

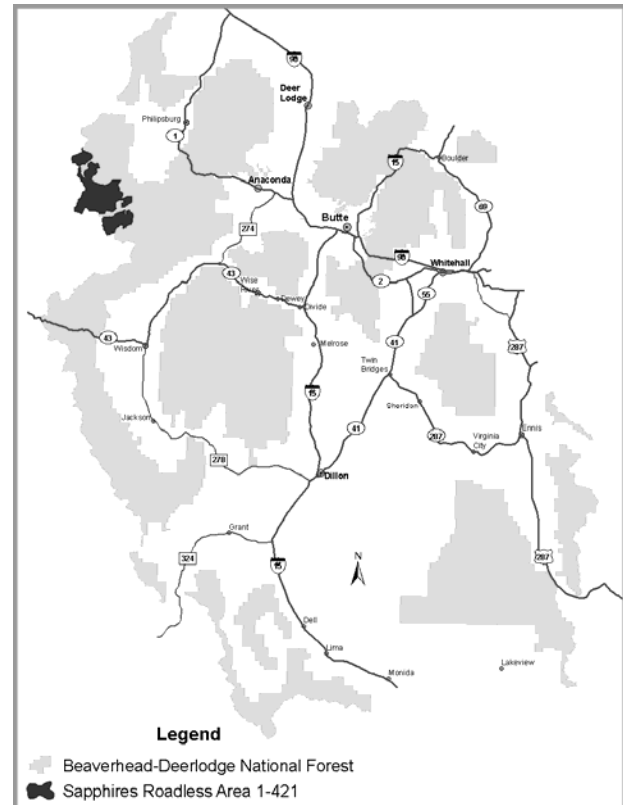
Sapphire (No. 1-421)

71,323 Acres

Description

The Sapphire Roadless Area is located along the east side of the Sapphire Mountains in Granite County, Montana. The area is contiguous to Bitterroot National Forest Roadless Area 3-423. Access is available from State Highway 38 and from forest roads in Rock and Copper creeks on the east, or from Bitterroot Forest roadless area 3-421.

Elevations range from 5000 to 9,000 feet at Kent Peak. The rugged peaks of the Sapphire Crest are prominent when viewed from the east side. The glaciated landscape includes exposed bedrock and rubble along the crest, steep rocky cirque basins and trough walls along the southern boundary, and rolling hills in the West and Ross Forks of Rock Creek. The majority of the area below the timberline is lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir dominated forests, with inclusions of streamside meadows. Douglas-fir savannas with bunchgrass are common on dry southern exposures. Subalpine fir and whitebark pine are present in alpine areas near the timberline.



Capability

Integrity of the Natural Environment and Scenery: The area appears mostly natural and scenic integrity is high. Fire suppression disturbance is visible in some locations. Historic mining prospects and developments are evident on the 248 acres of included private land. Natural integrity has been reduced along the crest, where past heavy grazing by domestic sheep has altered the vegetation. There are patches of noxious weeds.

Opportunities for Solitude and Primitive Recreation: The area is best described if IRA 3-421 is considered as a part of the whole. A core area along the crest at the headwaters of Copper Creek and in Ross Fork offers good opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

Special Features: In 1977 Congress designated most of roadless areas 1-421 and 3-421 as the Sapphire Wilderness Study Area.

Manageability and Boundaries: Manageability considerations include roadless area 3-421. The boundaries as drawn would be difficult to manage because they do not follow topographic or legal boundaries. Adjusting the boundaries to follow known features would reduce the area by forty to fifty-five percent. The residual area would be manageable.

Availability

Recreation: The heaviest recreational use here occurs during hunting season. In summer use is lighter, and includes backcountry experiences. Snowmobiling is a primary winter use in many parts of the area.

Wildlife: The IRA provides secure habitat for wildlife enhancing linkages and connectivity between GYA and forests to the west and north. Wolverine denning and Canada lynx habitat are mapped. Westslope cutthroat and bull trout inhabit some streams.

Water: Streams maintain biological values, channel structure, and riparian function. Water from this area is used for downstream irrigation during the summer months. Increases in demand for irrigation water are likely.

Livestock Grazing: Three allotments are primarily located in the eastern portion of the area. Incidental grazing occurs west of the Sapphire Crest.

Timber: There is no suitable timber base in this roadless area.

Minerals/Oil & Gas: Twenty percent of the area is included in a medium value known locatable mineral deposit area. Seven percent of the area has a low oil & gas potential, and the remainder has a very low potential.

Heritage: Past mining activities and locations are known. Prehistoric sites may exist, but are not identified.

Land Use Authorizations: There are no special uses which limit Wilderness potential.

Non-Federal Lands: There are 245 acres of private land in Frog Pond Basin and several isolated parcels of private land along the eastern boundary.

Disturbances: Wildfire burned across about 40 percent of the area in 2000.

Need

Ecological: The Sapphire roadless area may contribute sensitive plant communities to designated Wilderness as well as undisturbed habitat for wolverine and other wildlife.

Social: Although the Forest Service study recommended the area not be managed as Wilderness, Congress has not made a determination to designate or release the WSA. Management must comply with court direction to allow uses present in 1977.

Suitability

Capability: Natural integrity has been affected slightly by livestock grazing, noxious weeds, and small mines. There are many opportunities for solitude and challenging primitive recreation. The area would need a new boundary to be manageable.

Availability: There are no contractual obligations or resource needs which limit Wilderness availability.

Need: The area would supply additional lands and may contribute underrepresented and sensitive plant communities to the NWPS. Wilderness recommendation for Sapphire has received strong support *and* strong opposition from the public.

Wilderness Evaluation Summary

IRA	Acres*	Capability	Availability	Need	Suitability
Sapphire, BDNF 1-421	71,323	High	High	High	High
Bitterroot N. F. 3-421	44,116	Not Rated	Not Rated	Not Rated	Not Rated
Total	115,439				

*Nonfederal lands are excluded from the acreage.

Sapphire IRA Changes from 1987 to 2007

Updated Acres by Map Categories	BDNF Acres Only
1987 Total	72,414
Acres Added	0
Acres Dropped	-568
GIS Acreage Recalculated	-523
2007 Total	71,323

Note: Recalculated acreage using GIS include changes to one or more of the following categories: land exchanges, refined mapping scales, updated acre calculation techniques, and/or mapping error corrections.

Alternatives and Environmental Consequences**IRA Disposition by Alternative**

Roadless Acres in Allocation	Alt 1	Alt 2	Alt 3	Alt 4	Alt 5	Alt 6
Recommended Wilderness	--	--	--	--	--	--
Wilderness Study Area	77%	77%	77%	77%	77%	77%
Summer Non-Motorized *	79%	85%	88%	85%	85%	14%
Backcountry Recreation	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	9%
Road-based	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1%
Current Travel Plan Applies	20%	15%	12%	15%	15%	n/a
Winter Non-Motorized	1%	1%	4%	1%	1%	52%
Fisheries Key Watershed	n/a	n/a	100%	100%	100%	100%
Restoration Key Watershed	n/a	n/a	--	--	--	--
Tentatively Suitable Timber	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%
Modeled Suitable Timber	8%	--	--	--	--	--
Modeled Suitable Range	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Moderate Oil & Gas Potential	--	--	--	--	--	--

* Summer Non-motorized **includes** Recommended Wilderness and Some Wilderness Study Area allocations for Alternatives 1 through 5. Summer Non-motorized, Recommended Wilderness, and Wilderness Study Area allocations are **mutually exclusive** in Alternative 6.

No alternative recommends the Sapphire Wilderness Study Area for Wilderness. The FEIS states under Chapter 2, “Elements Common to all Action Alternatives” that Wilderness Study Areas set aside in 1977 through the Montana Wilderness Study Act, P.L. 95-150 will be managed according to the Act and direction from Courts, regardless of alternative. Until Congress acts, the law requires the Forest Service to protect Wilderness character and allow continuation of uses in

place prior to 1977. This does not prevent the Forest Service from making site specific decisions to close areas or trails in the future based on need.