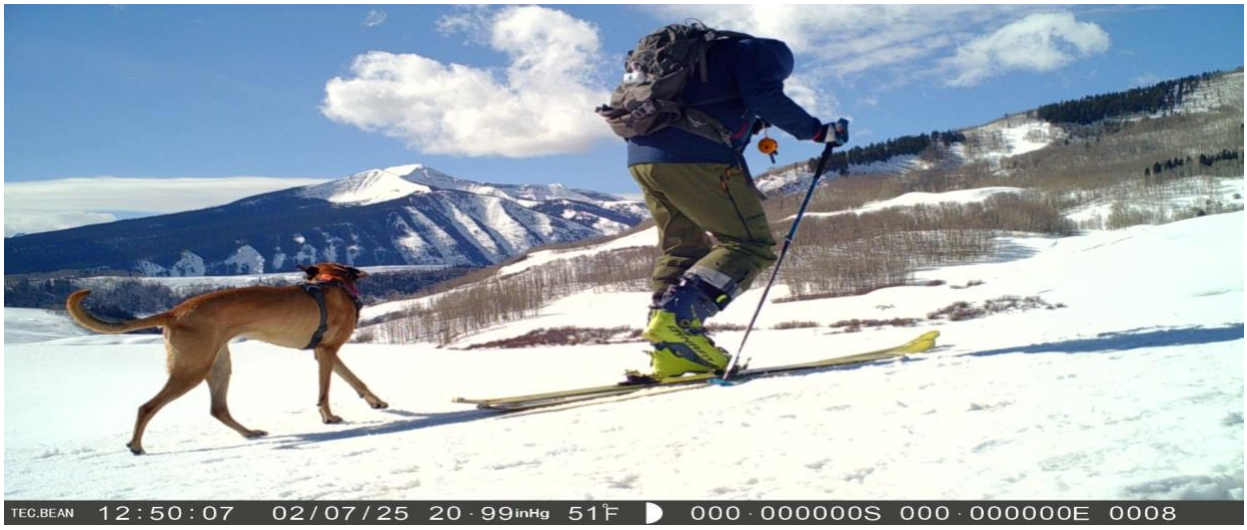



# 2025/2026 WINTER DATA COLLECTION INITIATIVE

# 2025/26 Upper Gunnison Valley Winter Visitor Use Report

The town of Crested Butte, and the surrounding Upper Gunnison Valley (UGV), is known throughout the Rockies as a winter recreation destination. This visitor use study aims to provide a database for stakeholders interested in winter recreation patterns in the UGV.

## 2025/26 Winter Data Collection Initiative

### UPPER GUNNISON VALLEY WINTER VISITOR USE REPORT INTRODUCTION

Considered by many to be one of Colorado's “last great Colorado ski towns” – Crested Butte, is located near the north end of the Upper Gunnison Valley (UGV), in central Colorado. This former mining town is now a travel destination that attracts recreationists year-round, but the long winters, low temperatures, and heavy snowfall are what have built this area's reputation as a winter recreator's dream. The town's location within the Elk Mountains offers a truly outstanding amount of winter backcountry access within a 30-minute drive from the town. Currently, these popular trailheads in the Crested Butte area are under the regulation of United States Forest Service's (USFS) Winter Travel Management Plan (WTMP), which was created over 20 years ago. Since the agency's plan was developed, technological changes along with observed increased visitation to the backcountry have prompted members of the Crested Butte community to express interest in updating the WTMP. Beginning with former student Doug Shaw's 2017/18 study, graduate students from the Master of Environmental Management program at Western Colorado University have been working in collaboration with The Center for Public Lands to produce an annual quantitative dataset regarding backcountry use/travel in the UGV.

While Crested Butte and the greater UGV are certainly well-known places for winter recreation opportunities, they are not the only communities facing changes in winter recreational planning. In 2015, a United States Forest Service ruling declared that “a system of routes and areas to provide for over-snow vehicle use” must be established for all winter use areas across the nation. While the local Forest Service office does plan to implement changes to the WTMP to account for the 2015 ruling, they have not done so yet. There are plans to complete a Forest Plan Revision before considering the WTMP. In the meanwhile, the community aims to study and better understand visitor use patterns to inform the planning of the WTMP once the process commences.

The goal of this study is to improve knowledge of winter travel patterns and enhance stakeholders’ ability to aid the USFS’s Winter Travel Management Plan. This study is an ongoing collaboration between the Master of Environmental Management program at Western Colorado University, The Center for Public Lands, Elk Mountain Backcountry Alliance, and the Town of Crested Butte. The following presents the results of data collection in the winter of 2025/26.

### METHODOLOGY

The methods and design of the 2025/26 study have been repeated with minimal variation since the original 2017 study. It is our hope that continuing a similar methodology will produce the most accurate model of recreational usage and represent trends of use over time. Trailhead monitoring occurred via eight remote cameras installed at trailheads in the six major drainages used for backcountry travel in the Upper Gunnison Valley. The images are collected from December to April approximately every ten days. Consistent collection of SD cards reduced data collection error due to snow and human interference. The batteries were also checked for each collection

and changed twice during the 2025/26 season. If the initiative used infrared counters, animals would be counted causing collection inconsistency, along with a restricted count on hybrid users. Remote cameras allow for a more defined collection of recreator use types at each of the various trailheads.

Users are categorized into 4 main user types: **non-motorized** (cross-country skiers, snowshoes, backcountry skiers/splitboarders, hikers, etc.), **motorized** (cars, snowmobiles, any type of over snow vehicle), **hybrid** (a user encompassing more than one category) and **mechanized** (fat tire bikes, mountain bikes). Motorized users are defined as “any vehicle which is self-propelled, other than a wheelchair or mobility device” by the US Forest Service. Hybrid users appear to be participating in multiple forms of recreation, typically identified by a snowmobile carrying skis or pulling skiers. The counts of users were defined by their “outgoing” characteristic, so users who may have done a point-to-point ski were not counted, such as skiing from Kebler before the camera location up Mount Emmons and ending at the Slate Creek Trailhead.




**Figure 1.** Location of Trailheads: A – Kebler Pass, B – Washington Gulch, C – Slate River, D – Snodgrass Trailhead, E – Gothic Road, F – Brush Creek Trailhead, G – Brush Creek Road, H – Cement Creek Road (Image: Google Earth, 2018).

## RESULTS

The Winter Data Collection Initiative was able to sample a total of 108 days in the 2025/26 winter season, with a total count of approximately 23,983 winter recreational users (December 14th – March 31st) in the Upper Gunnison Valley. The trailhead with the highest recreational use was Snodgrass Trailhead, averaging 56.0 users daily and a total user count of 4,758 individuals. Gothic Road followed closely as the second highest trailhead with 4,668 total users. The largest count of motorized users throughout the season was at Kebler Pass with 3,435 individuals, approximately four times greater than the next highest motorized count at Brush Creek Road (935). A large portion of hybrid users were distributed between the Slate River and Kebler Pass trailheads. Washington Gulch also recorded notable hybrid use at 158 individuals.

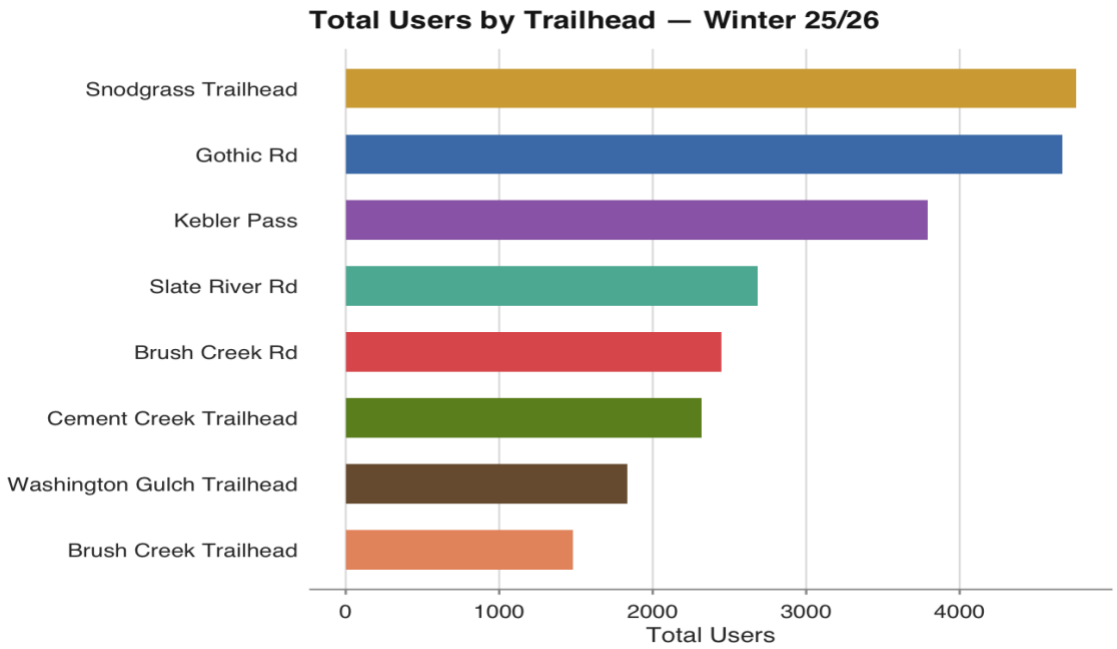



**Figure 2.** Overall recreation user type totals by trailhead for the 2025/26 winter season.

The most common trailhead for mechanized travel was Cement Creek with 272 users, followed by Gothic Road with 145 mechanized users. This represents a notable increase in mechanized use at Cement Creek compared to the previous 2024/25 season. A large portion of hybrid user groups were distributed between the Slate River and Kebler Pass Trailheads, both trailheads commonly known for their access to skiing in the West Elk Mountains.

The lowest number of winters recreators was observed at Brush Creek Trailhead with a total user count of 1,482, followed by Washington Gulch at 1,833. Table 1 below summarizes these counts by trailhead. The total days with camera failure are also noted on this table.

**Table 1.** Recreational user totals for the 2025/26 winter season.

| Location of Trailhead | Days with Camera Failure | Days with Data | Total Non-Motorized Users | Total Motorized Users | Total Mechanized Users | Total Hybrid Users | Total Users |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brush Creek Trailhead | 5 | 103 | 1,456 | 0 | 26 | 0 | 1,482 |
| Brush Creek Road | 0 | 108 | 1,301 | 935 | 180 | 29 | 2,445 |
| Cement Creek | 0 | 108 | 1,743 | 296 | 272 | 10 | 2,321 |
| Gothic | 2 | 106 | 4,510 | 13 | 145 | 0 | 4,668 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kebler Pass | 0 | 108 | 118 | 3,435 | 35 | 205 | 3,793 |
| Slate River | 0 | 108 | 1,950 | 240 | 27 | 466 | 2,683 |
| Snodgrass | 19 | 85 | 4,742 | 0 | 16 | 0 | 4,758 |
| Washington Gulch | 27 | 81 | 1,391 | 261 | 23 | 158 | 1,833 |
| **Combined Total** | **53** | **807** | **17,211** | **5,180** | **724** | **868** | **23,983** |

The average trailhead user count followed a similar pattern to Figure 2 above; the higher the total user count, the higher the user average per day. The average user data per day is displayed in Figure 3. Table 2 below also shows the average user groups broken into user type per trailhead location.

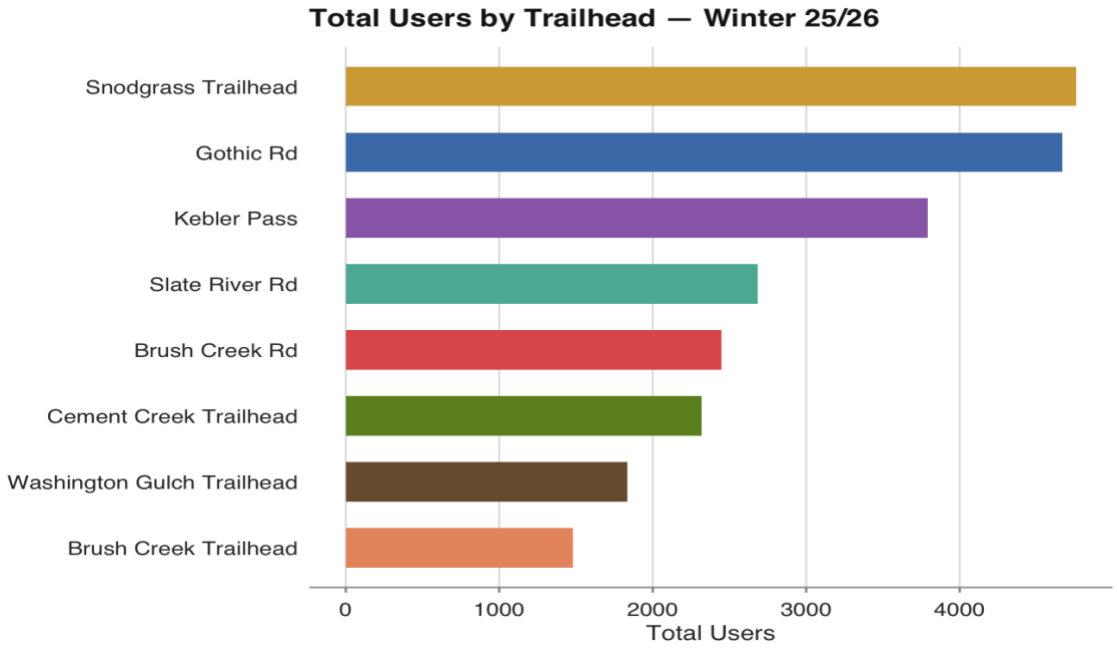



**Figure 3.** Overall average user count per day for the 2025/26 season.

**Table 2.** Recreational daily average user count for the 2025/26 season.

| Trailhead | Average Daily Users | Average Daily Non-Motorized Users | Average Daily Motorized Users | Average Daily Mechanized Users | Average Daily Hybrid Users |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brush Creek Trailhead | 14.4 | 14.1 | 0.0 | 0.3 | 0.0 |
| Brush Creek Road | 22.6 | 12.0 | 8.7 | 1.7 | 0.3 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cement Creek | 21.5 | 16.1 | 2.7 | 2.5 | 0.1 |
| Gothic | 44.0 | 42.5 | 0.1 | 1.4 | 0.0 |
| Kebler Pass | 35.1 | 1.1 | 31.8 | 0.3 | 1.9 |
| Slate River | 24.8 | 18.1 | 2.2 | 0.3 | 4.3 |
| Snodgrass | 56.0 | 55.8 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.0 |
| Washington Gulch | 22.6 | 17.2 | 3.2 | 0.3 | 2.0 |
| **Combined Total** | **29.7** | **21.3** | **6.4** | **0.9** | **1.1** |

Camera failure this winter season was caused by a combination of factors including human tampering, SD card errors, and weather-related interference. Washington Gulch saw the most significant missing data at 27 days, primarily attributable to the camera and SD card being tampered. Snodgrass Trailhead had 19 days of missing data from a data transfer error. Brush Creek Trailhead lost 5 days of data due to camera issues. Gothic Road recorded 2 days of missing data due to battery issues.

## BRUSH CREEK TRAILHEAD

**Total # of visitors = 1,482**

**Average # of visits per day = 14.4**

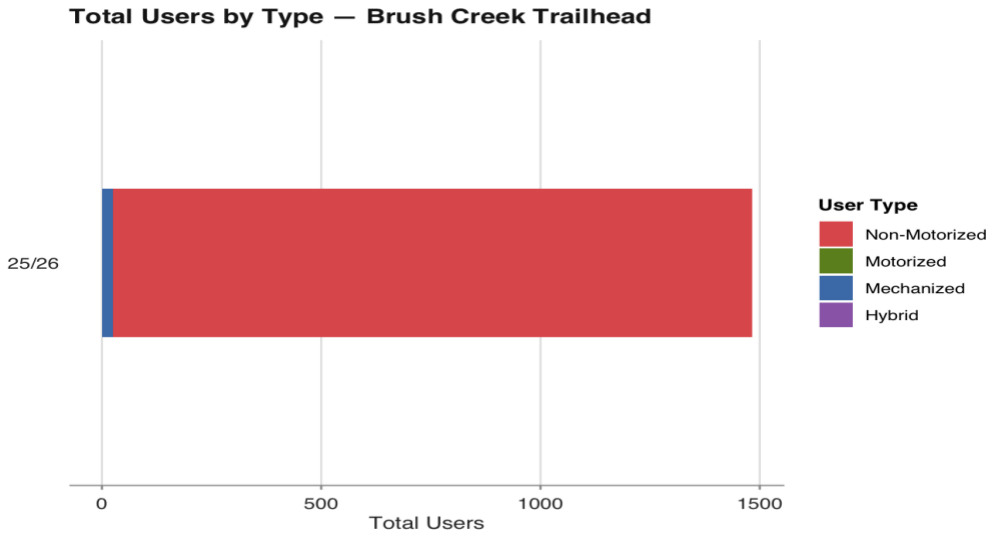



*Figure 4. Total users by type at Brush Creek Trailhead, 2025/26.*

In the 2025/26 winter season, observations were collected for 103 of the 108 deployed days at the Brush Creek Trailhead camera, with five days of missing data due to a camera issue. The total user count increased by 9% compared to the 2024/25 season. There were no motorized nor hybrid users noted at this site this season, with 26 mechanized users observed — an increase from five mechanized users the prior season. Overall, the Brush Creek Trailhead comprised approximately 98 percent non-motorized users (cross-country skiers, hikers, backcountry skiers) in the 2025/26 winter season.

## BRUSH CREEK ROAD

**Total # of visitors = 2,445**

**Average # of visits per day = 22.6**

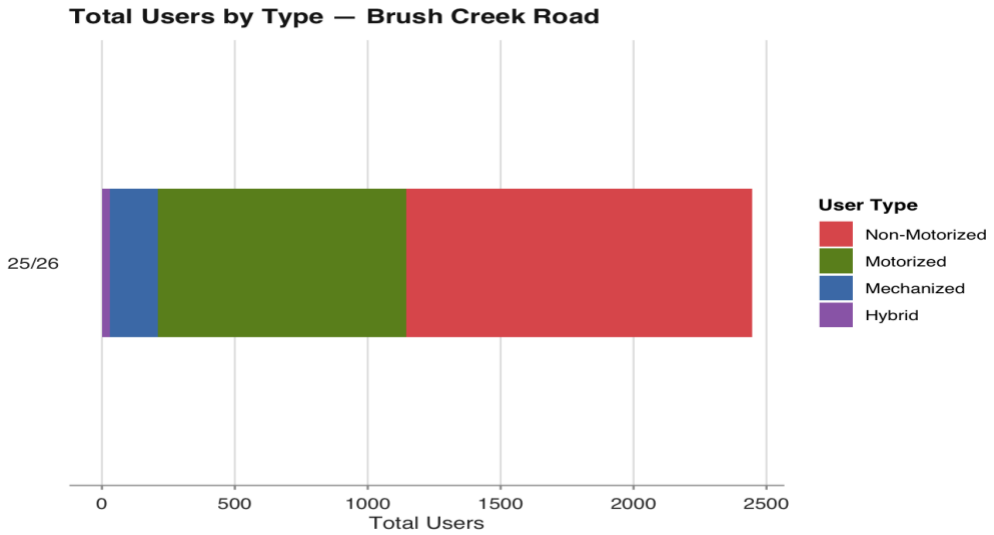



*Figure 5. Total users by type at Brush Creek Road, 2025/26.*

Brush Creek Road saw a substantial increase in total users this season, rising from 1,231 in 2024/25 to 2,445 in 2025/26 — a nearly 99% increase. The camera had no days of missing data this season. Motorized users rose significantly to 935 individuals, compared to 200 the prior year, suggesting increased snowmobile use along this corridor. Mechanized users also increased to 180 from 40 the prior season. Hybrid users decreased from 69 to 29. The notable increase in motorized use at this location warrants continued monitoring in future seasons.

## CEMENT CREEK ROAD

**Total # of visitors = 2,321**

**Average # of visits per day = 21.5**

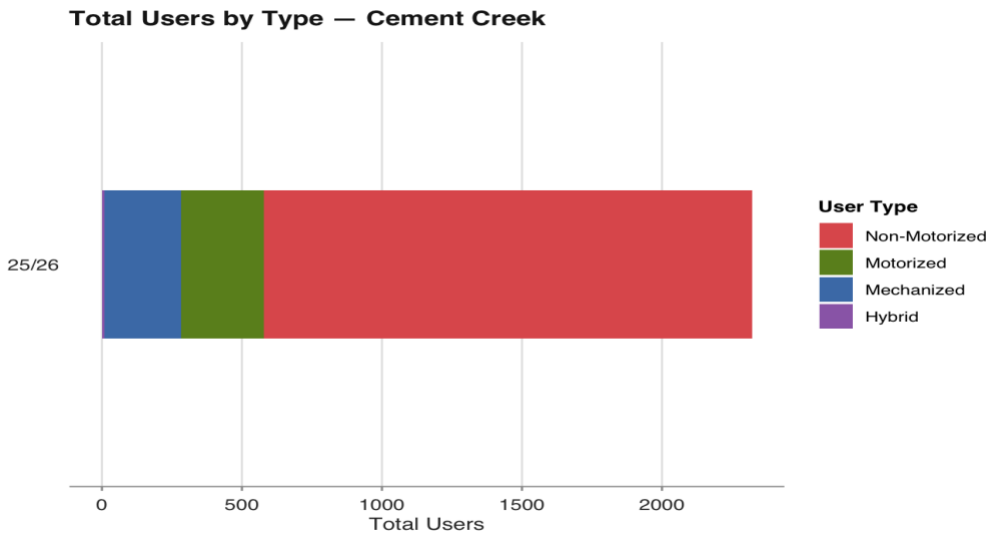



*Figure 6. Total users by type at Cement Creek, 2025/26.*

The Cement Creek camera had a total of 2,321 users this winter season with 108 observed days and no missing data. Non-motorized users comprised approximately 75% of all users at this site. Mechanized users increased significantly to 272 from 193 in 2024/25, reinforcing Cement Creek's status as the primary mechanized corridor in the UGV. Motorized users decreased from 419 to 296. The 2025/26 season at Cement Creek showed a 33% decrease in total users compared to 2024/25, though daily averages remained comparable.

## GOTHIC ROAD

**Total # of visitors = 4,668**

**Average # of visits per day = 44.0**

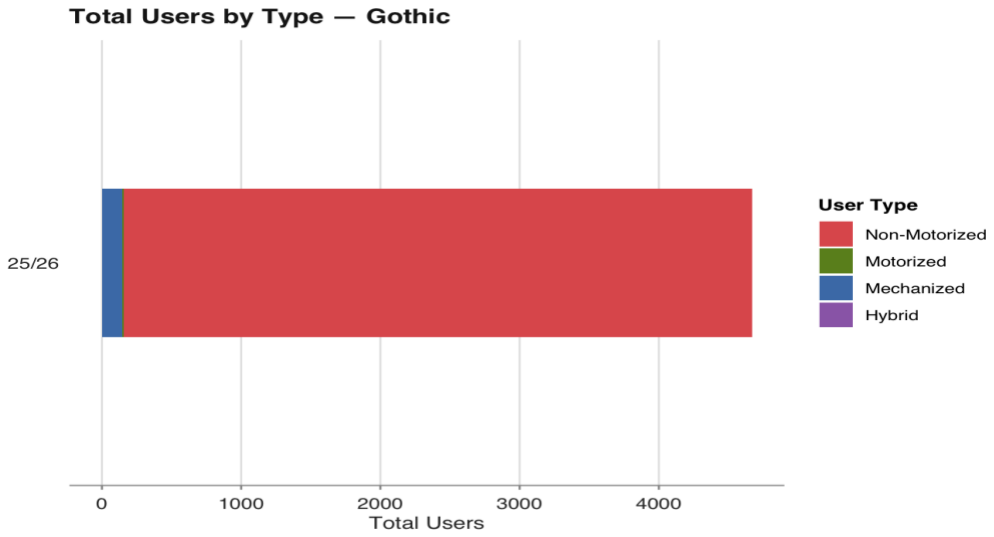



*Figure 7. Total users by type at Gothic Road, 2025/26.*

The Gothic Road user count was the second highest out of the eight remote camera locations this winter season with a total of 4,668 visitors. This represents a 2.3% increase over the 2024/25

season count of 4,565. The primary recreational use in this corridor continues to be by non-motorized users (cross-country skiers, hikers, dog walkers, backcountry skiers). Mechanized users increased from 92 to 145, while motorized users decreased from 29 to 13. The average daily user count of 44.0 represents a slight increase from 42.3 in 2024/25. Gothic Road continues to be one of the most consistently used corridors in the UGV across all uses.

## KEBLER PASS

**Total # of visitors = 3,793**

**Average # of visits per day = 35.1**

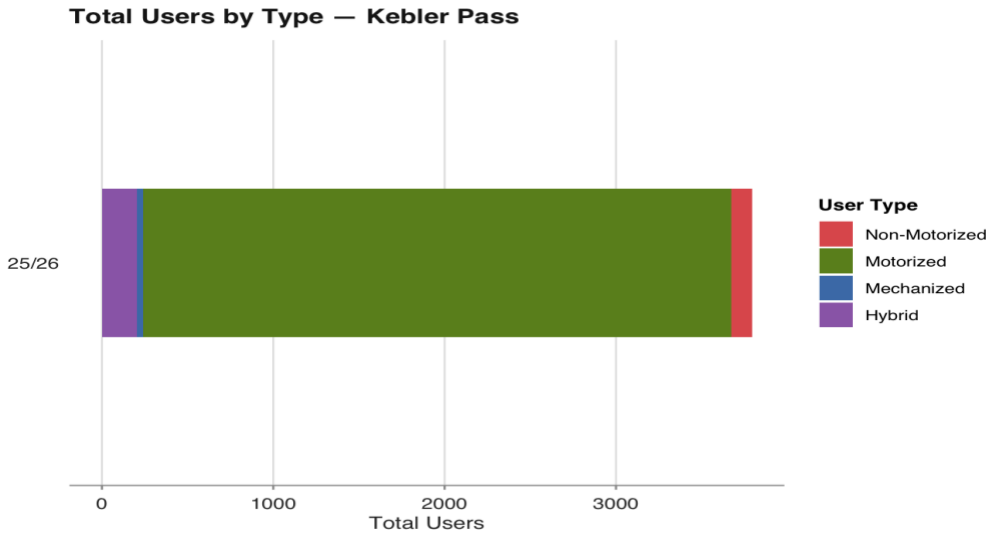



*Figure 8. Total users by type at Kebler Pass, 2025/26.*

The Kebler Pass trail camera recorded 3,793 users this winter season, a significant decrease from 9,030 in 2024/25. This decrease is likely attributable to changes in motorized use, with motorized users dropping from 8,322 to 3,435. Kebler Pass remains the primary motorized corridor in the UGV, with motorized users comprising approximately 91% of total users at this location. Hybrid users increased from 428 to 205. This trailhead location is an important hub for multiple permitted guide operations, primarily motorized, as well as individuals who live remotely in Irwin in the winter season.

## SLATE RIVER TRAILHEAD

**Total # of visitors = 2,683**

**Average # of visits per day = 24.8**

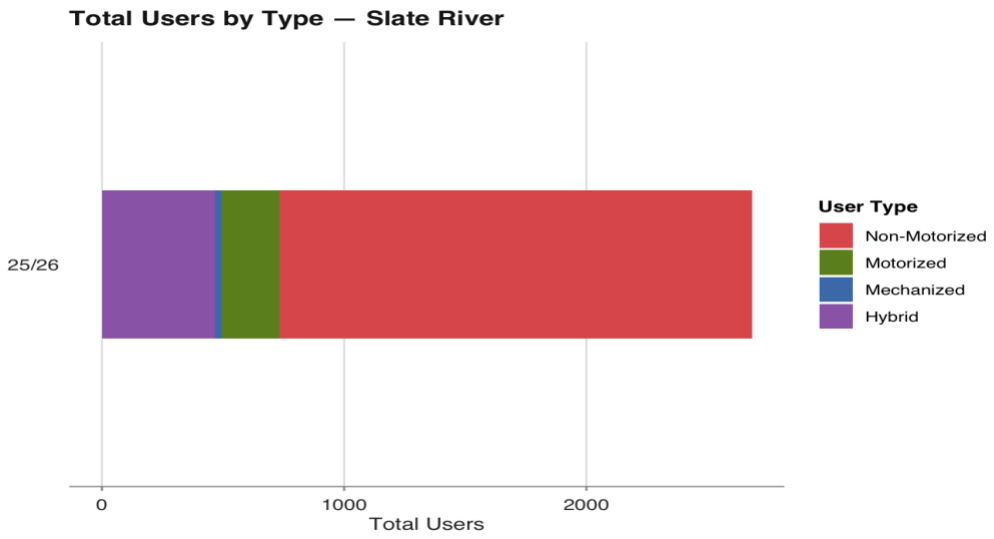



*Figure 9. Total users by type at Slate River, 2025/26.*

The Slate River remote camera recorded 2,683 users this winter season with 108 observed days and no missing data, representing a 6% increase from 2,529 in 2024/25. Hybrid users increased substantially from 489 to 466, continuing to represent a large proportion of total users at 17.4%. Non-motorized users increased from 1,949 to 1,950. Motorized users increased from 79 to 240. The lack of missing data this season, compared to 31 days in 2024/25, provides a more complete picture of use at this trailhead and likely contributes to the higher observed total.

## SNODGRASS TRAILHEAD

**Total # of visitors = 4,758**

**Average # of visits per day = 56.0**

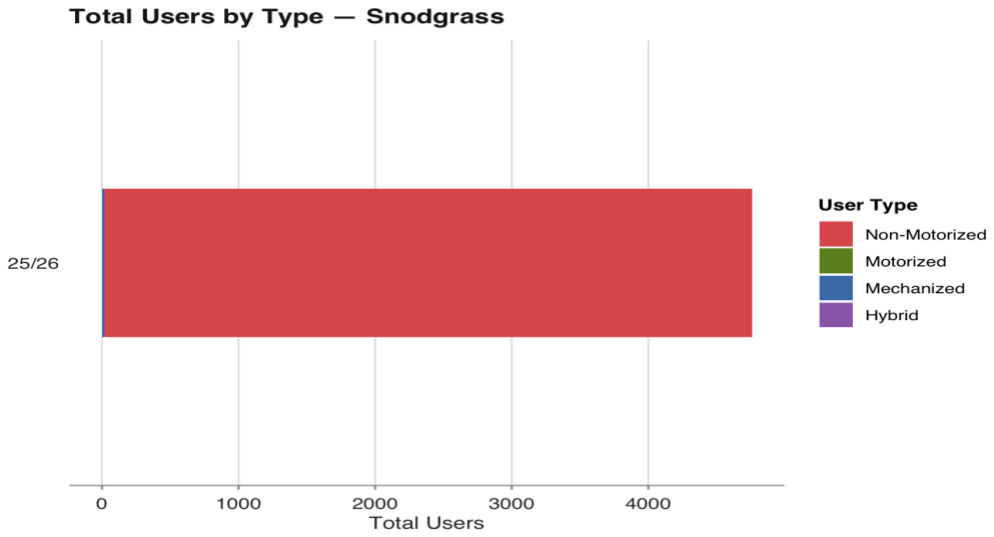



*Figure 10. Total users by type at Snodgrass Trailhead, 2025/26.*

The Snodgrass Trailhead was the most popular trailhead this season with 4,758 total users — a 52% increase from the 3,126 raw count in 2024/25. The camera had 19 days of missing data this

season mainly caused by a computer error during data transfer. With averages estimated to replace days of error, the adjusted user count would be approximately 5,820. Users at Snodgrass are comprised of approximately 99.7 percent non-motorized recreators. This trailhead had limited use by mechanized user types.

### WASHINGTON GULCH

**Total # of visitors = 1,833**

**Average # of visits per day = 22.6**

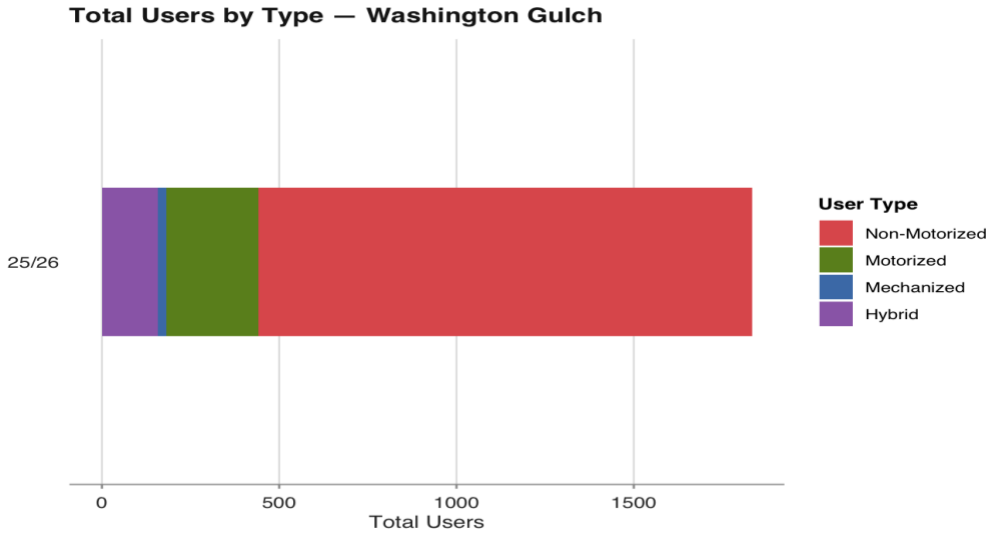



*Figure 11. Total users by type at Washington Gulch, 2025/26.*

Washington Gulch had 1,833 total users this season with 27 days of missing data, the highest among all trailheads. The 27 days of camera failure were primarily caused by camera and SD card tampering. Despite the missing data, Washington Gulch recorded a 40% decrease in total users compared to 3,046 in 2024/25. Non-motorized users comprised 75.9% of total users. Hybrid users were 158 and motorized 261. With averages estimated to replace days of error, the adjusted user count would be approximately 2,443.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, there was a 15% decrease in total recreational users in the Upper Gunnison Valley's winter season in 2025/26 compared to the 2024/25 Winter Data Collection Initiative report. Since the Winter Data Collection Initiative started in the 2017/18 winter season, there have been over 256,622 cumulative user's total. The average daily visitation for all combined trailheads for the 2025/26 winter season was 29.7 users per day. The total number of camera failure days was 53, a significant improvement compared to 122 failure days in 2024/25. The decrease in total users was driven primarily by a large reduction in motorized users at Kebler Pass, while non-motorized corridors such as Snodgrass and Gothic showed stable or increasing use.

Snodgrass Trailhead emerged as the most popular site this season based on raw data totals, a notable shift from prior seasons where Kebler Pass held the highest count. Gothic Road

maintained its position as the second most popular non-motorized corridor. The decrease in camera failure days reflects refined methodology and equipment management, though Washington Gulch continues to face challenges with human tampering.

Three key takeaways from the 2025/26 Winter Data Collection Initiative data analysis include:

- The UGV continues to have persistent and diverse winter users, with non-motorized recreation dominant at most sites while motorized use remains concentrated at Kebler Pass.
- Human tampering of camera equipment remains a challenge, particularly at Washington Gulch, and additional signage or protective measures should be considered.
- The significant reduction in Kebler Pass motorized counts warrants further investigation to determine whether this reflects a genuine behavioral shift or a data collection anomaly related to camera placement or capture speed.

Moving forward, the Winter Data Collection Initiative is set up for continued improvement in methodology each winter season. The reduced camera failure rate in 2025/26 demonstrates progress in addressing prior-year complications. Continued attention to camera settings, placement, and tamper-prevention will further strengthen the dataset year over year.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the multitude of stakeholders that all play a role in making the Winter Data Collection Initiative possible. Thank you, Western Colorado University, the Center for Public Lands, and the Gunnison Ranger District of the United States Forest Service for this opportunity to contribute to their ongoing research. Also, the Winter Data Collection sends thanks to Crested Butte Land Trust and Elk Mountain Backcountry Alliance for your support and your continued goal of making recreational opportunities more sustainable, accessible, and enjoyable. In addition to the above stakeholders, the Winter Data Collection Initiative extends its gratitude to all the community members and winter backcountry visitors who participated in the 2025/26 Gunnison Valley Winter User Survey.

Thank you to Dr. Melanie Armstrong for jumpstarting this project before your departure from the Center for the Public Lands. Thanks to our program lead Dr. Briget Eastep, research lead and statistical analysis Logan White. Much thanks to the Center for Public Lands technician Ronan Bittner and Intern Emma Pratt for all their help and accompanying us on our site visits. Thank you to all the previous research leads and assistants, and to Doug Shaw, for your work designing the original study and providing guidelines for this year's report.