

PLAN SUMMARY

MANAGEMENT CONTEXT

The North Star planning area, beginning at the US Forest Service’s Wildwood Lane and following the Roaring Fork River north to the Stillwater Bridge Take-out at the boundary of North Star Nature Preserve, comprises a complex management landscape with numerous public land managers, private properties, and a state-managed waterway and highway. To provide management direction for a more seamless system, Open Space and Trails (OST) works closely with our partners in the area; however, OST does not have management authority over activities at Wildwood or within the river.

- Pitkin County Open Space and Trails (OST) owns the North Star Nature Preserve parcel. Aspen Valley Land Trust (AVLT) holds a conservation easement on this parcel.
- City of Aspen and OST jointly own the James H. Smith parcel.
- The White River National Forest owns and manages the land at the Wildwood Put-in.
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) manages the wildlife in the area.
- The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) manages Highway 82 and the associated right-of-way, with OST holding a lease for the portions adjacent to North Star.
- The river also passes through a parcel owned by the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies (ACES) and a series of private properties with various landowners.

OUTREACH HIGHLIGHTS

To facilitate a collaborative update to the management of North Star, OST assembled a working group of land managers and non-profit partners, neighbors, commercial operators, and river users. This working group reviewed area research to craft a desired condition statement for North Star and set management goals and actions. OST collected public input through an online survey in the summer of 2025. The survey aimed to understand general usage patterns and public sentiment toward current and potential management strategies. A total of 770 responses were collected.

KEY UPDATES

The first management plan and each subsequent update focused on preserving a mosaic of high-quality native ecological communities that support biological diversity while allowing public access. The acquisition values outlined in the 2002 Conservation Easement include the area’s natural, scenic, habitat, wildlife, recreational, and open space values. This plan update reflects those broad acquisition values and refines them into conservation values to reflect both scientific knowledge and community input.

This plan also presents a desired conditions statement in alignment with the conservation values. This statement has been updated and clarified based on feedback from the public survey, working group input, and the property’s vision and values captured in previous plans.

Ecological trends at North Star point toward improved habitat and successful rewilding efforts with observable benefits to wildlife over time. This plan update seeks to ensure that safeguards and proactive management strategies are in place to protect and promote the desired conditions and conservation values. The following points summarize the intent of the updates to the management strategies included in this plan:

- Ecological restoration and support of natural processes allow the river to remain dynamic through a passive management approach.
- North Star remains an accessible nature experience that offers meaningful connections to the landscape.
- Recreational use is spatially and temporally concentrated, benefiting wildlife by creating predictable patterns of human use.
- Emphasis on respectful user behavior continues with proactive peak-use strategies.
- A transparent, measurable indicator-and-threshold approach is established to track key ecological and visitor-use attributes, ensuring continued progress toward the desired conditions. Response options, based on scientific research and best practices, may be implemented to address changing conditions or situations when thresholds are approached.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

CONSERVATION VALUES

The diverse and interrelated components that contribute to North Star’s ecological and social value include:

- Biodiversity and Ecosystem Integrity
- River System
- Riparian Area, Wetlands, and Beavers
- Wildlife and their Habitats
- Community

DESIRED CONDITIONS

North Star Nature Preserve provides long-term protection of biodiversity, natural ecosystem processes, landscape connectivity, and opportunities to connect with nature. Management efforts restore natural processes and promote ecological resilience in the face of challenges, including climate change, upstream water diversions, and agricultural land use legacies. Habitat complexity exists across the property to benefit diverse wildlife species as well as the continued provision of ecosystem services for the Roaring Fork Watershed, including flood protection, hydrological function, wildfire fuel break, and air and water quality. North Star in its entirety is managed first and foremost for ecological integrity and resilience, while allowing human presence in limited areas for environmental education, research, respectful recreation, and access to nature.

INDICATORS AND THRESHOLDS

Indicators translate the aspirational nature of the desired conditions into measurable attributes OST and partners track over time to evaluate changes in conditions. Thresholds ensure that conditions remain acceptable for the selected indicators. This plan establishes indicators and thresholds for the following topics:

Conservation Value	Topic
Biodiversity and Ecosystem Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biodiversity • Invasive species • Landscape permeability
River System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Floodplain connectivity • River system dynamism • Floodplain connectivity • Aquifer function • Hydrologic conditions • Water quality
Riparian Area, Wetlands, Beavers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beavers • Riparian condition • Wetland integrity and function
Wildlife and Habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bird diversity • Habitat condition • Plant communities • Wildlife diversity
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial use • Compliance • Education • Enforcement • Overall river use • Peak use • Recreation disturbance • Recreation use • River user experience • Safety

QUICK FACTS

Total Acreage: 248 acres

North Star provides important ecosystem services, including clear air and water, as well as protection from floods and wildfires. The estimated annual value of these ecosystem services exceeds \$1 million.¹

Over 192 plant species identified.

At least 95 bird species and 12 mammal species are known to occur.

Properties:
North Star Nature Preserve:
 Acquisition Date: 1978
 Parcel Size: 170 acres
 Purchase Price: \$1,030,000
 Funding Partners: Pitkin County General Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and Land and Water Conservancy Fund Easement: AVLT

James H. Smith:
 Acquisition Date: 2001
 Parcel Size: 78 acres
 Purchase Price: \$6,745,000
 Funding Partner: City of Aspen

Trail Miles:

- 1-mile of the East of Aspen Trail
- 0.6-mile natural surface trail
- 1.6-mile Nordic loop

¹ Colorado State University’s Colorado Conservation Data Explorer (CODEX)

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

* Indicates a new or significant update included in this plan.

POLICIES	
West Side Public Access Closure (Wildlife Zone)	The west side is permanently closed to public access to protect wildlife habitat and allow natural ecological processes to function with minimal human disturbance.
Designated Recreation Locations	Public recreation is limited to designated trails, corridors, and river access points to concentrate use and minimize impacts to wildlife and sensitive habitats.
Regulations Strictly Enforced*	Regulations are strictly enforced to ensure public safety, resource protection, and promote responsible visitor behaviors. .
Wildlife Closures*	Seasonal or temporary closures may be implemented to protect wildlife during critical stages such as nesting, calving, or migration.
Flow Level & River Temperature Closures	River access may be restricted or closed when flow levels or water temperatures pose risks to public safety or aquatic ecosystem health.
Quiet Zone	Audible music and disruptive noise are prohibited to protect wildlife and maintain a nature-oriented visitor experience.
Voluntary River Use Group Size Limits*	Voluntary limits on river group size of six are encouraged to reduce crowding, enhance safety, and lessen impacts to wildlife and other visitors.
Peak River Use*	River use during peak periods is proactively managed to prevent overcrowding, reduce conflicts, and protect ecological conditions and visitor experience.
Downed Trees	Naturally fallen trees are retained to support habitat complexity and ecological function unless removal is necessary for safety or infrastructure protection.
Beaver Dams	Beaver dams are protected as valuable ecological features and are not removed except when required to address safety or infrastructure concerns.
Memorials	New memorials are not permitted.
Public Paragliding Use	Paraglider landing is permitted subject to specific conditions.
Nordic Use and Grooming*	Nordic skiing and grooming are allowed only where consistent with wildlife protection.
Commercial Use: River Outfitters (Guiding/ Instruction & Shuttle Operations)*	A limited number of permitted commercial river outfitters may operate under conditions that prioritize conservation, and safety.
Commercial Use: Landing Zone	Commercial use is permitted within the established landing zone subject to established limits and regulations.
Special-Use	Special-use activities require permits and are approved only if they align with conservation priorities and do not adversely affect ecological resources or visitor experience.
Maintenance	Maintenance activities are conducted in a manner that prioritizes resource protection, minimizes disturbance, and supports long-term stewardship.

GOALS AND ACTIONS	
Conservation Value: Biodiversity and Ecosystem Integrity	
Goal 1: Provide ecosystem services for public benefit, such as flood protection, fire protection, and clean air and water.	
1.1	Cultivate and participate in landscape-level conservation and wildfire resilience partnerships.
Goal 2: Control invasive species to the greatest extent possible with the least environmental impact.	
2.1	Control noxious vegetation.
2.2*	Monitor/manage Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS) if concern of presence in the Upper Roaring Fork arises.
Goal 3: Protect and support the overall biodiversity of plants and animals.	
3.1	Monitor overall native plant biodiversity.
3.2	Monitor avian and mammalian species diversity.
3.3*	Prioritize habitat protection and enhancement activities in known biodiversity hotspots.
Goal 4: Maintain and enhance landscape permeability to allow animals of all sizes to move through and across North Star Nature Preserve. Preserve and improve the migratory corridors for elk and deer.	
4.1*	Address and prevent impediments to animal movement to the greatest extent possible.
4.2*	Use the Pitkin County land-use referral process (for both redevelopment and new projects) to minimize impacts on migration and movement corridors.
Conservation Value: River System	
Goal 5: Instream habitat contributes to the overall health and resilience of the stream ecosystem, meeting the needs of diverse aquatic and terrestrial species.	
5.1*	Encourage instream and near-channel habitat complexity.
5.2	Conduct macroinvertebrate monitoring to track overall, long-term river health.
Goal 6: Maintain floodplain connectivity as natural channel meander occurs via streambank erosion and sediment deposition processes, allowing the river system to operate in a dynamic state.	
6.1	Monitor groundwater and streamflow.
6.2	Monitor channel form and change through time.
Goal 7: Maintain good water quality and continue efforts to maintain and/or increase water quantity, ensuring this stretch of the Roaring Fork River has adequate flow, temperature, pH, and oxygen levels, and limited harmful pollutants to support native aquatic life.	
7.1*	Monitor water quality. Coordinate with regional partners to address acute and chronic water quality concerns in the upper Roaring Fork River.
7.2*	Keep water quantity in the Roaring Fork River as close to natural, undiverted levels as possible. Seek a hydrograph (seasonal streamflow) which mimics natural stream systems, with a late spring/early summer peak and a slow decline toward late summer baseflow levels.
Conservation Value: Riparian Area, Wetlands, Beavers	
Goal 8: Promote riparian area recovery toward a more naturalized state, with increasing habitat complexity, and protect beaver complexes across North Star as effective ecosystem engineers.	
8.1*	Encourage natural geomorphological and ecological succession processes, primarily through a passive rewilding management approach.

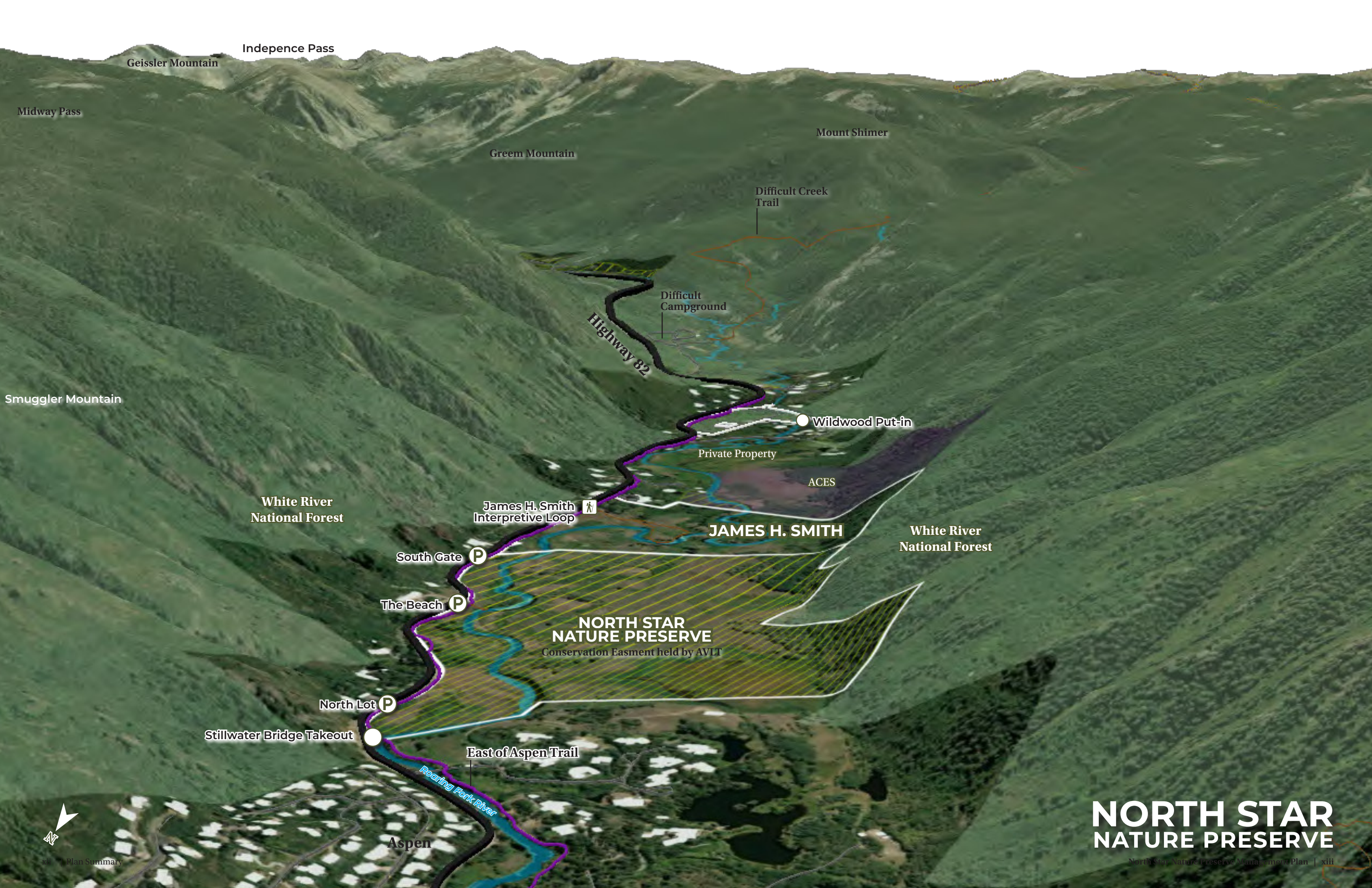
8.2*	Encourage beaver presence as effective ecosystem engineers, influencing the river channel, hydrology, wetlands, and vegetation in a natural, dynamic way.
Goal 9: Preserve wetlands to ensure the provision of ecosystem services and habitat for diverse flora and fauna.	
9.1*	Maintain and/or increase wetland extent and function, as feasible within climatic and hydrologic constraints.
9.2*	Monitor the fen wetland restoration area to ensure functionality is maintained.
Conservation Value: Wildlife and Habitat	
Goal 10: Maintain diverse habitat types (aspen forests, riparian areas, wetlands, open water, meadows, and shrublands) in good condition across the Preserve, hosting native plant communities and local fauna.	
10.1	Continue long-term plant community monitoring.
10.2	Promote persistence and integrity of native plant communities to provide forage and habitat for pollinators and all animals.
10.3	Promote recruitment in all forest types for long-term viability.
10.4*	Protect and enhance bird breeding habitat.
Goal 11: Provide habitats for diverse wildlife species, including songbirds, raptors, waterfowl, wading birds, herpetofauna, and large and small mammals, to use, live, and thrive.	
11.1	Monitor terrestrial wildlife species.
11.2	Monitor avian species.
11.3	Monitor indicator species to assess functionality of key habitat types for wildlife.
11.4*	Conduct habitat condition evaluation and utilization in conjunction with wildlife surveys.
Conservation Value: Community	
Goal 12: Serve as a living classroom, fostering and facilitating scientific research, community connection, and environmental education.	
12.1	With our educational partners, provide a naturalist presence at Wildwood and North Star to engage visitors and educate them on the ecological importance of the area.
12.2	Facilitate and support educational programming and volunteer opportunities to build a following, maintain relationships, and foster environmental and stewardship education.
12.3*	Develop, implement, and update education and communication initiatives.
Goal 13: Ensure the volume, type, and distribution of recreational and river use remain within a manageable and predictable range, allowing wildlife to adapt and thrive and utilize the river corridor during times with minimal (recreational) disturbance by tracking key indicators and adjusting management strategies as conditions change.	
13.1	Concentrate and regulate visitor use so that activity stays within designated areas and predictable timeframes.*
13.2	Coordinate commercial river use as a management tool to provide controlled public access that supports informed, respectful experiences, reduces parking pressure/congestion at access points, reduces private-use impacts, and enhances safety through structured scheduling, group size limits, and required education.*
13.3	Explore the potential expansion of the Nordic loop on James H. Smith.*
13.4	Explore and implement strategies to address trail safety on the East of Aspen Trail.*
13.5	Improve accessibility of river access points for people with mobility challenges.*

Goal 14: Ensure user behavior supports the desired conditions, reflecting environmental awareness and respect for wildlife, by maintaining a seamless system of clear, consistent, and enforceable rules with strong compliance.	
14.1*	Coordinate regulations across jurisdictional boundaries to limit the issues created by inconsistency.
14.2	Ensure ranger and enforcement staffing can effectively communicate, and enforce regulations and policies (see Policy Section), Title 12 and the additional regulations specific to North Star have been established to ensure that visitor use impacts on wildlife are minimized and to facilitate predictable and non-threatening behaviors.
14.3	Fund enforcement positions to help manage the parking and access at Wildwood and encourage user behavior shifts.
14.4*	Update and install consistent regulatory, wayfinding, education, and interpretive signage to educate and inform the public about the ecological value of the area, regulations, and management efforts.
Goal 15: Maintain limited, functional and safe access points, parking, and trails, while minimizing ecological impacts, reducing congestion, and promoting respectful use.	
15.1*	Use limited, available parking as a tool to manage visitor use and congestion and continue to explore and implement strategies to facilitate alternative modes of transportation.*
15.2	Manage congestion at the Stillwater Bridge take-out.
15.3*	Manage congestion and vehicle flow at the Wildwood put-in.*
15.4	Complete the land exchange to transfer ownership of the Wildwood area from the USFS to Pitkin County Open Space and Trails.

MANAGEMENT PLAN OVERVIEW

The 2025 North Star Nature Preserve Management Plan provides updated guidance on the ecosystem and visitor use management for North Star, for both the near and long term.

- **Plan Summary** provides a condensed overview of the Plan Update, highlighting the key updates and proposed management strategies to help readers quickly understand the plan's purpose and direction.
- **Section 1** tracks the acquisitions leading to the open space that exists today and celebrates the numerous accomplishments made since the original 1989 plan.
- **Section 2** details the current conditions, complete with references to relevant studies. A more detailed history of North Star and all studies are located on the [North Star website](#).
- **Section 3** summarizes the plan update process as well as feedback from stakeholders and the community. Appendix A contains the full engagement results.
- **Section 4** provides an implementable and adaptable management direction, including response options, which is a product of research, assessment of current conditions, and stakeholder/public input.



Geissler Mountain
Independence Pass

Midway Pass

Greem Mountain

Mount Shimer

Difficult Creek Trail

Difficult Campground

Highway 82

Wildwood Put-in

Private Property

ACES

White River National Forest

James H. Smith Interpretive Loop

JAMES H. SMITH

White River National Forest

South Gate P

The Beach P

NORTH STAR NATURE PRESERVE
Conservation Easement held by AVLT

North Lot P

Stillwater Bridge Takeout

East of Aspen Trail

Aspen

Roaring Fork River

NORTH STAR NATURE PRESERVE

