Early years: Browns Canyon

Decades of work culminate in national monument designation

by Ryan Summerlin
Mail Staff Writer

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series about Browns Canyon.

National monument designation for Browns Canyon is the culmination of decades of work, and it might not have happened at all if not for the persistence—perhaps stubbornness—of a few advocates.

Just days after President Barack Obama signed off on Browns Canyon National Monument, a few of those same advocates sat in a Salida coffee shop to recount the years of effort.

“This is a story that has great human and political drama,” said Michael Kunkel, the first president and cofounder of Friends of Browns Canyon.

In the early years, they were swapping together any money they could for the cause.

Even before the Friends group came along, advocates struggled for decades to get more protection for Browns Canyon, seeing bills come and go, only to have hopes dashed by political roadblocks.

The Friends’ ultimate goal was to create a wilderness area east of the Arkansas River with the Browns Canyon Wilderness Study Area at its heart.

“We were all volunteers,” said Kunkel. “We weren’t paid. We had no hidden agenda.” And for the first 10 years of their efforts, they operated on less than $1,000 a year.

Much of this area used to be roadless, said Jerry Mallett, who was the Wilderness Society’s western field representative from 1970 to 1982 and another cofounder of Friends of Browns Canyon.

At the time, Mallett was on the ground mapping the area and meeting with interested individuals and groups.

But as the years went by, the size of wild space around Browns Canyon would shrink by significant amounts.

“We didn’t want Browns Canyon to become a 20,000-acre appendage of Fourmile,” said Kunkel.

The story begins with the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE I, established in 1972, included U.S. Forest Service lands in Browns Canyon, then known as Aspen Ridge, which spanned more than 100,000 acres.

In 1976, Congress instituted the Federal Land Management Policy Act (FLPMA), an act that directed the Bureau of Land Management to review its land for best management practices and gave the BLM direction to manage resources, said Mallett.

“Before that they were a holding agency to dispose of lands no one thought were valuable. Mostly, they were going to graze and energy.”

Mallett and Dick Scar helped champion wilderness designations for other areas, such as the Sangre de Cristo, Collegiate Peaks and Buffalo Peaks wilderness areas.

FLPMA was the first initiative that said that the area in the heart of Browns Canyon, which wasn’t a wilderness study area yet, had wilderness characteristics. In 1976 it also closed Turret Trail where it crossed into the area that would become the Browns Canyon Wilderness Study Area.

But during that process there was no public involvement. “It was all agency guys proposing the designation of wilderness study areas,” Mallett said. “The BLM was at that time a small agency that wasn’t prepared for FLPMA.

From the late 1970s into the 1980s, Browns Canyon was further inventoried for wilderness characteristics.

In 1980 the BLM reached the decision that 6,614 acres of Browns Canyon did qualify as a wilderness study area and purchased nearly 150 additional acres to add to the original recommendation after an intensive inventory of the area. Inventorying of Browns Canyon continued through the 1980s.

A 1991 BLM Wilderness Study Report officially recommended the Browns Canyon WSA for wilderness designation. “The entire Browns Canyon WSA is recommended for wilderness designation. This is the environmentally preferable alternative as it will result in the least change from the natural environment over the long-term,” reads the 1991 BLM Wilderness Study Report.

Republican Rep. Wayne Allard and Dan Schaefer introduced the first wilderness bill that would include Browns Canyon in 1991, but it also included many other areas in Colorado. That bill never made it out of committee, and future bills attempting to designate areas in bulk as wilderness would see similar troubles.

In 1999, Democratic Rep. Diana DeGette of the 1st Congressional District presented her first Colorado Wilderness Act proposal. Dogette would take multiple stabs at an omnibus wilderness bill that included Browns Canyon.

Since 1999, DeGette has introduced 11 different Colorado wilderness bills that would include Browns Canyon, and none of them have come to fruition. The acreage of proposed Browns Canyon wilderness began at nearly 22,000 in 1999, then swelled to about 24,500 in 2001 and 2002. In 2003 it grew to 34,873 acres, stretching further north and south than the national monument seen today.

Compromises have been made along the way, shaving off sections to the north and south. To the south were lands, such as the Longs Gulch area, that did not have wilderness characteristics, and to the north DeGette’s wilderness crossed a well-established motorized-use trail, which would later become the southern boundary of the Fourmile Travel Management Area.

Although the Browns Canyon advocates were supportive of DeGette, they knew anything she put up for Congress to designate would be hard to advance. DeGette’s bills targeted land all over the state for wilderness while her own district, in the Denver metro area, had none.

It had to come from someone local or it wasn’t going to fly, said Reed Dills, a longtime raft company owner, wild.
Colorado Environmental Coalition outing stuns Kunkel

Continued from FRONT page

ness advocate and one of the principal volunteers for Col-
legiate Peak Anglers Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

“The DeGette’s bills have never gone anywhere because they are too far reaching into too many areas of the state where it’s not well received. It causes blowback to whoever is locally elected there,” said Kunkel.

In 2000, Kunkel went on his first outing in the area with the Colorado Environmental Coalition on a wilderness mapping trip. “When I saw the area, I was stunned that the wilderness study area was not being managed at all as wilderness. There was trespassing and trash,” he said.

“It was stunned to note that the BLM-forest Service gateway and fence line on FS 184 Dur- ret Trail had been vandalized 100 feet in either direction

with the fencing ripped out and torn down. Heading west down Cottonwood Gulch, motorcycle, ATV and Jeep tracks were fresh and ram-
pant, Wilderness Study Area signs were nonexistent or had been mutilated. Cans, bot-
tles and trash were scattered throughout the WSA.

“The cool thing was over the feeling that the Browns WSA was incredibly neglected and certainly not managed as wild-
ness. Nobody cared about it, and it wasn’t on the BLM’s radar for any management effort.

The advocates’ efforts really began in earnest in 2002, Kunkel said. He approached Mallett, who had exten-
sive experience in getting the legislation to designate wil-
dernesses, about creating a friends group for Browns Can-
yon. Mallett had mapped the Aspen Ridge Roadless Area during RARE I.

Hooking up with Light Hawk, an organization sup-
pported from conservation groups by offering flights of areas of interest, the Friends took multiple flights over the Browns Canyon area.

Kunkel said the Fourmile area to the north of Browns Canyon looked like a blood-
shot eye with its many criss-crossing motorized trails vis-
ible from the sky. Fourmile has 200 miles of motorized trails on 100,000 acres.

It was an eye-opening experience, said Star, who participated in multiple fly-
overs. The maze of user-cre-
ated trails, especially north of Browns Canyon, was obvious from the sky, he said.

Friends of Browns Canyon officially formed in 2003, with volunteers spending “hun-
dreds upon hundreds of hours in the field mapping and get-
ing to know the area,” Kun-
kel said.

“Jeff Widen and Kurt Kunkle especially dedicated hundreds of hours on field work.”

Later that year a major stepping-stone in their efforts came about. The 5th Congres-
sional District’s Republican Rep. Joel Hefley had 10 areas in the district, and he could pick one to push forward as wilderness.

“I’m a real lover of the wil-
derness.” Hefley recently said. With his wife and chil-
dren, Hefley was an avid out-
doorsman who’d often pack into wilderness areas on horseback. They even rafted Browns Canyon. After hav-
ing firsthand experience with the area, Hefley knew “it was worthy of protection.”

The area proposed for wil-
derness in Hefley’s bill, how-
ever, looked much closer to the boundaries today, as op-
posed to DeGette’s 35,000-
acre proposal. Even though Friends volunteers who’d been dedicating hundreds of hours in the field inventorying the land had to admit that lands in the south did not have wil-
derness characteristics.

And to the north, the DeGette proposal incorporated a well-established motor-
ized trail, something that, if included, made it hard to argue for wilderness.

Hefley officially introduced the Browns Canyon Wilder-
ness Act in Congress Nov. 4, 2005.

The Browns of Brown Can-
yon were riding high on Hef-
ley’s proposal, said Pete Bond, a former friends board mem-
ber. “We thought with this Republican congressman on board that it would be a done deal.”

But their struggle was still far from over.

Lamb to appear in District Court

by Ryan Summerlin
Mail Staff Writer

Currently serving time in the Colorado Department of Corrections, Justin Lamb, 29, will appear in District Court in Salida for arraignment today.

He faces charges including six counts of aggravated motor vehicle theft with two priors, a Class 3 felony; theft of $5,000 to $20,000, a Class 5 felony; misdemeanor crimi-
nal mischief; and a habitual priors, a Class 3 felony; theft

ed break-ins and thefts of cargo trailers, motorcycles, items and vehicles that had been pawned.

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ing six counts of aggravated motor vehicle theft with two priors, a Class 3 felony; theft of $5,000 to $20,000, a Class 5 felony; misdemeanor crim-
nal mischief; and a habitual
criminal sentence enhancer.

Those counts follow a Chaffee County Sheriff’s Office investigation while

Lamb was already locked up. The sheriff’s office investigat-
ed numerous thefts of motor-
ized vehicles during the course of a week in April. Lamb was already locked up. Upon Lamb's arrest May 130 mph. Lamb fled when a Douglas County jury con-

victed Lamb in January on 11 ed break-ins and thefts of cargo trailers, motorcycles, items and vehicles that had been pawned.

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Struggle for Browns Canyon

Process more complicated than initially expected

by Ryan Summerlin
Mail Staff Writer

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series about Browns Canyon.

With a Republican congressman as an ally, the Friends of Browns Canyon thought their wilderness proposal for Browns Canyon was all but passed. But the legislative process in Washington would prove to be more complicated.

Before submitting his wilderness bill, Rep. Joel Hefley of the 5th Congressional District held a public meeting in 2005 at Chaffee County Fairgrounds. The hearing went well, Hefley said, and he was sympathetic Congress the next year.

But Mallett, a Chaffee County commissioner, was still hopeful that they would be working with a more sympathetic Congress next year. However, Republican Doug Lamborn was elected in 2006 to fill Hefley's post.

The inquiry resulted only in a formal reprimand, but it also stirred up resentment.

"DeLay liked to surround himself with supporters," Hefley said. And when it came time for the chair of the House Committee on Resources to be selected, DeLay selected California Rep. Richard Pombo, a supporter of his. In doing so, DeLay jumped him over several congressmen with seniority over Pombo, including Hefley.

"I wasn't happy with that, and obviously (DeLay) wasn't happy with me," Hefley said.

Hefley said it was his sense that DeLay had control over the chairman, and he wasn't going to let the Browns Wilderness bill pass because of his resentment against Hefley.

Hefley said he never could get the full committee, where it would have to be voted out before seeing the House floor.

"Though the legislative process had been rolling right along up to that point, that was where the bill died."

Much has been made over the National Rifle Association’s influence over the bill, Kunkel said, but more than the NRA was at work in the halls of Congress.

"Even though nobody had a problem with Browns, we got involved with policies that were totally out of our control," he said.

The NRA wanted Hefley to keep the Turret Trail open in his proposal – its objection aimed to maintain access for hunters. The NRA turned to Sen. Wayne Allard, saying it would oppose his coordinated Senate bill unless the trail remained open.

While reports at the time pointed only to the NRA’s opposition to the bill, Hefley recently spoke to The Mail about political elements that had nothing to do with Browns Canyon, but rather bad blood among lawmakers.

Texas Republican Tom DeLay was House majority leader when Hefley chaired the House Ethics Committee in 2004.

Though they were both Republicans, Hefley came down hard on DeLay when allegations arose of misuse of his office. The Ethics Committee launched a formal investigation into the allegations, which included DeLay’s participation at a fundraiser for an energy company with much at stake in upcoming House decisions.

Regardless of party affiliation, Hefley said he was going to “let the chips fall where they may.”

The Arkansas River flows through Browns Canyon with the Union Pacific Railroad on one side.

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County donates $2,500 to fund Imagination Library
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Wagner expected to take plea agreement
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Struggle for Browns Canyon

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Bad blood forms between Hefley, Lamborn

During that time the Friends were confronting groups claiming the area was littered with mines. “We went out and looked at every supposed mine site, too,” said John Salab, who had been with the Friends since the area was “knucklehead,” when hearing that Lamborn said he’d lend a hand to the campaign “sleazy,”

The Denver Post reported in 2012 that Hefley called Lamborn “a knucklehead,” when hearing that Lamborn said he’d lend a hand to the campaign “sleazy,”

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Lamborn claimed he objected to the lack of consensus on the plan, which would have limited public access to the area.

In 2007, U.S. Senator Edward M. Kennedy introduced S.2206, the “Browns Canyon Wilderness and Recreation Act,” which would have designated 22,000 acres for the national monument.

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Lamborn held a public meeting on Browns Canyon via the Turret Trail. “This was a first, and with the U.S. Senate and House controlled by Democrats, with all of DeGette’s land selections in the area.”

The Friends put in hundreds of hours of work in the field.

The water conservancy district was unanimously opposed to the bill, which effectively killed the bill as multiple counties in the area that had been closed by the state of Colorado, which indicated a national or federal action was needed, were confronting groups claiming the area was littered with mines.

The Friends of Browns Canyon presented their findings, that the mines in the area outside the proposed boundary, to Lamborn, to The Mail, in public meetings. The Friends presented their findings, that the mines in the area outside the proposed boundary, to Lamborn, to The Mail, in public meetings.

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