

CHAPTER 8. SPECIAL INTEREST AREAS

Background

The GMUG National Forest contains a number of special and unique resources. Designating these areas as special interest areas (SIA) will protect or enhance the unusual or significant characteristic. Research natural areas are different than SIA in that they often require a higher degree of pristine character to qualify for designation because they serve as ecological baseline reference areas. Special interest areas can be designated to recognize a broader range of values than research natural areas, including botanical, geological, historical, paleontological, scenic, or zoological resources. They may be allocated to protect and manage threatened, endangered or sensitive species and other elements of biological diversity, or for their motional significance, historic importance, scenic values or public popularity. The size of the individual special interest area varies depending on the site-specific resource values and management emphasis.

Existing Special Interest Areas

The 1983 Forest Plan identified four Special Interest Areas on the Forest:

Existing SIA	Acres	Elevation	Category
Slumgullion Slide	288	11,400	Geologic
Dry Mesa Quarry	55	7,500	Paleontologic
Ophir Needles	445	11,500	Geologic
Alpine Tunnel	200	11,000	Cultural

Slumgullion Earthflow National Natural Landmark – The earthflow is a natural geologic process associated with the erosion of unstable geologic and soil features. It includes approximately 900 acres of BLM land, 288 acres of National Forest System land and 100 acres of private land. It is located two miles south of Lake City along the Silver Thread Scenic Byway. The area is designated as a National Natural Landmark and is listed in the National Registry of Natural Landmarks. The Colorado Natural Areas Program has also designated the earthflow as a Colorado Special Interest Area.

Dry Mesa Dinosaur Quarry Paleontological Site– the Dry mesa Quarry is a 55 acre site located within the Jurassic Morrison formation and contains fossils with a geologic age of approximately 150 million years. The quarry is located 26 miles southwest of Delta on the Uncompahgre Plateau. Excavation activity has yielded remains of many different kinds of extinct animals including partial skeletons of animals not previously known to science. The site was actively excavated from 1972-2000.

Ophir Needles – The Ophir Needles is a geologic formation within the San Juan Geographic area formed by alpine erosion etching out spectacular topographic spires from highly pointed intrusive rock. This intrusion cuts sharply across a varied sequence of sedimentary and volcanic rocks and the discordant contacts are exceptionally displayed over a vertical range of about 1,000 feet. This formation is 10 miles southwest

of Telluride. Ophir Needles is being nominated by the National Park Service for inclusion in the National Registry of Natural Landmarks.

Alpine Tunnel Historic District – The historic district is approximately 200 acres of National Forest System land. It consists of three non-contiguous parcels of railroad that were built as part of the Denver, South Park, and Pacific Railroad. With the tracks reaching 11,523 foot elevation, the Alpine Tunnel became the highest section of railroad in the world. The Palisades parcel is known for its use of cribbing to stabilize the narrow points of the railroad route. The district is located approximately 40 miles east of Gunnison along Forest Road 839. The Alpine Tunnel has been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

Potential SIA

A variety of areas with unique characteristics were identified during forest plan revision by both internal and external interests. Table 1 below highlights those areas and their unique characteristics. Also see the [SIA map](#).

Table 1.

Potential SIA	Acres	Elevation	Plant Community	Category
Ironton Park Fen	320	9,700	Wetland Iron Fen	Botanical and Cultural
Taylor-Willard	511	12,000	Alpine	Botanical
Spring Creek Spring	3		n/a	Hydrologic
Wager Gulch Iron Fen	474	11,500	Engelmann Spruce-Subalpine Fir Iron Fen	Botanical
Willow Mesa	4895	12,700	Alpine willow carr	Botanical – (within LaGarita Wilderness)

Ironton Park Fen - The Ironton Park fen supports a good occurrence of a bog birch subalpine peatland shrub community considered to be rare throughout its range in the state of Colorado. Located 6 miles south of Ouray in: T43N R7W S 19, 20, 29-31. The 320 acre fen is located along Highway 550 at an elevation of 9,640 ft. (2,938 m) in an alluvium filled north facing glacial valley and is listed as a Potential Conservation Area by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program.

The fen encompasses approximately 300 acres of wetland with a dominant subalpine peatland shrub community (*Betula glandulosa*/mesic forb-mesic graminoid). Portions of the wetland vegetation are dominated by bog-birch (*Betula Glandulosa*) 55%, with planeleaf willow (*Salix planifolia*) present. The understory is dominated by beaked sedge (*Carex utriculata*), with water sedge (*Carex aquatilis*), short-beaked sedge (*Carex simulata*), elephantella (*Pedicularis groenlandica*) water crowfoot (*Batrachium circinatum*), floating buttercup (*Ranunculus hyperboreus*), mare's tail (*Hipparis vulgaris*), Sphagnum moss (*Sphagnum squarrosum*), hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) and water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum sibiricum*) in the understory or growing in ponds. Spruce-fir and aspen forests grow on the steep hillsides above the valley floor.

Highway 550 bisects the occurrence, confining the once meandering Red Mountain creek to the eastern portion of the wetland. Full Moon Gulch is the main tributary feeding the

west side of the wetland and its five inactive beaver ponds. These ponds eventually drain into Crystal Lake, a constructed lake approximately of 14 acres with weedy berms and a controlled outlet. There is an open test pit and a mine tunnel opening on the west slope above the wetland. Drainage from the mine portal was measured to have an acidic pH of 4. Upstream from the Ironton Park fen is the Idarado mine, which is in the process of stabilizing and revegetating its large tailings piles.

Spring Creek Spring— the Spring Creek hydrologic site consists of two small wetlands in T. 128S., R. 89W. Sec. 10. Site #1 is approximately .8 acres in size located at UTM, N299528.16 and E 4322664.68. Site #2 is approximately 1.8 acres in size located at N299582.16 and E 4322948.65. The springs at Site No. 1 discharge a greater volume of water.

The sites represent unusual and interesting features that support important ecological processes and wetland ecosystems. The sheer volume of groundwater discharge makes these sites unusual for western Colorado. The source of water is snowmelt and rain runoff from the Ragged Mountains, which has percolated through massive landslide debris deposit forming a westward flowing colluvial/alluvial ground water flow system. Vegetation of the Spring Creek sites is complex for such small areas. Species present include *Carex aquatilis*, *Carex utriculata*, *Corydalis caseana*, *Senecio triangularis*, *Cardamine cordifolia* and an exotic invasive *Trifolium repens*.

The Ragged Bench Trail traverses across the upper edge of Site #1. A grazing enclosure was constructed at Site #1 in 2003 in order to protect groundwater and climate monitoring equipment. This enclosure will help with restoration of wetland plant communities.

Taylor Willard – The Taylor-Willard proposed Special Interest Area is located approximately twelve miles south of Aspen, CO, on the border between the White River and Gunnison National Forests. It includes approximately 1400 acres, 500 of which is located on the Gunnison National Forest just south of Taylor Pass. The area located on the White River National Forest is currently being managed as a special interest area with an emphasis on sensitive and endangered botanical plant species. The area occupies parts of T12S, R84W, Sections 9-10, 15-17 and 20-22, in rolling terrain, consisting of alpine tundra and wetlands, and small areas of Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir.

The area lies within the Elk Mountains, a westward extension of the Sawatch Range. Most of the area is above timberline with elevations ranging from 11,200' to 12,300'. Uplands consist of dry, gravelly tundra dominated by alpine grasses and sedges, dwarf prostrate shrubs, Engelmann spruce, and cushion plants. Common species are whortleberry (*Vaccinium sp.*), alpine avens (*Geum rossii*), arctic and snow willows (*Salix arctica* and *S. reticulata*), Hooker's mountain avens (*Dryas octopetala*), moss campion (*Silene acaulis*) and alpine clover (*Trifolium dasyphyllum*). In lower lying wet areas there are thickets of low willows and sedge meadows. The area is significant for the number of identified rare high-alpine plants that have been found to occur there.

The area around Taylor Pass and Taylor Lake receives heavy recreation use.

Wager Gulch Iron Fen - The Wager Gulch Iron Fen is an unusual ecological type not commonly found in the western United States. It is an iron fen that has over 16 inches of organic soil or peat, very low pH (3.4) water, and primary support from groundwater flow. It encompasses approximately 474 acres.

Ecological types within the fen are primarily an Engelmann spruce-subalpine fir-bog birch (*Abies bifolia*-*Picea engelmannii*-*Betula glandulosa*)/Sphagnum moss plant community. The Colorado Natural Heritage is ranking iron fens with spruce as G2 S2, globally and state imperiled. This community is found growing on deep organic Histosol soils. Limonite deposits are also present. Other plant species found in the fen are various sedges (*CAREX*), Labrador tea (*Ledum glandulosum*), elephantella (*Pedicularis groenlandica*), heartleaf arnica (*Cardamine cordifolia*), star gentian (*Swertia perennis*), Canada reedgrass (*Calamagrostis canadensis*), and brook saxifrage (*Micranthes odontoloma*). A planeleaf willow/water sedge (*Salix planifolia*/*Carex aquatilis*) plant community is found on the southwest edge of the fen.

Willow Mesa – Willow Mesa contains one of the largest expanses of alpine short-fruited willow (*Salix brachycarpa*) and mesic forb willow carr in Colorado. A willow carr is a type of wetland found on mineral soils and containing a high diversity of willows, forbs, and sedges (*CAREX*). The wetland lies within the LaGarita Wilderness Area and encompasses 500 acres on the north slope of Baldy Chato, which is 13,401' in elevation. High elevation alpine plant communities with well-developed biological soil crusts (lichens and mosses) border the wetland on the south and southwest edges. A large herd of elk frequents the wetland in the warmer months. Plant species found within the potential SIA include elephanthead (*Elephantella groenlandica*), marsh marigold (*Psychrophila leptosepala*), Eastwood's podistera (*Podistera eastwoodii*), arctic willow (*Salix arctica*), snow willow (*Salix reticulata* ssp. *nivalis*), and alpine poppy (*Papaver kluanense*). A diverse and colorful lichen community, including snow cetraria (*Cetraria nivalis*) and deadman's fingers lichen (*Dactylina ramulosa*) flourishes in this SIA.