

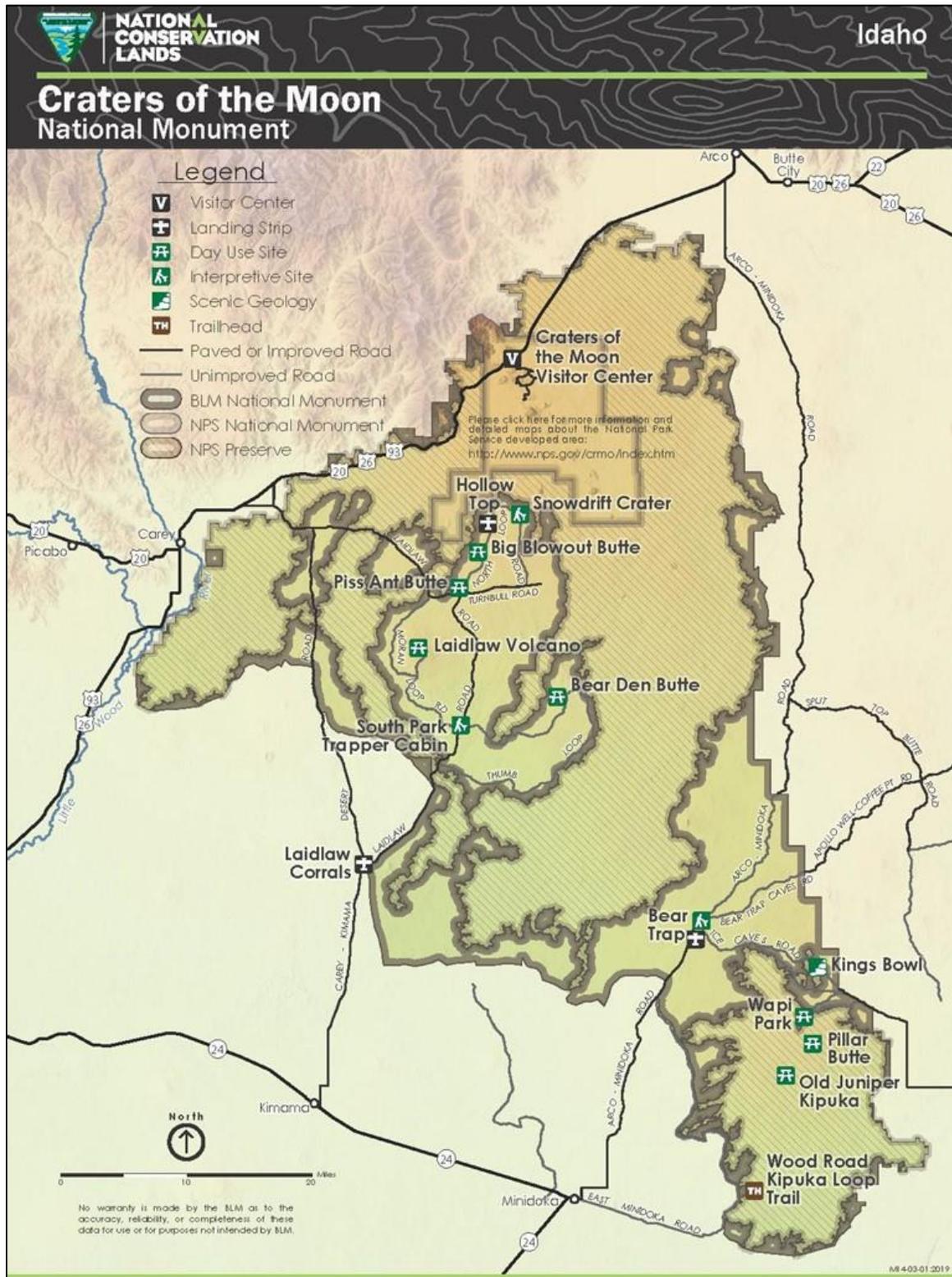
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Idaho
2021: Annual Manager's Report

Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve



Map



Accomplishments

Thirty-three miles of road have been improved on the southeast end of the Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve (hereafter the Monument), creating a fire break as well as good access for fire suppression efforts when the next wildfire occurs. Another 14 miles of the Brigham Point Road is planned to be crowned and graded in FY22.

Visual simulations were conducted in Laidlaw Park to determine if there would be a visual impact from the proposed Lava Ridge Wind Farm, located south of the Monument. The findings suggest that the topography would shield the Monument area from a direct line of sight from the proposed wind turbines.

Nine populations of the Special Status Plant species Picabo milkvetch were surveyed by a contracted crew. Picabo milkvetch is endemic to the Monument and the surrounding area in the Shoshone Field Office (hereafter the Field Office). These populations had last been surveyed 17-27 years ago. The 2021 surveys identified one population with a stable trend, one with a positive trend, four with a negative trend, and three with an unknown trend due to ambiguous initial surveys. Each population was being negatively impacted by non-native species and other disturbances, such as wildland fire and livestock grazing. The survey results highlighted opportunities for future restoration work as well as the need for more frequent monitoring.

Fire rehab work accomplished included the Split Butte North Drill Seed/aerial grass, forb, and brush seeding (3,993 acres), the Spud Butte chemical weed treatment (3,427 acres), and the Laidlaw Brush Experimental chemical weed treatment (1,243 acres).

During the 2021 field season, monitoring data for the Minidoka Allotment was collected as a continuation of efforts started in 2020. In the fall of 2021, analysis of the collected data was started as well as early development of the Rangeland Health Assessment (RHA).



Challenges

Invasive weeds, such as rush skeletonweed, have become established in the Monument and are expanding across the landscape, despite efforts to control spread. Drought and large areas that have burned in recent years have made it easier for invasive weeds to get a foothold in what was once a vast sagebrush steppe landscape.

Covid-19 has continued to severely limit the BLM's ability to conduct public events, outreach, and inventory caves for bat species and to monitor their health.

Filling seasonal park ranger positions, as well as other positions in the Field Office, continues to be a challenge due to vacancies in Idaho BLM Human Resources. Because of the lower grade of the Park Ranger position, it has been difficult to find applicants and once hired, it's hard for them to find affordable housing. BLM has been able to offer housing in a BLM Fire Station, but that is not a long-term solution.

The Field Office has received several applications for wind and solar development outside the Monument, some of them quite large. The Lava Ridge Wind Farm EIS is underway and has created a significant workload for the Monument shared staff. This, paired with vacancies has resulted in an impact on Monument unit accomplishments. While not a challenge, the potential for increased renewable energy development in the Field Office makes the Monument an important refuge for sage-grouse and big game, and as a preserve for sagebrush steppe.



Visitors

Across the United States, the public sought outdoor experiences in record numbers, likely due to Covid-19. The National Park Service (NPS) visitor center on State Highway 20 experienced an increase in visitation compared to previous years, similar to other NPS units in 2021. The rugged, more remote BLM portion of Monument saw fewer visitors in 2021 compared to other parts of the Monument, which is likely due to the undeveloped nature of the interior of the Monument.



Partnerships

The Monument partnered with the NPS, the Craters of the Moon Natural History Association, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and the Intermountain Bird Observatory in 2021. The NPS and Craters of the Moon Natural History Association provided education and outreach to local schools but was limited in 2021 by Covid-19 restrictions. The BLM was able to provide a park ranger for part of the summer season to give interpretive presentations at the NPS visitor center.

The BLM partnered 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 sage-grouse surveys were completed in 2021.

The BLM collaborated with the Intermountain Bird Observatory to conduct avian point count surveys to identify density estimates and trends in relative abundance of avian species, including special status species. A total of 11 point counts were completed in the Monument in 2021. This data helps inform baseline resource and habitat conditions within the Monument.



Science

Dr. David Beyers of Utah State University completed his analysis of bison remains from Bison Knee Cave in the Monument. Amy Commendador, of Idaho State University, completed her project on climate change modeling for the Holocene Period by analyzing microfaunal remains collected from Dot Cave in the Monument.

The Field Office botanist is developing a project with the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center to study forb diversity in crested wheatgrass stands. Field work is anticipated in Fiscal Year 2022.

The BLM provided a letter of support to a Boise State University geoscience professor in his efforts to obtain NASA grant funding for a project titled “Automating Mobile Geophysical Sounding for Planetary Exploration.” If funded, the Planetary Science Institute and Boise State University would conduct non-invasive seismic and ground penetrating radar on cave sites within and adjacent to the Monument.

The BLM Twin Falls District is currently contracting for a Class I Cultural Resources Overview, which will include the Monument. The resulting document will guide cultural resource management for the entire BLM District and is due for completion in Fiscal Year 2022.



Climate Impacts

All of southern Idaho, including the Monument, experienced drought in 2021. Many of the ephemeral ponds across the Monument dried up very early due to limited snowfall and lack of spring rains. Livestock grazing operations on BLM-managed lands were constrained due to drought. Several pastures in the southern Monument will be rested from grazing in 2022 to aid in plant recovery.

Overall, invasive weed populations are increasing in the Monument. This was determined 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 weed treatments utilizing Utility Terrain Vehicles (UTV) and truck mounted sprayers. Wildfires occurring over the last twenty years have also contributed to reduced native sagebrush steppe plants and increased weeds.



Climate Resiliency

Wildfires have always occurred within the Monument due to the weather patterns and dry lightning, but the severity and size of the fires in the last twenty years has increased. Numerous fires have removed large areas of existing sagebrush since the Monument was first expanded in 2000. An effort to improve the main transportation system has been ongoing in recent years to create more fire breaks across the Monument. In 2021, a total of \$796,163.00 was available to improve 33 miles of road on the southeast side of the Monument. The result will be faster response times to wildfires in the southeastern Monument.



Events

Covid-19 severely reduced planned public events within the Monument in 2021. The BLM hired a temporary park ranger for the summer season who worked with the staff at the NPS Monument visitor center to provide public outreach for part of the summer. Local Covid-19 cases increased later in August and September, so public events at the NPS visitor center were subsequently canceled. The winter snowshoe treks BLM would normally support in the NPS portion of the Monument were not held in 2021 due to Covid-19 concerns.



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<https://www.blm.gov/visit/craters-moon-national-monument>

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