

Admirers cite plateau's isolation, biodiversity

By Todd Hartman, Rocky Mountain News

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In a state wealthy with thickly forested wilderness areas, the spectacular peaks of Rocky Mountain National Park, and 54 fourteeners, the Roan Plateau doesn't always make top billing.

But for folks who know the place, especially those living in nearby Western Slope towns of Rifle, Silt and Parachute the Roan Plateau represents wild country at its breathtaking best, a Colorado treasure largely unknown to the Front Range.

Marked by topography that rises quickly to 3,500 feet above the surrounding country, the Roan boasts deep canyons, rolling hills, rugged cliffs and lush valleys. It welcomes hunters, hikers and mountain bikers who like its proximity to small towns and adore its splendid isolation once inside.

Here roam most all of Colorado's signature animals: mule deer, elk, black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, peregrine falcons, bald and golden eagles, sage grouse and cutthroat trout.

Streams including Parachute Creek and Trappers Creek carve their way through the land, eventually feeding the Colorado River. The East Fork of Parachute Creek tumbles more than 200 feet down a rockface, making it one of the state's tallest waterfalls.

Trees spill over much of the plateau, with aspen groves sharing hillsides with Douglas fir and spruce forests. "When the leaves turn," said Bob Elderkin, who picnics and hunts on the Roan, "it's just plum gorgeous up there."

The Roan is critical to the Western Slope economy, advocates say. In 2006, hunters purchased more than 1,000 elk permits, part of the estimated \$5 million the Roan generates from its recreational appeal.

Clare Bastable of the Colorado Mountain Club calls the Roan "an island in a sea of oil and gas drilling," and says it provides locals with an important source of money unrelated to fuel extraction.

"We need to maintain the balance, so that after the oil and gas industry is out - which it certainly will be once (the gas is out) - we can still maintain our economy through recreation and tourism," she said.

hartmant@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5048