



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Montana
2022: Annual Manager's Report

Upper Missouri River Breaks

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (Monument) celebrated a year full of accomplishments. Below is a list highlighting a few noteworthy happenings as well as a few accomplishments described in greater detail.

- Kipp Recreation Area – Hazard Tree Removal Contract awarded with GAOA funding – to be completed in 2023.
- Monument Transportation Map finalized and made available to the public.
- Over 10,000 acres of cultural resources inventory – including 2,742 acres of proactive inventory (Sec. 110) within Stafford WSA.
- Habitat restoration at Wood Bottom - 265 Acres of native grasses planted.
- Grizzly bear conservation - Section 7 consultation completed for multiple commercial guided activities in the Missouri River corridor.
- Sage-grouse habitat enhancement -1,069 acres of Greater-sage grouse habitat improved through vegetation treatments.
- Water conservation rain barrel workshop at Interpretive Center.
- Monument Manager presented at Montana History Conference
- Reed Coulee Stream Restoration- Low-tech process-based restoration

During the Summer of 2022, an Outcomes Focused Management (OFM) study was conducted at sites along the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River as well as five focus groups in gateway communities, in partnership with the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. The purpose of the OFM study is to further understand the experience and benefits associated with a quality recreation opportunity on the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River (UMNWSR). This effort was fundamental to moving forward with updating the Comprehensive River Management Plan for the UMNWSR. The OFM study will provide valuable information for the updated plan as well as for general visitor management in the Monument, that will guide informed management direction and decisions for recreation use on the river.

With public support and the Upper Missouri River Breaks Airstrip Maintenance Environmental Assessment, the use of mechanized equipment was approved to remove encroaching vegetation and smooth surfaces on the 6 remote airstrips recognized in the UMRBNM Resource Management Plan. Of the 6 airstrips, 2 received needed maintenance in 2022 to increase safety and preserve recreational opportunities for backcountry pilots. Fuels staff utilized a tracked skid-steer with a masticating head to treat encroaching woody debris, maintaining the existing footprint at both Woodhawk and Knox Ridge airstrips. More maintenance activities are planned for 2023.



Challenges

Along with the accomplishments and successes came significant challenges. Just as we started to catch momentum after being nearly fully staffed in 2021, changes came quickly. During the course of the year, five different permanent positions were vacated as personnel left for new opportunities both within and outside the Agency. The Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center in Fort Benton felt the brunt of this pain as the information specialist, park ranger, park ranger (interpretation) and outdoor recreation planner were all vacated by mid-year. Despite ending the year with only one permanent employee on location, a law enforcement officer, operations at the Interpretive Center persisted, albeit under adjusted hours and days of operation. The Monument was able to utilize the Experienced Services Program to continue operations at the Interpretive Center. The years of knowledge and expertise provided by the senior members greatly benefited our staff.

The career-seasonal Range Technician, recently hired in Lewistown, was not in the position long before accepting a permanent, full-time range management specialist position elsewhere. No progress was made in 2022 to fill any of these vacant positions. With seven of 12 positions vacant within the Monument, and summer fast approaching, 2023 is expected to be a greater challenge yet. Our ability to be successful in meeting administration priorities is greatly hindered when operating with limited staff.

Recruitment and retention of seasonal staff continues to be problematic. Four seasonal employees were hired to support the Interpretive Center and recreation program with two leaving earlier than anticipated. The invasive species program typically hires two to five seasonals each field season but were only successful in hiring one individual. During the interview process, the question of government provided housing is more routinely asked

than in previous years. The Monument has no government housing to offer to seasonals, which appears to be limiting recruitment success.

For another year, drought had a significant impact on the health of riparian areas and made accessing areas by motorboat on the Missouri River difficult, if not impossible. Low water levels in the Missouri River limited the amount of administrative work staff could complete including post-grazing monitoring, project maintenance, invasive plant treatments and wildlife monitoring. Additionally, drought precluded the possibility of prescribed fires and challenged vegetation monitoring as plants either failed to develop or senesced quite early in the field season.

Visitors

The Monument's visitor numbers continue to be high but are trending back toward pre-pandemic levels. The most visible and popular activity in the Monument continues to be visiting the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River. In 2022, our BLM managed boat launch sites experienced 7,485 visits, according to data collected from fee envelopes at each site. Outfitters and guides account for nearly half of the visitation on the river. Total visitation to the Monument was 29,098 people, including day-use river floating, fishing from shore, visits to the Interpretive Center, and those enjoying scenic drives through the Backcountry Byway. This is slightly down from the 34,995 people that visited the Monument during the previous year. Despite our adjusted hours of operation, the Interpretive Center received 3,948 visitors, a number quite similar to the previous year.



Partnerships

Students from Fort Benton High School volunteered to help pull weeds, trim grasses, and remove debris from the decorative gravel beds at the Interpretive Center. The effort was part of the school's annual Longhorn Day, during which students help with clean-up projects around the Fort Benton community.



In partnership with NorthWestern Energy, The National Wild Turkey Federation, and local landowners, a riparian exclosure was constructed on BLM lands near Evans Bend to promote and protect the existing growth of cottonwood and chokecherry trees. The effort helps remedy impacts of a 2015 wildfire that consumed nearly 40 acres of mature cottonwood trees. NorthWestern Energy has also contracted with the University of Montana to conduct avian point counts within and adjacent to the exclosure.

Once again, the Monument partnered with the Friends of the Missouri Breaks to complete a cottonwood tree planting event in March at Hole-In-The-Wall campground and completed an additional temporary exclosure of naturally regenerating cottonwoods in the same area. Hole-in-the-Wall is one of the few naturally regenerating cottonwood galleries along this stretch of the Missouri River and has been significantly impacted by ice damage and beavers. Thirty-eight awesome volunteers helped plant the 76 new cottonwoods. More than 100 naturally regenerated cottonwoods were protected in the temporary exclosures.

The invasive species program assists and participates in cooperative efforts with local county weed districts. Although no official partnerships are documented, Monument staff are often consulted on projects planned by weed districts and the expertise of

county staff is often solicited by BLM to identify and address invasive species issues. In addition, our invasive species crew participates in annual invasive species crew training offered by the local weed districts. These trainings are attended by county, federal, state, and private entities.

Science

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Services (ARS) from their laboratory located in Sidney, Montana, completed the last year of monitoring leafy spurge biological control release sites, two of which are on the Monument at Evans Bend Island and Black Bluffs. This research is part of a regionwide assessment to help determine where and why biological control insects have been successful in some areas while less effective in others. Natural Resource Specialist, Kenny Kever, assisted ARS with project data collection and site selection. Results of the study are anticipated to be published in 2023.



The Monument's biologist continues to collaborate with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) to improve citizen-science opportunities. In a unique partnership with the Montana Wilderness School, a non-profit outdoor education organization providing multi-week wilderness expeditions for youth, more than 4,000 data points were collected on radio-tagged pallid sturgeon in the Upper Missouri River as these youth canoed the river. With the aid of a BLM-provided radio telemetry unit, the group helped record important data on pallid sturgeon, a biological object of the Monument, as they floated the river. At the end of the summer float season, data was compiled and submitted to Montana FWP for analysis.

Dr. Ray Rogers of Macalester College continued his 25-plus year relationship with the Missouri Breaks. In 2022 Macalester College professors, in partnership with the Keck Geology Consortium, brought students from across the United States and Puerto Rico to conduct research in the Monument. The Keck Geology Consortium is focused on enriching undergraduate education through the development of high-quality research experiences. Each summer, with support from the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Consortium offers a Research Experiences for Undergraduates program to engage undergraduate students in multi-week field and laboratory research projects in the earth sciences. Upon completion of the field experience, two student papers were presented at the 2022 Geological Society of Americas annual meeting.

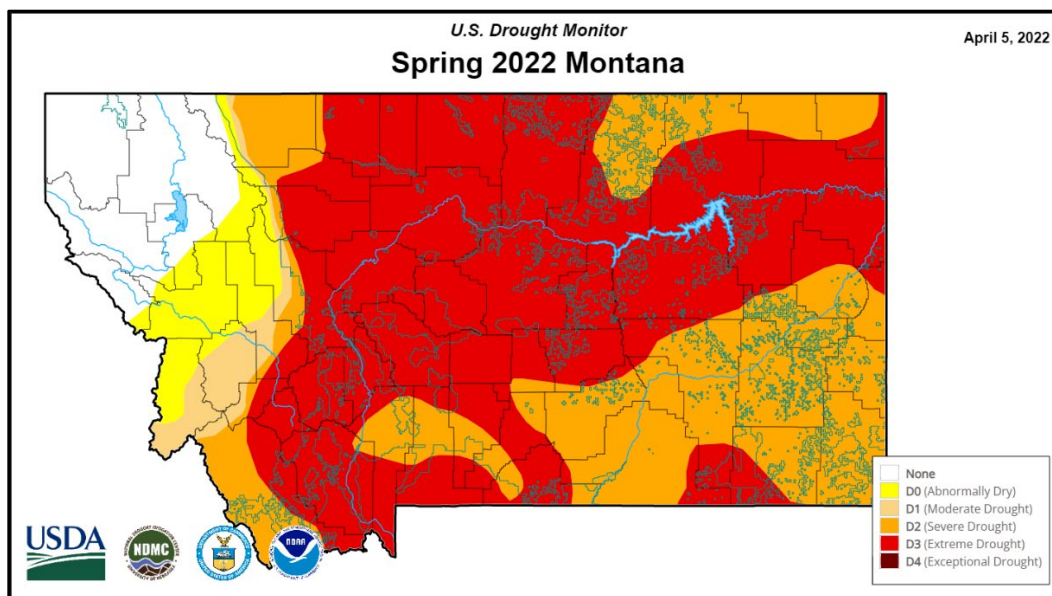


The students brought a diversity of experiences to this remote stretch of Montana, while most had never before seen or experienced the “Breaks” or its clay gumbo soils. Notably, more than one of the students shared that they were first-generation college students, and were greatly appreciative for this unique, field environment learning opportunity as part of their higher education.

Climate Impacts

The Monument continued to experience persistent drought conditions in 2022 with the entire Monument in severe or extreme drought. Coal Banks boat ramp, generally the busiest river launch site in the Monument, became inoperable for motorboat launches throughout the season because of low water conditions. By mid-summer, the ramp proved to be inadequate for canoe launches as well. Recreational users were forced to adjust, utilizing dispersed launch sites further upstream.

Grazing permittees, too, were asked to adjust because of persistent drought. With reduced forage production in 2021, little residual forage going into 2022, and limited fall moisture, a 30% Animal Unit Month (AUM) reduction was implemented south of the Missouri River, as was a 25% reduction in AUMs north of the river (most allotments) in an effort to avoid long-term degradation of public rangelands. These voluntary reductions were in the form of reduced grazing seasons, reduced animal numbers, permittees taking non-use, or a combination. Despite prolonged and extreme drought, the Monument had a below-average fire season with only three fires recorded, totalling less than 1-acre.



The Antelope Creek Prescribed Burn, originally slated to occur in 2022, was postponed due to persistent drought. Fuels specialists, who had been systematically tracking fuel moistures in preparation for this prescribed burn for nearly a year, cautioned that the objectives identified within the project burn plan may be difficult to achieve based upon low fuel moistures within both live and dead woody materials.

Climate Resiliency

BLM Hydrologist Bonny Richard, assisted by project partners at The Nature Conservancy and National Wildlife Federation (NWF), successfully completed Phase II of our Reed Coulee stream restoration project. This project demonstrates the uses of low-tech, process-based restoration techniques in headwater streams within the Missouri Breaks. Phase II of the restoration project stabilized more than five large headcuts that were threatening upstream meadow habitat. Additionally, there were 19 beaver dam analogue structures constructed to capture sediment and help maintain water on the landscape longer into the growing season. As a result of this project, close to a mile of important stream habitat will be restored. Reed Coulee will be used as a demonstration site to showcase modified low-tech restoration techniques in prairie systems with dispersal clays. The NWF partnered with the United States Geological Services and University of Montana to research impacts of these projects to promote a better understanding of the systems and processes. This restoration project has sparked conversations with local landowners curious about the project. This is just the beginning of a much broader restoration effort across central Montana and the Monument to mimic beaver activity across watersheds, leading to increased sediment trapping, improved riparian habitats, and increased climate change resiliency.



Environmental/Social Justice

Plans were made in late 2021 to transport the Blackfeet Tribal Historic Preservation Officer and tribal elders to areas of expressed interest within the river corridor. These individuals were interested in collecting bi-valve shells to be used in ceremonial sweats. Unfortunately, low water levels prevented us from being able to safely navigate the river in 2022.

A deferred maintenance funding request was made to enhance the existing trail network at the Interpretive Center. If provided, those additional funds will improve visitor accessibility by widening the trails and smoothing surfaces.

Events

Fourth graders from Shelby, Montana visited the Interpretive Center for a class trip to learn about the history of steamboats on the Upper Missouri River. They also explored the unique livelihoods of “woodhawks,” who made a living selling cord wood to the steamboat crews.



North Central Montana District Archeologist Josh Chase led an archeological excavation inside the footprint of the original Fort Benton, a site situated along the banks of the UMNWSR. The two-phase excavation explored the Engages’ Quarters, which housed workers and shops during the fort’s fur-trading era. BLM staff teamed up with the River and Plains Society, the Montana State Historic Preservation Office, and other volunteers to sift through mounds of dirt. Artifacts found were carefully packaged with field notes

regarding the section and depth at which they were discovered to provide important information for researchers.

Friends of the Missouri Breaks hosted a first-ever “Barrels for the Breaks” rain barrel workshop at the Interpretive Center. Participants came out to learn about the water conservation and watershed health benefits of using a rain barrel while creating their very own to take home.



BLM, Friends of the Missouri Breaks, and volunteers took to the river during National Trails Day to collect waste along the busy White Cliffs stretch of the Monument. Several bags of trash were gathered and disposed of in an effort to “Bash Trash” in the Breaks.

Moving Forward in 2023

A new position, interpretive center manager, was approved within our table of organization. We are encouraged this position will help provide leadership and management of daily activities at the Interpretive Center, while tackling facilities management, deferred maintenance, administrative workloads, and personnel actions. This new position will shoulder many responsibilities previously juggled by the sole outdoor recreation planner (ORP), allowing the ORP to now focus on recreation management. Additionally, the interpretive park ranger position was reclassified to also provide youth education and outreach as part of their duties. We are excited about being able to reach a broader audience as we deliver our outreach and education to students, partners, and the interested public.

While this past year has been one of our most challenging, we are optimistic of the opportunities that lie ahead. With nearly 60 percent of our positions vacant, we hope to assemble a team with the right skills, experiences, and personality to be successful moving forward.





NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument

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The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument contains a spectacular array of biological, geological, and historical objects of interest. Located in central Montana between Fort Benton, the nation's inmost port, east to the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, the Monument spans 149 miles of the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River, over 377,000 acres of the adjacent Breaks country, and portions of Arrow Creek, Cow Creek, and the Judith River. The landscape has remained largely unchanged since Meriwether Lewis and William Clark traveled through it on their epic journey with the Corps of Discovery over 200 years ago.