



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

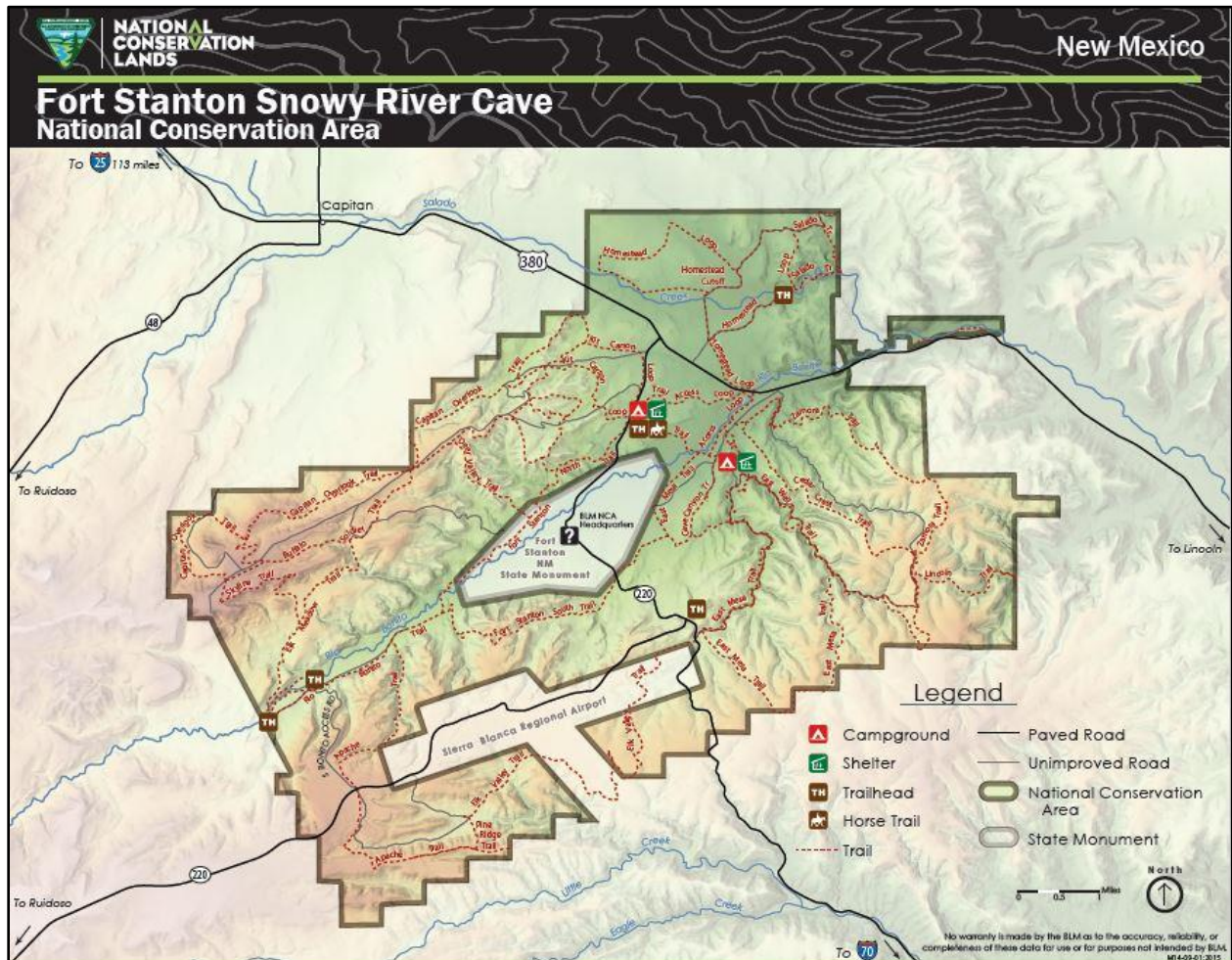
New Mexico  
2021: Annual Manager's Report

# Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave

## National Conservation Area



# Map



# Accomplishments

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In the Fall of 2021, Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area (Conservation Area) completed the construction phase of the expansion and upgrade of the Rob Jagers Campground. The upgrades include enhanced electrical and water lines, additional split rail fence around the new group shelter and an upgraded dump station with a larger tank with a new wash tower.

The Conservation Area hosted two National Public Lands Day events this year. One event was BLM staff working with volunteers to stain the new group shelter and fence at Rob Jagers Campground. The second event involved a team of cavers who made a trip into Fort Stanton Cave and worked on a formation restoration project.

The Conservation Area hired two outdoor recreation planners to oversee surface recreation. Staff completed evaluation of the entire 72-mile trail system and worked on reroutes that will help make the trail system more sustainable. The Field Office Fire program conducted prescribed burn operations on 1500 acres and mechanically thinned 230 acres.

BLM increased yearly entries into Fort Stanton Cave to 275 in 2021, and the increase is expected to continue in 2023 to 350. The Conservation Area was given approved access to exploration beyond the boundary. Trips will start in 2022 and will expand the understanding of the extent of the cave system.

In 2021, the Conservation Area used partners for the following projects: research continued with US Fish and Wildlife Service and Texas Tech University on migratory birds; the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project and other cave survey teams mapped more of the cave; the PLIA (Public Lands Interpretive Association) worked with BLM to develop a cave educational program which includes an in-classroom component, a videogame module, and a field trip into the cave; updated the cave MOU between the USFS Smokey Bear District and the RFO; and worked with State of New Mexico Historic Sites to build a spur trail on State land that connects to BLM trails.



1 Rob Jagers Campground

# Challenges

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The bat populations in the Fort Stanton Cave (Cave) are potentially at risk from White Nose Syndrome, a fungal infection that has caused devastating declines of bat populations in other locations. The threat of introduction of the fungus by people was addressed by restricting recreational access from the cave. Minimal cave entry was allowed only for scientific and management purposes. In 2021, all entries into the Cave required dedicated cave gear to reduce potential introduction of the virus to the cave system. Conservation Area management has taken measures to prevent Cave break-ins and vandalism which could harm biological values and cave formations. However, with portions of the Cave outside the Conservation Area, there are concerns about how to protect the whole cave system. A potential future stressor to the Cave's biological and physical features could potentially come from outside the Conservation Area.

Stressors on non-cave specific natural resources result mostly from increased recreation use. Bonito Lake dam construction is planned to be finished within the next couple years. Once this is complete, and water is diverted back into the lake, this will affect the amount water coming down the Rio Bonito which flows through the Conservation Area.



2 Researcher weighing bat

# Visitors

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During the pandemic, the Conservation Area saw a substantial increase in dispersed camping and recreation. The campground was closed due to construction, and options were limited for the public. The visitation increased litter, illegal dumping, user created roads and new campsites. Staff have worked to mitigate the impacts of increased use. Reopening Rob Jagers Campground is expected to alleviate some of the pressure from increased use.

The Conservation Area continues to be a premier destination for equestrian riders. In 2022, the Conservation Area is hosting one of the largest memorial rides, with over 200 riders, in the Conservation Area's history. In 2021, BLM's New Mexico Conservation Corp intern rode and evaluated the maintenance need for the Conservation Area's 70+ miles of trails.



# Partnerships

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Partnerships are very important to the Roswell Field Office and the management of the Conservation Area. Partnerships are how the Conservation Area is successful in carrying out its accomplishments. The partnership with Conservation Corps New Mexico has been a huge help with the assistance of interns. The Upper Hondo Soil & Water Conservation Area has helped with multiple projects including thinning vegetation, and eradicating non-native, invasive vegetation. American Endurance Riders and Backcountry Horsemen continue to help monitor and maintain Conservation Area's trails.

The assistance agreement with the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project has resulted in cave displays, virtual cave tours, and new science research. Research scientists have provided volunteers in climatology, bat census, geomicrobiology, cave sedimentation and White Nose Syndrome monitoring. AmeriCorps/EcoServants youth trail crews have provided trail construction and maintenance. Camp hosts are crucial to the success and providing visitor services in the campgrounds.

Continued research with US Fish and Wildlife Service and Texas Tech University will help monitor the effects of the vegetation thinning on migratory birds. In collaboration with the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project and other cave survey teams, 0.5 miles of new passage was mapped in the Snowy River Cave Complex in FY 2021. The Cave is now the 10<sup>th</sup> longest cave in the USA, and the 44<sup>th</sup> longest in the world. Yearly entries to Fort Stanton Cave increased to 275 and will be increased to 350 in 2023. BLM approved a new assistance agreement with PLIA to develop a cave educational program for 7<sup>th</sup> graders in Lincoln County and Mescalero Middle schools.



3 Volunteers in the Conservation Area

# Science

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The Conservation Area continues to host scientific research on both the Area's surface and in the Cave. On the surface BLM (with partners Texas Tech University, New Mexico State University, and the Fish and Wildlife Service) is in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of an 8-year study on the effects Piñon and Juniper thinning projects has on migratory birds. Below the surface, there are many on-going research projects. The list includes: Toxicological Study on the Effects of Fluorescent Groundwater Tracing Dyes on Cave Bacteria; studying the geochemistry of the hydrologic system to investigate the source water for the cave; paleo climate, Composition and Metabolic Activity of Microbial Communities; Clastic Sediment Study and *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*; and White Nose Syndrome testing.



4 Cave researchers

# Climate Impacts

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The Conservation Area is holding steady with the changing climate. It is noticeably warmer and dryer, with more extreme weather events. For now, stream flows seem to be stable within the cave and in the Rio Bonito. There is not much snowpack on Sierra Blanca Mountain this year. Last year the Conservation Area received record rain fall amounts, and record flood events along the Rio Bonito.



5 Rio Bonito



# Climate Resiliency

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The Conservation Area is proving to be resilient to climate change. All vegetative and wildlife species are accounted for and in a healthy condition. Preventative fuels treatments, stream restoration projects and prescribed fire are helping maintain a healthy eco-system.



6 Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave NCA

# Social and Environmental Justice

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The Conservation Area was an example of the need for social and environmental justice during the difficult times in the pandemic. Visitors realized the environmental and mental benefits of recreating in the Conservation Area. The Field Office strives to treat all people in a fair, meaningful and equitable manner.



7 Cave researchers

## Events

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Numerous events are hosted throughout the Conservation Area during the year. Events took place in campground facilities and throughout the Conservation Area. Annually, the Conservation Area hosts a large equestrian endurance ride. Other events include 3D archery shoots, March on Rome, and Civil War reenactments. People enjoy hunting and camping on the NCA throughout the year during game seasons.



8 Equestrian event in the Conservation Area

## Words from the staff

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Roswell Field Office is proud to manage the Conservation Area, work with the neighboring communities and host the visitors' experience. Each year BLM strives to improve the Conservation Area's ecological, biological, and physical features as well as increase the publics' (and the javelina's) satisfaction every year.



9 Javelina running in the Conservation Area



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### National Conservation Area

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