



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

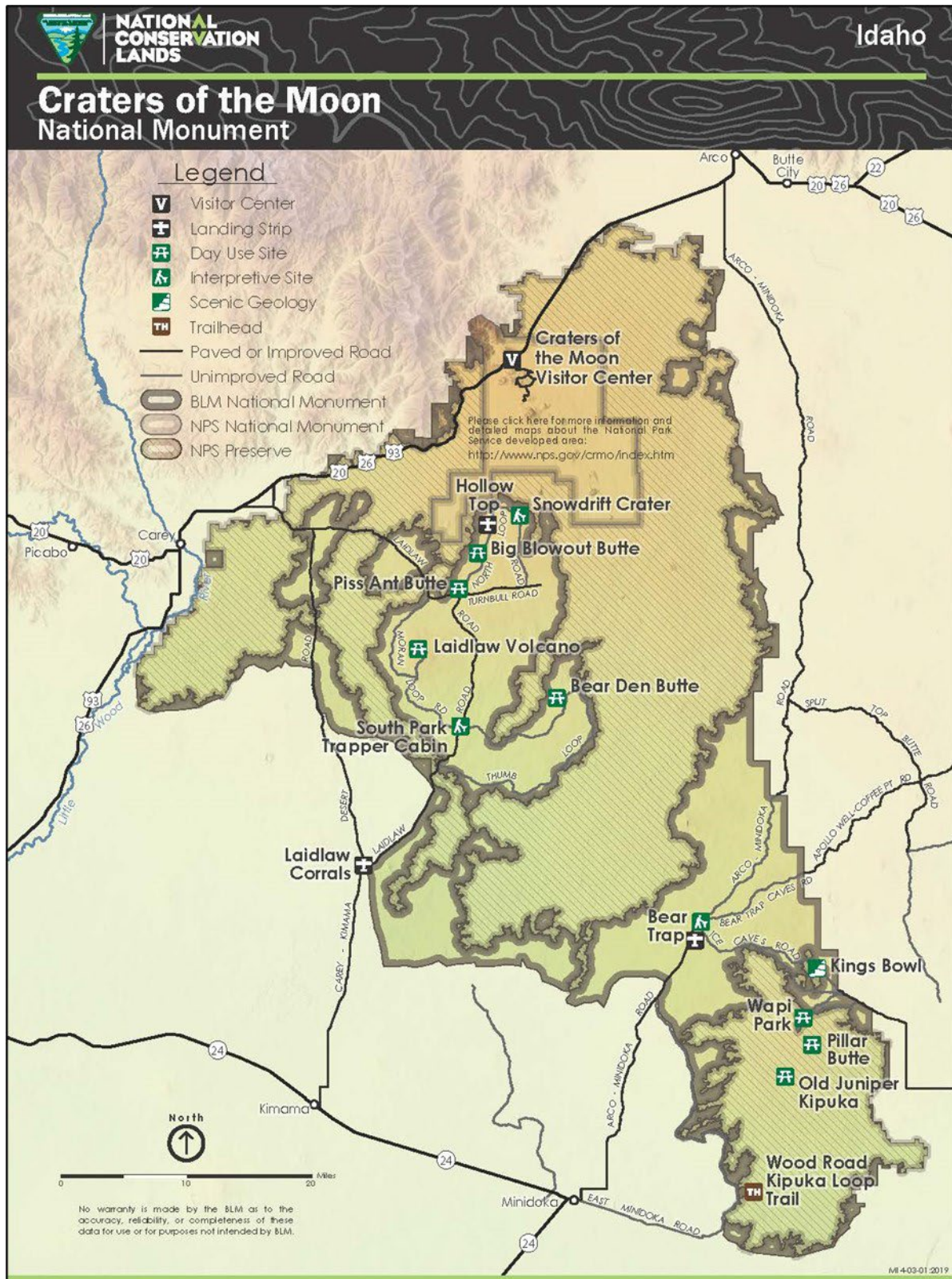
Idaho
2022: Annual Manager's Report

Craters of the Moon

National Monument and Preserve



Map



Accomplishments

It was a good year at Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve (Monument). Spring rains helped the rangelands recover from drought the year before. Several miles of the Brigham Point Road were crowned and graded in Fiscal Year 22 (FY 22), and a new metal buck and pole fence was installed to protect the riparian vegetation from livestock grazing at Carey Hot Spring. The Poison Lake livestock water pipeline installation was started. The pipeline will improve livestock distribution throughout the allotment.

To improve public safety, a new sign was developed with assistance from the National Park Service (NPS) to deter visitors from inadvertently entering the backcountry. The sign was posted at all backcountry entry points. Google Maps sometimes directs users onto primitive, unpaved routes rather than to the National Park Service visitor center.

Shoshone BLM and NPS staff jointly monitored Carey Kipuka in the spring and the Burley BLM staff monitored Big Juniper Kipuka. One of the features for which the Monument was designated, kipukas are islands of vegetation surrounded by lava flows that provide a window into the past before livestock grazing came to the Monument. Thirty-seven acres were proactively inventoried for cultural resources and two new National Register eligible sites were recorded.

Many miles of road were improved over the last few years to create fire breaks and improve fire suppression access. Rehabilitation of burned areas occurred in multiple locations including the Spud East Wildhorse (3,487 acres) chemical weed treatment and the Laidlaw Brush Experimental chemical weed treatment (1,243 acres). Additionally, 150,000 acres were flown within and adjacent to the Monument to map and inventory noxious weeds.



Challenges

Craters of the Moon National Monument faces many challenges. Invasive weeds, such as rush skeletonweed, have taken hold in the Monument and continue to spread. Filling the seasonal park ranger position for the Monument also continues to be a challenge due to pay scale and lack of affordable housing in the region.

One challenge is timely sign inventory and replacement, given the remoteness and size of the Monument. Location and directional signs are targeted by recreational shooters requiring more frequent replacement. Additionally, vandalism of Bear Trap Cave is a constant issue. Well known and easily accessed, the cave is a favorite local party spot. Monument staff have plans to address the Bear Trap Cave vandalism and replace damaged signs in FY 23.



Bear Trap Cave

Visitors

The rugged, more remote Bureau of Land management (BLM) portion of the Monument continues to see relatively few visitors. This is due to the undeveloped nature of the interior of the Monument. However, the NPS visitor center located immediately adjacent to State Highway 20 did experience an increase in visitation, similar to what many NPS units experienced in 2022. Across the US, the public sought outdoor experiences in never-before-seen numbers.



Snowdrift Crater

Partnerships

The NPS, and to a lesser extent the Craters of the Moon Natural History Association, coordinate and partner with the BLM when possible. Unfortunately, the agencies' partnership to provide education and outreach to local schools was hampered again in FY 22 by COVID-19.

The BLM also partners with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to complete randomly selected sage-grouse lek surveys every spring. However, there were no assigned lek routes in the Monument this year, so no surveys were completed in 2022.

The BLM partnered with The Nature Conservancy to apply for Land and Water Conservation Fund FY 25 Core Project funds for the potential acquisition of the Huddles Hole and Snowdrift Crater Farm properties. These private inholdings contain approximately 1,825 acres and 320 acres, respectively. If approved, acquisition is anticipated within 18 months of receiving the funds. The acquisition will provide more contiguous management of federal lands with the Monument.



Bluebird Couple at Snowdrift Crater

Science

The Craters of The Moon Fine Scale Greater Sage-grouse Habitat Assessment Framework Report was completed, assessing approximately 389,563 acres of public land that includes part of the Monument. The report determined that Greater sage-grouse habitat conditions are marginal. Across the fine-scale area anthropogenic features are present but limited. Anthropogenic disturbances are predominately located in the southern portion of the analysis unit due to proximity to agriculture and urban interface. Overall, anthropogenic disturbance is not widespread or dense. There is overlap of seasonal use areas, but the extent of sagebrush cover is limited across the fine scale area due to wildfire. Wildland fire has reduced the extent and connectivity of seasonal habitats. Early successional grassland habitats are dominant and may contribute to high-risk movements and mortality of sage grouse. Currently most leks have not been abandoned, however the decreasing sagebrush cover is likely trending toward unsuitable thresholds.

Shoshone Field Office botanist developed a multi-year project with the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center to study forb diversity in crested wheatgrass stands. Field work was conducted in FY 22.

Staff from the Institute for Applied Ecology visited Laidlaw Park and the east side of the main lava flow in June to survey for a rare phacelia, which they were able to locate. The BLM botanist will continue to monitor these populations.

The Twin Falls District BLM archaeologist completed a comprehensive Class I Cultural Resources Overview, which included the Monument. The resulting document will guide cultural resource management for the entire Twin Falls District for many years to come.



Juniper Kipuka

Climate Impacts

Southern Idaho, including the Monument, experienced drought in 2021. Many of the ephemeral ponds across the Monument dried up very early due to scant snowfall and lack of spring rains. Some areas in the southern Monument were rested from grazing in 2022 to aid in plant recovery. If the range readiness criteria are met this spring, grazing should be able to resume in FY 23.

Invasive weed populations are increasing overall in the Monument. This is evident from herbicide weed treatment data points and weed inventories that occur within the Monument each year. Rush skeleton weed is expanding so rapidly that it is beyond the capacity of ground treatments utilizing UTV and truck mounted sprayers to control. Large wildfires over the last decade have cleared much of the native sagebrush steppe of plants that would have offered some protection from weeds.



Monkey Flower at Carey Kipuka

Climate Resiliency

The BLM is implementing proactive measures to create and maintain a climate resilient landscape. In 2022, several miles of road were upgraded to improve fire response times when wildfire strikes the southern end of the Monument. BLM continues to employ chemical treatments on post-fire rehabilitation seedings, which allows the seeding to become established and better able to withstand weed invasions. BLM also partnered with Pheasants Forever in the Fall of 2022 to plant sagebrush seedlings to reestablish the healthy sagebrush steppe which is one of the reasons the Monument was designated. On the southern end of the Monument in the Burley Field Office, 2,547 acres of Split Butte North restoration area were drill seeded, 1,997 acres were aerially seeded with sagebrush and 3,993 acres were aerially seeded with grass.



Road work on the Arco-Minidoka Road

Events

While most visits to the interior of the Monument are self-directed, BLM staff did lead a group of 10 photographers from the Magic Valley Camera Club on a tour in May 2022. The group visited Snowdrift Crater and Big Blowout Butte in Laidlaw Park, as well as Little Park and Paddelford Flat kipukas. The group was able to photograph a wide variety of geologic features, vegetation, and fauna.



Big Blowout Butte in Laidlaw Park

Words from the staff

The Institute for Applied Ecology was contracted by BLM to conduct three surveys for the Special Status plant Hidden Phacelia (*Phacelia inconspicua*) in the Monument. A total of 200 acres were traversed in the hunt for this small annual wildflower where it had previously been found. Hidden phacelia is very rare and has only ever been documented in seven isolated locations between Idaho and Nevada. This delicate species is at high risk of decline, particularly due to increasing cheatgrass invasion and drought. Its population numbers fluctuate year to year, making it challenging to track. The most recent surveys in 2018 were unable to find plants in these population areas; however, the 2022 surveys were successful in finding plants at two of the three locations. An especially wet spring lent itself to excellent growing conditions for this species this year. Population 1 was in good condition in a native plant dominated community, with 131 plants counted. Population 2 was in fair condition with 19 plants counted within a smaller area than previously documented. The third area surveyed had a mostly intact native plant community, although some cheatgrass was present. Nonetheless, no hidden phacelia plants could be found there. Finding this elusive species was a highlight for the Botany program here this year. ~ Samantha Seabrook-Sturgis, Shoshone FO botanist



Hidden Phacelia



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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mypubliclands/albums/72157633600345803/>

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