

Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center's  
***Wilderness Investigations***  
High School

**Wilderness Profile #3**  
***Gila Wilderness***

**Common Core Standard Connections**

Standards addressed will vary depending on how the teacher chooses to approach the lesson and/or activities.

**Teacher background:**

Part of the original wilderness designation (Wilderness Act) in 1964, the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico encompasses 558,014 acres and is managed by the U.S. Forest Service. The Gila Wilderness is of special historic significance because it is the world's first designated wilderness (1924). Due to the vision and hard work of Aldo Leopold and others the Gila was protected as wilderness 40 years before federal protection was extended to other wild areas. Its landscape consists of desert-like rolling hills and mesas, pinion/juniper woodlands, grasslands, and ponderosa pine forest. Steep river-carved canyons and high mountains (up to 10,895 feet) round out the rich landscape diversity of the Gila Wilderness.

**Instructions for the teacher:**

To help students become familiar with the Gila Wilderness choose one or more of the following:

- Use information from *Teacher Background* and the *Student Information Sheet* to prepare and present a mini-lesson about this wilderness.
- If students have already started their *U.S. Wilderness Area Field Guide* (started as part of Wilderness Profile #1) have them add entries for the Gila Wilderness by choosing items from the list below:
  - Photocopy the *Student Information Sheet*, have students go through it and then conduct a discussion about the information found there.
  - Using the *Student Information Sheet*, have students choose one of the following creative projects:
    - Create an original art piece that features a scene from the Gila Wilderness. See [wilderness.net](http://wilderness.net) for images.

- After studying the Gila Wilderness, develop a presentation (poster, PowerPoint, comic strip, etc.) that features appropriate wilderness activities for this place.
    - Plan a skit focused on: 1) Getting to the Gila Wilderness from your school location; 2) Shows several friends getting ready for a Gila Wilderness backcountry trip and feature planning, packing, gear, safety, etc.; 3) Write a poem or song that compares and contrasts the Gila Wilderness with some other known place.
  - Use the wilderness map included with *Wilderness Investigations* and have students locate New Mexico and the Gila Wilderness. Provide blackline maps of the Southwestern United States. Have students identify and label each state and draw in/label this wilderness.
  - Have students choose one of the common animals of the Gila Wilderness (found on the *Student Information Sheet*) and have them research information about the animal. Next, using their research findings have them prepare a creative way to share what they've learned.
- Prepare a backcountry menu for a multi-day trip in the Gila Wilderness.
  - Create a *U.S. Wilderness Area* classroom display or place on class webpage. Continue to add information as new areas are focused on.
    - Just a few wilderness areas are focused on as part of *Wilderness Investigations*. Have students choose non-focused areas to research, present and post on the bulletin board.
  - For more information about the Gila Wilderness go to [www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net).



**Horseback Riding in the Gila Wilderness**  
(from Wilderness.net; Image #380)

**Wilderness Profile #3**  
***Gila Wilderness***  
**Student Information Sheet**



**West Fork of the Gila River; Gila Wilderness**  
(from Wilderness.net; Image #567)

**What's the story?**

- First designated wilderness area in the world. Under the direction of Aldo Leopold (U.S. Forest Service) and others wilderness set-aside in 1924.
- Total size: 558,014 acres which is a little over 2/3 the size of the state of Rhode Island.
- Located entirely within the state of New Mexico.
- Part of and administered by the Gila National Forest.
- Popular with backpackers from all over the world.

- Diverse geography and vegetation:
  - Eastern portions: High mesas, rolling hills, deep canyons, pinion/juniper woodlands as well as grasslands
  - Central portion: Sheer cliffs along the Gila River, ponderosa pine forest
  - Western and southwestern portions: High mountains (elevations up to 10,895 feet in Mogollon Range), steep canyons
- Some animals that call the Gila Wilderness home:
  - Amphibians: Tiger salamander, New Mexico spadefoot toad, Woodhouse's toad, bullfrog
  - Birds: Wild turkey, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, red-tailed hawk
  - Fish: Gila trout (threatened or endangered), rainbow trout, brown trout, channel catfish, Flathead catfish, large mouth bass, small mouth bass, speckled dace
  - Mammals: Black bear, mule deer, mountain lion, elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, dusky shrew, silver-haired bat, big brown bat, Townsend's bat, desert cottontail rabbit, Abert's squirrel, red squirrel, coyote, striped skunk,
  - Reptiles: Greater earless lizard, tree lizard, short-horned lizard, black-necked garter snake, striped whipsnake, black-tailed rattlesnake, western diamond-backed rattlesnake
- Extensive trail system for backcountry users.
- Weather:
  - Low elevations: Mild in winter (although below freezing at night), very hot in summer with occasional heavy rains that can produce flash flooding..
  - High elevations: Usually snowpacked in winter (December - February), hot in July and August.
- Main rivers (Gila and the three forks) run year round. Backcountry users should be aware of seasonal drought conditions as smaller creeks and springs may dry up.
- The Gila Wilderness surrounds the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument.
  - The monument was established in 1907 and expanded in 1962 (both before the Wilderness Act became law in 1964).
  - This area is rich in cliff dwellings and other artifacts of the Mogollon people who lived there over 700 years ago.