

PROTECTED FOREVER

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Elk and Protected Habitat Loom Large in Colorado's South Valley

You'll be forgiven if you mistake Colorado's Upper Purgatoire watershed west of Trinidad for the parklands of Yellowstone. Against a backdrop of snowcapped peaks, meadows of lush grass seem to go on indefinitely, broken occasionally by stands of aspen and pine that buffer ridges crowned with 100-foot fins of reddish stone.

More than 500 of these ruler-straight rock walls scatter the landscape here, sometimes running for a dozen miles or more, each pointed squarely at their twin makers, the Spanish Peaks. The taller of the two summits rises 13,626 feet, formed by swelling magma more than 20 million years ago that split the earth's crust in every direction like a star-crack in pond ice. Lava oozed in to fill the gaps, then erosion did its business, exposing one of best examples of radial volcanic dikes to be found on earth.

Some 15 miles south of Spanish Peaks, the Middle Fork of the Purgatoire River slices through one of these dikes at a town named Stone Wall. That dike then rises again to form the western rim of the South Valley.

From an elk's perspective, the South Valley acts

as the verdant nucleus to a network of outstanding wildlife habitat, helping to support a herd of more than 20,000—the state's second largest. The valley's east rim is called the Ute Hills, beyond which lies the 30,000-acre Bosque del Oso State Wildlife Area. RMEF was instrumental in creating the Bosque in 1998, and that's just one of a number of land protection projects here. The South Valley alone is home to five RMEF-held conservation easements securing more than 10,000 acres of prime elk habitat, with another 10,000 acres of RMEF easements nearby. One of those is the gorgeous Ute Hills easement, shown here, which protects 2,800 vital acres that straddle the ridge between the Bosque del Oso WMA and County Road 13, the South Valley's only thoroughfare.

The Harteis Family donated this easement to RMEF in 2003, and more than a decade later it continues to bolster this world-class elk herd. Ten years is about how long elk hunters wait to draw a tag for the Bosque. But the monster bulls they vie to chase will be that much heavier, thanks to this stellar linkage of habitat, which RMEF enhancement projects have helped to improve in recent years as well.