

THE COLORADO COLLEGE

STATE OF THE ROCKIES PROJECT

Research • Report • Engage



The Colorado College State of the Rockies Project 2013 Expedition: Exploring Large Landscape Conservation Along the Spine of the Rockies

May 20, 2013

Prepared by:

Prof. Walt Hecox, Rockies Faculty Director: whecox@coloradocollege.edu

Brendan Boepple, Rockies Program Coordinator: Brendan.Boepple@coloradocollege.edu

David Spiegel, 2013 Expedition Manager: David.Spiegel@ColoradoCollege.edu

Zak Podmore, 2013 Expedition Manager: zpodmore@gmail.com

Objective:

A team of four explorers will hike through key parts of the 8 state Rocky Mountain region, moving along both sides of its spine tracing the continental divide, while highlighting areas of key importance in large landscape conservation. These segments of the expedition touch upon a variety of large landscapes, helping to document their immensity and unique dimensions. The expedition will be working in conjunction with our separate team of four 2013 Rockies Student Researchers, who will be preparing in-depth “case studies” of these Expedition segments as well as other examples of unique approaches to large landscape conservation in the Rockies.

By utilizing social media, blogging, photo and video media, the expedition will produce content to engage Rockies’ citizens in the discussion of large landscape conservation. This work will further the reach of the Project’s research and seeks to incorporate the many diverse and distinct voices at work in the field of conservation in the Rockies. A more in-depth explanation of the 2013-14 Rockies Project focus on large landscape conservation is posted online, [click here to view](#).

Additionally, the expedition will be partaking in citizen science efforts throughout their journey by utilizing the online database iNaturalist. This growing element of the scientific community seeks to further the breadth and scope of scientific data by utilizing crowd-sourced scientific observations. The expedition’s observations in areas of conservation importance will help to further the understanding of species’ habitat and the important role that adaptive management will play as development and a changing climate affect ecosystems. To view the Rockies Project’s iNaturalist observations, [click here](#).

Routes:

[For a detailed map of the expedition, click here.](#)

1. **Thompson Divide: May 13-31.** The expedition will start its summer field expedition work by investigating the issues surrounding the largest roadless area in Colorado, the Thompson Divide.

Situated west of Aspen and south of Glenwood Springs, the Thompson Divide is nestled between extensive wilderness areas and public land utilized for oil and gas development. The Divide is at the center of a controversy over development versus conservation. With its roadless status, the Divide is still eligible for greater federal land protection status, but pre-existing oil and gas leases in the area are pushing the area towards development. With its unique geographic situation between two starkly different areas of federal management, Forest Service Wilderness and Bureau of Land Management lands, the Thompson Divide typifies the discussion between conservation and development in the Rocky Mountain Region.

2. **Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area: June 12 - 27.** The expedition will hike a major portion of spine of the Sangre de Cristo Range in Colorado, from North to South through the high country, low country, Sand Dunes NP and then the Blanca-Trinchera ranch with its 170,000 acres under conservation easement. The region is at the center of an innovative conservation initiative between private and public partners. By crossing through Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and private lands we aim to show the cooperation and collaboration that can be achieved in large landscape conservation initiatives. Louis Bacon, owner of the Blanca and Trinchera ranches, at the center of the conservation area, describes the region as "a contiguous mosaic of privately held and publicly protected lands that will stay in perpetuity in creating one of the longest migratory wildlife corridors in America."
3. **Greater Yellowstone: July 8 - 20.** The expedition will begin outside the southern boundary of the park in the Teton Wilderness, hiking and pack rafting until the boundary. They will then enter the park and follow the Yellowstone River through Yellowstone Lake. From Yellowstone Lake, the group will hike through the Lamar River Valley for several days before rejoining the Yellowstone River at the north boundary of the park. The purpose of this portion of the expedition is to explore the concept of voluntary registration of the Yellowstone River under the Department of Interior's National Blueways Program set up by then Secretary of Interior Salazar in May, 2012. The Yellowstone River is the longest undammed river in the U.S. and its location in the crown jewel of the federal park system, Yellowstone National Park, presents many unique issues.
4. **Crown of the Continent: July 23 - August 6.** The expedition will begin by packrafting down the North Fork of the Flathead River in Canada until the U.S. border; this area is a key wildlife corridor between the many pieces of federally conserved lands in the U.S. and Canada. The team will then travel on foot through Glacier National Park. This section of the expedition will highlight the importance of cooperation of many unique stakeholders across national, tribal and agency boundaries. In addition, the impact of a changing climate on the region's ecosystems will highlight the importance of adaptive management in large landscape conservation.
5. **Gila Wilderness: October (final dates TBD).** The Gila Wilderness in southern New Mexico is considered the world's first designated wilderness after the tireless efforts of Aldo Leopold in the 1920's. Today, the Gila is a crucial habitat for the endangered Mexican Gray Wolf population. Gray wolves, hunted to near extinction in the 1970's, were reintroduced here. Now, the Gila and the surrounding BLM land, Forest Service land, and other wilderness areas, provide the wolves with the space they need to thrive and to return their populations to a sustainable level. The work of the expedition will highlight the history of wilderness preservation in the Rockies and the important role that key "core" conservation areas play in the protection of species.