

Wilderness Character Narrative

East Fork Wilderness

U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture



A wilderness character narrative is a positive and affirming description of what is unique and special about this wilderness.

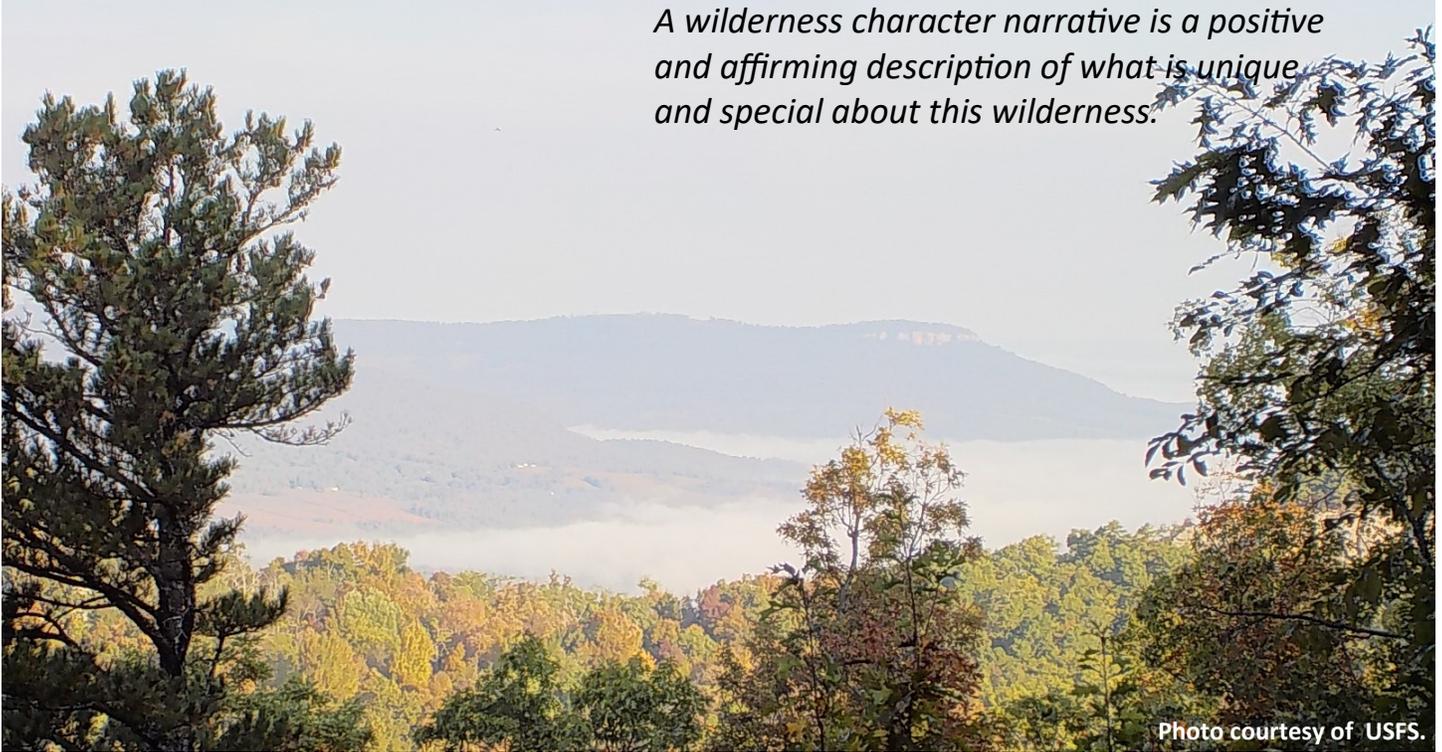


Photo courtesy of USFS.

Overview

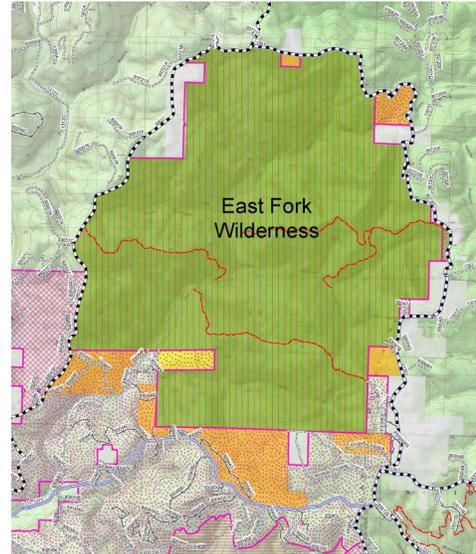
Named in reference to the East Fork of the Illinois Bayou, the East Fork Wilderness was formed in 1984 with the passage of the Arkansas Wilderness Act. The East Fork Wilderness stretches across 10,777 acres in rugged Northwest Arkansas. The lands are characterized by a rugged terrain, strewn with boulders and dissected by a number of wild creeks and streams. Under the management of the Big Piney Ranger District, the East Fork Wilderness falls entirely within Pope County.

A common conception of “wilderness” is that it is an area that is void of intrusion by man, where virgin stands of timber grow and perish without interference. But wilderness areas in the eastern portion of the United States diverge from this conception in that these areas have all felt the impact of man in their not so distant past. Unlike the vast and virtually untouched wildernesses of the American West, the eastern United States takes pride in a different iteration of “wilderness”. The East Fork Wilderness has a rich history of human settlement, made evident by the various old roads and homesteads that punctuate the area. Long before homesteaders entered the region, Native American Tribes such as the Osage, Cherokee, Caddo, Quapaw and others called this land home. Since inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1984, remnants of past inhabitation like cemeteries and rock walls silently sit untouched as reminders of the history of the land. Today, the once-used roads function as trails for visitors to the East Fork Wilderness. As the years go on, nature will continue to reclaim these spaces; the beauty of this reclamation illustrates the powerful resiliency of nature. Trees lean into old roads, wildflowers and shrubs overtake the remnants of homesteads, and overtime nature will take back these human-altered spaces.

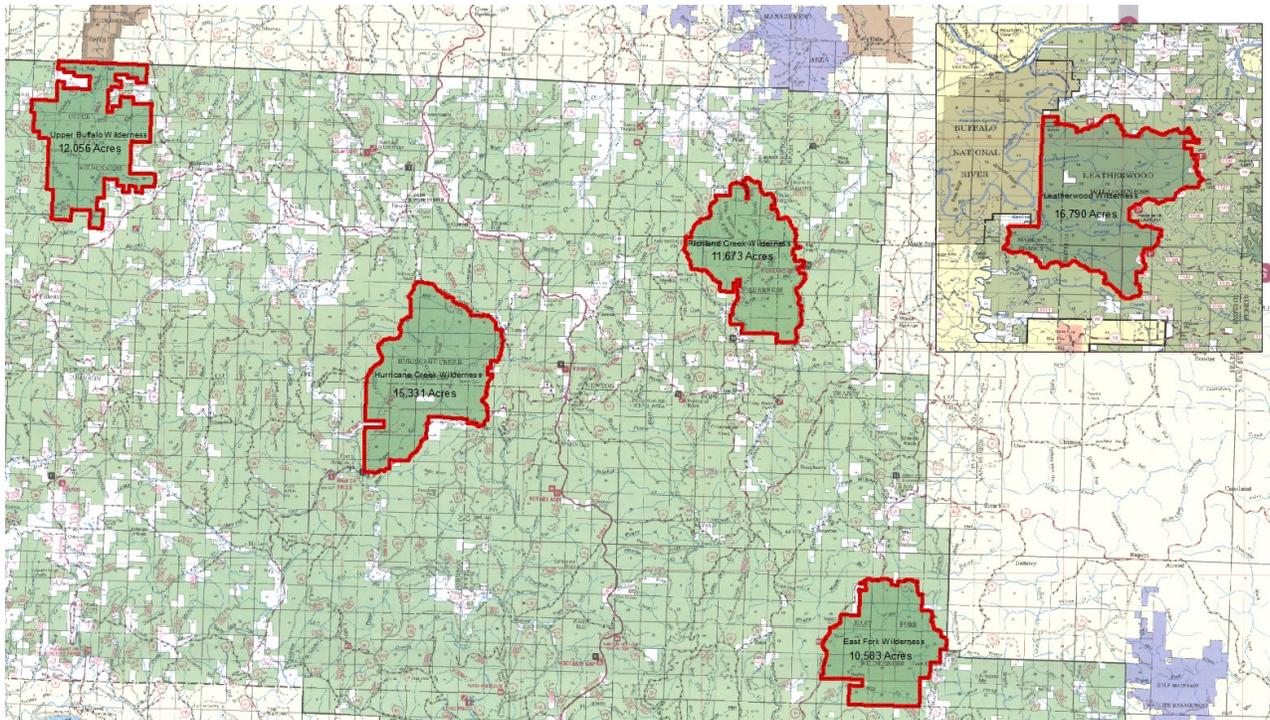
Overview (continued)

A wilderness character narrative is a positive and affirming description of what is unique and special about this wilderness.

The purpose of this report is to highlight what is unique and special about the East Fork Wilderness. As defined by the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station, wilderness character is the combination of a) natural environments that are relatively free from modern human manipulation and impacts, b) opportunities for personal experiences in environments that are relatively free from the encumbrances and signs of modern society, and c) symbolic meanings of humility, restraint, and interdependence in how individuals and society view their relationship to nature. This Wilderness Character Narrative is not a stagnant or solitary document; it functions to set the stage for further steps in Wilderness Character Monitoring for the East Fork Wilderness. The following pages should transport you to the forests of the wilderness. This narrative describes the attributes of the East Fork Wilderness as they relate to the four qualities of wilderness character: untrammeled, natural, undeveloped, and opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. Allowing these qualities to guide management decisions and planning for the East Fork Wilderness is critical to preserving the essence of this wilderness.



Map of East Fork Wilderness, showing creeks and waterways.



Map showing all five wilderness areas on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests.

Untrammeled

Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from modern human actions that control or manipulate the community of life.

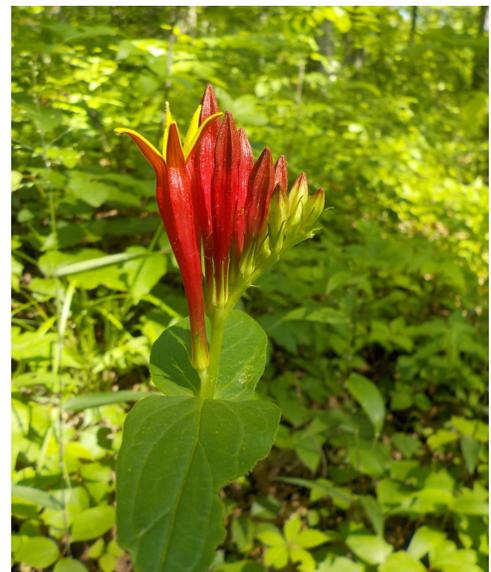
Per the text of the Wilderness Act, “a wilderness... is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”. The “untrammeled” character of wilderness assures that wilderness is essentially free of intentional actions of modern human manipulation or control. This quality of wilderness is degraded by actions that intentionally manipulate ecological processes of the wilderness, called “trammeling actions”. Trammeling actions include introducing a new non-native species to the wilderness because this intentional action disrupts the “earth and its community of life” within the wilderness. The goal of interrogating the extent of trammeling in a wilderness area is to track whether more or less human manipulation of the environment is occurring over time.



Remnants of an old rock wall.
Photo courtesy of USFS.

Given the storied past of the East Fork Wilderness, the lands of the wilderness evolved in parallel to man. From serving as homes to a number of Native American tribes to providing timber for homesteaders to being hunting grounds for present-day residents of the region, these lands have felt the impact of society. With that being said, since its designation in 1984, the ecology of East Fork Wilderness has gone virtually untouched; Forest Service staff leave the wilderness area to the whims of nature, only intervening in the case of emergency.

Natural fires were once relatively frequent and of low-intensity in the landscape of the Boston Mountains. It is believed that Native Americans used prescribed fire on the land as a hunting technique as well as a means to efficiently clear land. However, for much of the first half of the



The dense understory that characterizes the East Fork Wilderness. Photo courtesy of USFS.

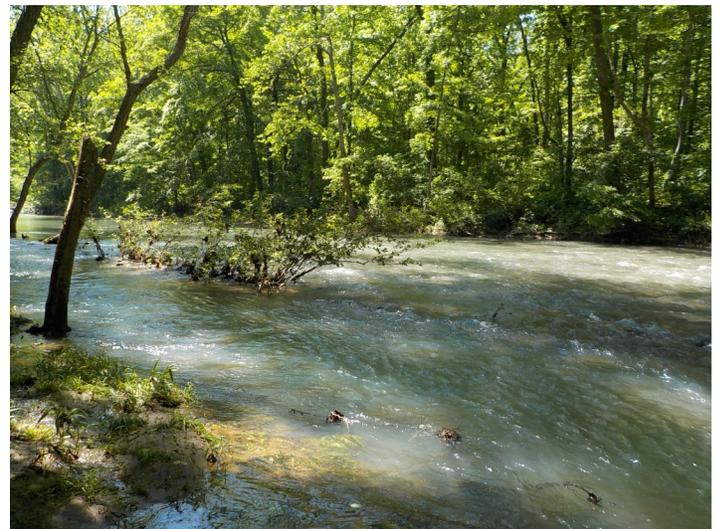
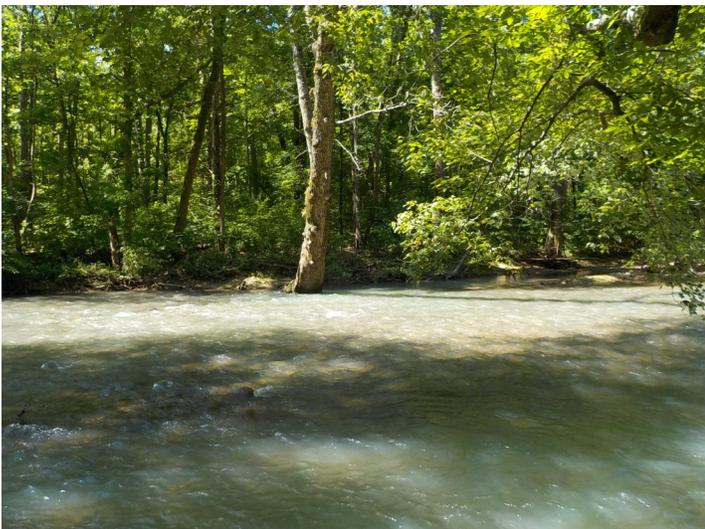
Untrammeled

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Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from modern human actions that control or manipulate the community of life.

20th century, the Forest Service viewed fire as a danger that was to be kept out of the forests. This is to say that the ecology of the East Fork Wilderness evolved with a fire regime that is very different from the current fire regime of the last century. The legacy of fire-adverse management policies has been detrimental to the health of the forests of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests. Ecologists believe that the health of the current oak and pine ecosystems that characterize much of the Forest, including **the East Fork Wilderness, are threatened due to the extent of modern fire suppression. Per the text of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests' 2005 Forest Plan, prescribed fires are not allowed in the wilderness areas on the forest.** Additionally, more aggressive fire suppression is used when a fire breaks out within the wilderness. The 1990 Implementation Document for East Fork Wilderness states that "suppression action will be taken on any fire in the Wilderness regardless of the cause." Fears of wildfires reaching a private inholding or crossing out of the wilderness boundary are compounded with the fact that some of the wilderness area is bordered by private lands and roads which are easily accessed by car. Further, the roads that circumnavigate the East Fork Wilderness provide excellent opportunities for carelessness that can lead to fires. At present, there is some debate over the idea of reclaiming prescribed fire as a management tool to be used for resource benefits.

Given the extent that it is presently possible for humans to extend control over the natural environment, the East Fork Wilderness remains largely unrestrained. The rivers flow freely, the flora grows without manipulation, and access remains up to the visitor to find. Life within the East Fork Wilderness is left to run free without the guidance of most forest management activities.



East Fork of the Illinois Bayou in the East Fork Wilderness.
Photo courtesy of USFS.

Wilderness is distinct from other areas managed by the Forest Service because it is protected with the primary goal of preserving its natural character. In the perspective of the Wilderness Act, the natural character of wilderness is degraded by impacts of modern life on the wilderness area. This means that wilderness is to be managed to support “ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization”.

Before the East Fork Wilderness was designated and before the Forest Service acquired the lands through proclamation and purchase, intensive timber cutting operations occurred throughout the Boston Mountains; except on the very steepest of terrain, hardwood stands were selectively high-graded. Because of this history, today the vast majority of the forest cover is second and third growth oak and hickory. The mid-19th century brought a lumber and mining boom to the Ozark Mountain region. Lead and zinc were the most heavily mined minerals in the Ozarks. Large scale timber processing did not begin until the end of the 19th century, though small saw mills were common before the establishment of industrial timber operations. The effects of the timber industry on the Ozark Mountain region were tremendous. White oak was especially valued during the 1940’s and 1950’s. First, the waterproof nature of white oak made it a valuable container material for overseas shipments during World War II. Then, the bourbon industry made extensive use of the white oak for cooperage. Pine was also extensively logged during this period and timber stand improvement efforts tended to favor pine. Harvesting the forests at an unsustainable rate led to the depletion of game species, soil erosion, and degraded natural water supplies. In addition to logging, prior to Forest Service acquisition of the land, farms were located along the bottomlands where soil was most fertile; pine stands have grown up in the spaces once occupied by farms. These past actions significantly altered the forest composition of the East Fork Wilderness.



Dense forests of the East Fork Wilderness.
Photo courtesy of USFS.

Natural

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Wilderness maintains ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization.

Old home sites, which nature is rapidly reclaiming, are marked by rock fences and plantings of forsythia, daffodil and iris. The dwarf iris is common along the old roads which serve as trails, and spring rains bring out a profusion of colorful fungi, such as the Caesar's Amanita.

Today, the wilderness is almost entirely forested save for a few clearings. Some clearings mark early homesites while others indicate old food plots and openings, which were part of a larger wildlife management program. The East Fork



East Fork of the Illinois Bayou in the East Fork Wilderness.
Photo courtesy of USFS.

Wilderness lies within the 176,000-acre Piney Creeks Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which is cooperatively managed by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and the U.S. Forest Service. The goal of the Piney Creeks WMA is to restore, protect and enhance native wildlife and aquatic species and provide optimal recreational opportunities for the people of the state and nation. Multiple strategies including conservative hunting seasons, more intensive law enforcement efforts and habitat improvement projects are used to manage these resources. Wildlife openings are a common management action used in wildlife management areas. These openings, or food plots, are designed to improve habitat conditions on the area by increasing the availability of nutritious forage and by providing a dependable emergency food source when natural food sources are scarce. These areas are mowed on a planned schedule and most of them are maintained in a mixture of nutritious grasses and legumes that are heavily used by popular wildlife species. Before the East Fork Wilderness was designated as a wilderness area, there were 10 wildlife openings of 1.5 acres each on the land that would later be designated. Since the lands' designation in 1984, these wildlife openings have not been maintained. As time goes on, a variety of plants are slowly overtaking the openings; sumac, sassafras, blackberry, dogwood, persimmon, hickory, and locust are some of the most common. Clearings make up only a portion of the East Fork Wilderness; the majority of the tree cover within the wilderness is second and third-growth oak and hickory, with some shortleaf pine.

The East Fork Wilderness's terrain is characterized by gently rounded ridges separated by hollows with very steep slopes and sheer rock walls. Elevation ranges from 800 to 1,600 feet above sea level within the wilderness area. Some of the most striking scenery within the wilderness can be seen at the meeting of the high sandstone bluffs and the deeply carved hollows. Waterfalls of up to 20 feet are common in this area. The Ozark region has four distinct

Natural

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Wilderness maintains ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization.



Above: Red bat
Below: Northern long-eared bat
Photos courtesy of Paige Wagar.



seasons with a temperature range from 10-15 degrees below zero to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Annual precipitation measures around 50 inches, but the range may vary considerably from this average. Snowfall occurs in the East Fork Wilderness, covering the ground from a few hours to occasional extended periods of up to several days.

There is little documented knowledge of the presence of sensitive species within the wilderness. Given the known range and life history of the species, it is likely that a number of threatened and rare species call the East Fork Wilderness their home. Gray bats forage along the river corridor and Ozark big-eared bats may occasionally seek shelter in the caves formed by the rocky outcrops along the cliffs within the wilderness area. The northern long-eared bats once thrived in closed-canopy forests, like those of the East Fork Wilderness, but these bats have become exceedingly rare in recent years due to the impacts of white-nose syndrome. In the summer, they roost underneath bark or in cavities of live trees; they spend their winters hibernating in caves. The Ozark big-eared bat, gray bat, and Indiana bat are all federally listed as endangered species and the northern long-eared bat is listed as threatened; thus, these species are under the protection of the

Endangered Species Act. Though not on the federal list of protected species, the small-footed myotis and the tri-colored bat are protected by the Regional Forester's Sensitive Species list, which recognizes animals that the Regional Forester deems necessary of receiving additional protection on the regional level. Bald eagles— which recovered under the Endangered Species – can be seen soaring above the trees within the East Fork Wilderness as they enjoy the winds that pass through the river valleys.

The wilderness lies within the East Fork-Illinois Bayou watershed, making up 10,777 acres of the 35,630-acre watershed. Unlike the stagnant water body commonly conjured by the term “bayou”, the Illinois Bayou is swift-moving stream, especially after periods of heavy rains. The East



Bald eagle perched atop a tree.
Photo courtesy of Arkansas
Department of Parks & Tourism.

Natural

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Wilderness maintains ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization.

Fork of the Illinois Bayou, colloquially referred to as East Fork, is one of four streams that make up the larger river. After high rain events, East Fork is strong river, but in the drier summer months, it lies in large and fairly deep pools with small streams connecting one pool to another. A large portion of the water flows underground, a typical characteristic of streams in the Ozark region. The waters of the East Fork Wilderness are recognized as having high water quality, but since the larger watershed includes private land as well as state-owned land, water quality cannot be entirely managed by the Forest Service. Further details on water quality management within the East Fork Wilderness can be found in the East Fork Wilderness Water Monitoring Plan.

At the time of the wilderness designation, there were two active mineral leases totaling 450 acres within the wilderness boundaries. By March of 1993, both leases expired because no production was underway or implemented. Since the expiration of those leases, no new mineral leases have been permitted within the East Fork Wilderness. The East Fork Wilderness is characterized as a Class II air quality management area according to the Clean Air Act as amended in 1977. As the East Fork Wilderness is surrounded by mostly Forest Service lands, the biggest threat to air quality within the East Fork Wilderness is smoke generated by prescribed burns. As such, prescribed burning plans and smoke management plans for areas to be burned in close proximity to the wilderness consider potential impact on the East Fork Wilderness's air.

The natural character of the East Fork Wilderness is by far its most attractive feature; people from near and far come to the area to bear witness to the stunning vistas and hidden waterfalls that scatter the wilderness area. The plants and animals that call the wilderness home are residents of a wild and densely forested landscape.



Buck standing along an old road.
Photo courtesy of USFS.



East Fork of the Illinois Bayou in the East Fork Wilderness. Photo courtesy of USFS.

The Wilderness Act states that wilderness must remain “without permanent improvement or human habitation... where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”. The undeveloped character of wilderness captures the notion that wilderness is primeval in its essence and is to be free of structures, installations, habitations, motor vehicles, motorized equipment, or mechanical transport. An early Forest Service report, Wilderness Policy Review, explains that that buildings or structures are usually installed for only one purpose– to facilitate human activity. The building or structure not only occupies the land, but makes it easier for people to impose their will on the environment, thereby modifying it. This policy review also found that motorized equipment and mechanical transport similarly make it easier for people to occupy and modify the land. As such, the undeveloped character of wilderness is degraded by the presence of these items and activities.



Farmer on his land near the East Fork of the Illinois Bayou.
Photo courtesy of USFS, 1937.

The challenge in assessing the extent of development within the East Fork Wilderness emerges from trying to reconcile the history of the land, its life before designation, and the expectation of ‘wildness’. In the case of the East Fork Wilderness, a number of ‘developments’ were grandfathered in by special provisions in the enabling legislation, including buildings and roads. In 1908, when President Theodore Roosevelt signed the proclamation establishing the Ozark National Forest, there were some 2,500

families residing within the boundaries of the newly established national forest. To this day remnants of antiquated farm equipment, silent cemeteries, dilapidated stone fences, and old roads can be found throughout the wilderness area. The old homesteads, many of which are still discernible along the creek bank, and the old roads are testaments to the past use of the land. There is even a pioneer cemetery within the East Fork Wilderness. As the years go on and the plants grow thicker, these structures fall a little deeper into nature’s grasp. Succession is currently returning the formerly-used roads and fields to a climax forest with an oak-hickory association. This process is precisely why the lands of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests are testaments to the resiliency of the earth. The history of these hills holds tales of deforestation, violent Civil War battles, intrusive timber logging and milling. And yet, the ecological process continues to persevere. Occasionally, Forest Service employees will take actions to expedite this process, like removing old wire fences from trees and placing them on the ground to encourage faster rusting.

Undeveloped

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Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvements or modern human occupation.

When the original wilderness boundaries were being drawn, the Forest Service was careful to take into consideration existing parcel boundaries to avoid unnecessarily cutting into private land; the result of this logic is that though there are no privately-owned inholdings within the wilderness, there are a number of parcels of private property directly bordering the East Fork Wilderness. With private property sharing boundaries with the wilderness area, there are more informal entry points into the wilderness as people can enter the wilderness from their own backyard. This close proximity of private landowner to the wilderness area forces collaboration and careful communication between federal and private landowners to ensure sustainable wilderness stewardship. At present, marks made by vehicle encroachments, litter, and vandalized signage are the most common evidence of continued human presence within the East Fork Wilderness. Law enforcement patrols this area and increases the frequency of their patrols during hunting season, when traffic in the East Fork Wilderness is highest.

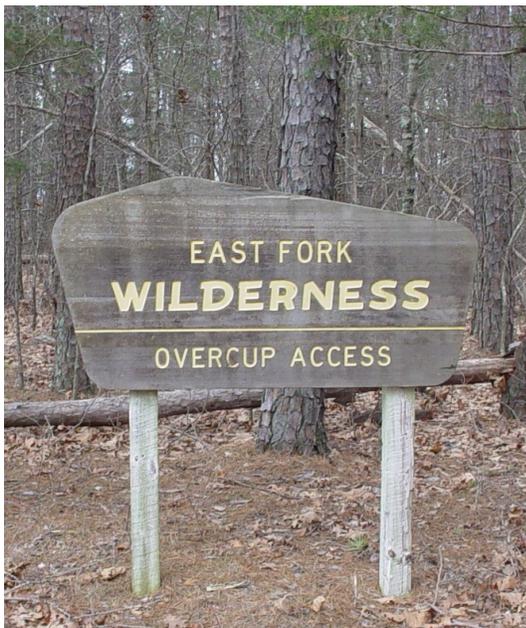
As mentioned previously, the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests' fire management strategy in dealing with wildfire in the wilderness areas lean more heavily towards active suppression than passive monitoring. Since its designation, one wildfire has occurred within the East Fork Wilderness. Since this unnamed fire burned roughly 125 acres within the East Fork Wilderness in 1988, there have been no other known ignitions.

In addition to wildfire, the other common category of instances that the Forest approves use of motorized equipment or mechanical transport in the East Fork Wilderness is emergency search and rescue; though even in these instances, use is reliant on specific Forest Service written approval. One difficulty with coordinating search and rescue efforts within the East

Fork Wilderness is that the wilderness area stretches across three counties, each with their own protocol for search and rescue operations.

The wild and currently untouched nature of the East Fork Wilderness makes it an attractive study site for researchers and living classroom for educators. The Forest Service recognizes the value of research and intends for the wilderness areas to function as "living laboratories". However, there is no documented record of the East Fork Wilderness being utilized as a site for research exploration like the other wilderness areas in the region.

Though remnants of its past inhabitants remain on the land, the feeling of isolation from the modern world is never lost. Despite its storied past, development within the East Fork Wilderness is limited and, today, the area is largely left to its own evolutions.



Signage showing the Overcup Access to the East Fork Wilderness.
Photo courtesy of USFS.

Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.

Per the text of the Wilderness Act, wilderness is characterized by “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation”. This clause functions to preserve a common essence of wilderness: that it is a retreat from the modern world where visitors can flee to in an effort to escape. As mentioned previously, the East Fork Wilderness cannot be likened to the large swaths of uncharted wilderness as exists in the American West. Stretching only roughly 5 miles at its widest point, the grandeur of the East Fork Wilderness does not come from its size. The beauty of this landscape lies in the resiliency of its forests and the deep connection between the land and the communities that serve as its stewards. The sandstone ridges and outcrops in the East Fork Wilderness create opportunities for stunning vistas and offer spectacular viewpoints for visitors to take in the rolling sea of trees that is the Ozark-St. Francis National Forest. At present, the most common use of the East Fork Wilderness is backcountry hunting.

Compared to the other four wilderness areas on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, the East Fork Wilderness receives very little traffic. In fact, the East Fork Wilderness is often referred to as “The Forgotten Wilderness”. The names of the surrounding areas reflect the wildness of East Fork Wilderness: the south-eastern corner of the wilderness is known as “Lost Corner” and ‘Nogo’ is the name of a nearby community. As an area protected from human development or settlement, the East Fork Wilderness can provide opportunities for solitude that are not



Sycamore Creek Trail. Photo courtesy of USFS,.

available otherwise. Contributors to a true sense of solitude include privacy, inspiration, being away from other visitors, self-paced activities, and a sense of connection to the land. The roads that circumnavigate the wilderness allow ease of access for visitors to enjoy the wilderness for day trips, rather than committing to an overnight experience in the wilderness as is the case in other more remote wilderness areas. However, the presence of the roads can also detract from a visitor's sense that they are truly solitary in wilderness. There are points atop ridges within the wilderness where roads can be seen and traffic is easily heard. Though regulations set by the Federal Aviation Administration require a minimum flying altitude of no less than 2,000 feet above wilderness areas, audible plane traffic overhead is common within the East Fork Wilderness.

The most prevalent forms of recreation within the East Fork Wilderness are hiking and camping, more specifically, hiking and camping associated with deer or turkey hunting. The lessons from a visitor monitoring study conducted in 1988 showed that visitation to the East Fork Wilderness was twice as high in turkey hunting season that during any other time of the

Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation (continued)

Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.

year. Despite initial frustrations with the designation of the East Fork Wilderness and the restrictions on vehicle-use that come along with wilderness designation, by the early 1990's the local hunting community was grateful for the designation. In the 1992 East Fork Wilderness Annual Report, it was noted that hunters shared that their hunt was more serene and enjoyable because of the "no vehicle" policy; they went so far as to say hunting in the areas bordering the wilderness, where vehicles are permitted, is just no fun any longer because of congestion.

Other anecdotes retold by visitors to the East Fork Wilderness echo this sentiment: East Fork Wilderness is the place to go for backcountry hunting. In 1991, a Swedish man camped out in the East Fork Wilderness from December through February. When asked why he chose East Fork Wilderness as his home to live through the coldest months of the winter, he responded that he was impressed by the ample wildlife, specifically turkeys, which made remarkable opportunities for hunting. Though, he also commented on the harshness of the winter chill: "The kind of weather you have here is probably the hardest to cope with because you have the dampness and the cold. When the sleeping bag gets wet, it doesn't insulate as well."



Volunteers working to clear fallen trees from the Overcup Trail.
Photo courtesy of USFS.

Primitive recreation is a form of recreation that requires self-reliance and a degree of wilderness skills, such as canoeing or backpacking. The presence of developed facilities that decrease the need for self-reliance degrade opportunities for primitive recreation. The extensive road system within the East Fork Wilderness now functions as an informal hiking network. Though, the old roads are now mostly overgrown with vegetation and difficult to navigate when there is high vegetation. Experienced wilderness users are able to negotiate routes through the

wilderness. Novice users may find it difficult to find their way through the wilderness, which is why the old roads within the East Fork Wilderness are maintained as wilderness hiking trails. The 2005 Forest Plan for the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests states that increasing recreational opportunities across the forest is a primary management priority. This vision extends into the wilderness areas and, in the eyes of the Forest Service, constructing a new trail is a means to increasing recreational opportunities. This is to say that there is no prohibition on developing trails within the East Fork Wilderness, as is the common perception of the public regarding the prospect of new trails in the East Fork Wilderness.

Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation (continued)

Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.

Though the Forest Service is limited in their capacity to upkeep the trails within the wilderness area due to personnel and budgetary constraints, in the past volunteer groups have participated in work days to clear trails and pick up litter within the wilderness area. The most recent work was done by a Boy Scout Troop based in the Russellville area. Their efforts are tremendously helpful in maintaining the trails within the East Fork Wilderness.

With hopes of gaining a better understanding of the use of the trails within the wilderness, in 2013 the Forest Service installed a trail counter just outside of the wilderness boundary at the Overcup trailhead. Unfortunately, the trail counter was stolen off the tree it was affixed to within 12 months of its installation. Because of the lack of visitation, the Forest has considered decommissioning trails to expedite nature taking back the area. Since the 1990's they have removed certain trailheads from published maps. Today, there are two maintained access points that function as entry sites to the East Fork Wilderness: Overcup Trail Access and Sycamore Creek Trail Access. Both of these access points have parking areas to accommodate vehicles and each function as a trailhead for two of the most popular trails within the East Fork Wilderness: the Overcup Trail and the Sycamore Creek Trail.

In total, there are 4 trails creating 14 miles of trails within the wilderness. The East Fork Trail spans the length of the wilderness area, though the most spectacular sights can be found in the side hollows and drainages off the main creek. The Overcup Trail is a 3-mile trail that passes by the East Fork Wilderness's unique overland ponds. This is the primary trail that wilderness visitors use; year after year, it receives the most traffic. Dean's Ridge and Sycamore Creek Trail are the other two trails within the wilderness area. In addition to day-hiking, many people overnight camp within the wilderness. In 2007, a survey was conducted to take inventory of all the established camping sites in the East Fork Wilderness. At that time, there were a total of 10 campsites. Overall, these campsites are quite dispersed throughout the wilderness area and many showed signs that they were already transitioning back into the wilderness.

Paddling is another form of recreation within the East Fork Wilderness; though, the waters of the creek can be precarious and challenging to navigate. In his guidebook, *A Canoeing & Kayaking Guide to the Ozarks*, Tom Kennon writes of the East Fork of the Illinois Bayou: "Paddlers can expect a class II-II+ stream with rocky shoals, willow jungles, and scenic bluffs. The main hazard is downed trees that block your passage. Remember to scout ahead if your route is not clear." This portion of the Illinois Bayou drops 25 feet per mile, making it the steepest descending portion of the Illinois Bayou. Rated as a Class II run, the East Fork of the Illinois Bayou attracts experienced and adventurous paddlers to the wilderness area.

In the mid 1980's, when the Arkansas Wilderness Act was being discussed, the Arkansas



Signage for parking.
Photo courtesy of USFS.

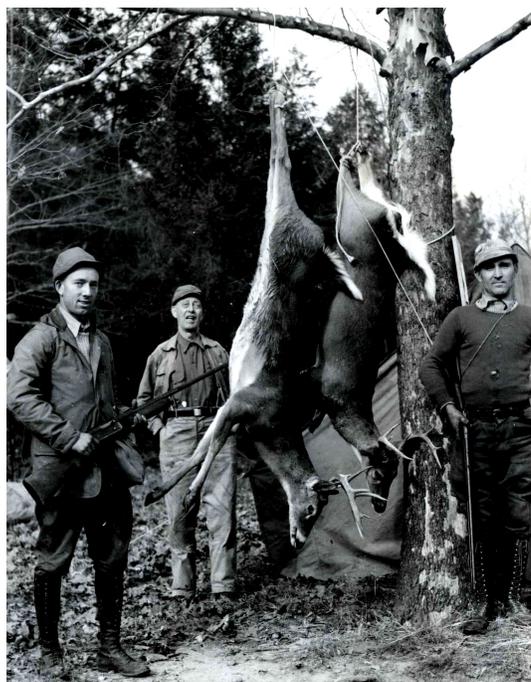
Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation (continued)

Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.

Wilderness Steering Committee was created to help guide the establishment and initial management of wilderness areas within the state. In the eyes of this committee, because the National Park Service's Buffalo National River Wilderness already offered tremendous opportunity for hiking via developed trails, it was decided that those desiring the truly backcountry trekking wilderness experience would be directed to one of the five nearby wilderness areas managed by the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests. It was this informal rationale that guided the first management plan for the East Fork Wilderness, and it continues to inform management of the area to this day. The rugged wildness of the East Fork Wilderness is precisely what makes it such a magnificent place. The wild character of the area is not for everyone, but it does offer a degree of isolation not often found in Arkansas.

Wilderness often sparks a sense of exploration within its visitors; the promise of unconfined recreation refers to the notion that wilderness should be a place where visitors can explore freely and roam widely without constraint. This quality of wilderness character strives to ensure wilderness offers visitors the opportunity to engage in unconfined recreation; it is not an evaluation of visitor experience or a count of the quantity of visitors. Wilderness management is tailored to preserve spontaneity of use and as much freedom from regimentation as possible, while preserving the naturalness of the wilderness resource. Visiting the East Fork Wilderness does not require a permit or reservation. There are no designated camping areas within the wilderness. The only restriction on where one is able to explore within the wilderness is detailed in the USDA's "Southern Region Caves and Abandoned Mines Decision Memo" issued in 2014 by the Regional Forester for Region 8. This 5-year cave closure order was issued as one action to slow the spread of white-nose syndrome, which is a deadly wildlife disease that has killed over 5 million bats in the United States. Though the primary transmission pathway is bat to bat, human transmission between locations is possible.

As mentioned earlier, the East Fork Wilderness falls within the Piney Creeks WMA meaning that hunting within the wilderness is subject to the hunting regulations and seasons outlined by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. So long as visitors understand the basic prohibitions pertaining to federal wilderness areas – like no mechanized equipment or mechanized transport – and they refrain from entering caves, they are welcome to freely explore the beauty of the East Fork Wilderness. Ranging from backcountry hunting to peaceful hiking, the East Fork Wilderness offers its visitors opportunities to engage in a variety of activities.



Men hunting deer along the Buffalo River.
Photo courtesy of USFS, 1937.

Other Features of Value

Wilderness preserves other features that are of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

Each wilderness area holds features that define the area and mark it as unique from the environment around it. The Wilderness Act acknowledges that wilderness areas "may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value". This quality differs from the previous four qualities of wilderness in that it is site-specific and tied to a particular wilderness area; opposed to assessing the values of wilderness character that are derived from particular sites, this quality focuses on the physical feature itself and assumes that preservation of the physical condition of the feature will preserve the values derived from them. Features acknowledged under this quality must be integral to the character of the wilderness area. Given its diverse history and unique landscape, the East Fork Wilderness has one other feature of value: the presence of the overland ponds.

The presence of three upland ponds marks the East Fork Wilderness as a distinctly different landscape from other wilderness areas in the region. These ponds create a unique ecosystem within the East Fork Wilderness, creating a home for a diversity of plants and animals otherwise not found in the upland regions of the Ozark Plateau. These upland areas have exposed, standing water during wet months and support plant communities that otherwise would thrive in bottomlands. Two species of bottomland oaks – pin oak (*Quercus palustris*) and overcup oak (*Quercus lyrata*) – are present near two of the ponds. These ponds create dynamic ecosystems that support a vibrant community of plants and animals that is unique to the East Fork Wilderness.

The East Fork Wilderness, with its rugged landscape and wild valleys, is a testament to the resiliency of nature. From its sharp cliffs and forested slopes, the East Fork Wilderness is a mysterious landscape with new wonders around every bend in the river.



Overcup oak trees. Photo courtesy of Vern Wilkins, Indiana University, Bugwood.org.



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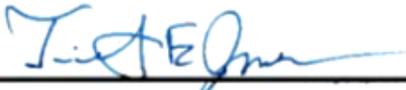


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