

THE PALISADE WILDERNESS PROPOSAL

“The Palisade appears as an enormous red rock island in the sky. It’s a real contrast to traditional Colorado imagery.”

Joe Neuhof, Grand Junction



Rising from the cottonwood groves and rocky slopes along the Dolores River, the landmark of the Palisade displays a portrait of millions of years of geologic history. **Photo © Lee Gelatt**



From this vantage point, atop John Brown Canyon, the Palisade is the central image, framed on either side by the verdant corridors of West Creek to the east and the Dolores River to the West. **Photo © Matt McGrath**

A Wilderness Deserving Landscape – Located 50 miles southwest of Grand Junction, the Palisade Wilderness Proposal (WP) sits astride the western edge of the Uncompahgre Uplift and the eastern bank of the Dolores River, forming geological, ecological and recreational bridges between the lush aspen and ponderosa forests of Unaweep Canyon and the red slickrock, hoodoo-lined tributaries of the Dolores River. As such the Palisade is a favorite destination for naturalists, fly-fishers, photographers, and hikers alike.

Geology, Ecology, & Wildlife Habitat – On the eastern edge of this geologic bridge, Unaweep Canyon and Unaweep Seep present a geologic and hydrologic enigma filled with nearly two dozen seeps and springs (see Wilderness Recreation for more on the Unaweep Seep). Moving westward and lower in elevation, the landmark of the Palisade itself provides a rich contrast to the sheer granite walls of the Unaweep Canyon as deep red Wingate sandstone bursts from the landscape to form dramatic vertical cliffs, topped by a dome of Entrada and Morrison formation sandstones. Colorful shales and sandstones alternate at the base forming natural rock sculptures like hoodoos. East to west the proposal’s ecological bridge links the shrubby uplands and forests of Pinion Mesa and the Uncompahgre Plateau; the geologic enigma of Unaweep Canyon; and the desert river canyon of the Dolores River. With its dramatic variation in topography and vegetation, this unique area supports a fascinating array of uncommon species, ranging from Gunnison sage grouse, to Longnosed leopard lizard, to Nokomis fritillary butterfly and Giant Helleborine orchid. From a botanical perspective, the Palisade lies at the heart of a global hotspot for extremely rare plants, including the Dolores River skeleton plant, Fisher Towers milkvetch, and Horseshoe milkvetch.

Rich History & Iconic Western Landscape – Though ultimately found to be more trouble than it was worth, an historic mining route, which now serves as a popular and challenging red rock hike, leads visitors from a historic camp at the base of the Palisade to the top of this imposing feature. The views from the top are breathtaking and many will transport the viewer to a time since past.

Wilderness Recreation –In addition to exploring the area’s numerous hoodoos, and seasonal waterfalls, at the proposal’s eastern edge, West Creek and its immediate surroundings represent an ecological anomaly heralded by naturalists and fly-fishermen alike! Cold air descending Unaweep Canyon carries with it a microclimate derived from much higher elevations. Consequently, the plant life along the creek is representative also of the higher terrain, with such trees as ponderosa pine, narrowleaf cottonwood, and others growing at elevations far lower than is typical in other parts of the state. The stream itself also exhibits this characteristic; it is cold enough to support a population of trout down to 5,000 feet elevation, much lower than one would normally expect. The seep is perhaps the most outstanding natural botanical display in Colorado and is listed on the register of Colorado State Natural Areas.

Adjacent Backcountry Recreation – In addition to the spectacular backdrop this pristine landscape offers to Gateway community members and Resort visitors, it also provides a wild backdrop for river runners and groups camped along the river, in addition to motorized enthusiasts traveling along Sheep Creek Rd, on the proposal’s western edge, coming to or from the high country of Pinyon Mesa.

The Palisade WP includes 26,914 acres of federal public land.

