	2.07%	2.2%
Vermont	0	0	.09%	.18%	1.7%
Washington	0	0	3.99%	8.02%	10.5%
Wyoming	0	0	2.76%	5.56%	4.92%

This table looks at the individual state acreage and percentage of total protected Wilderness Areas in two ways for 2015— one based on the acreage of the federal National Wilderness Preservation System (109,201,800 acres), and another based on the NWPS plus the state and tribal Wilderness Areas that meet the standards of the NWPS (112,487,386 acres). This analysis gives a wholly new way of weighing relative state distribution of protected Wilderness. New York is the outstanding example.



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Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez

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