



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Colorado
2021: Annual Manager's Report

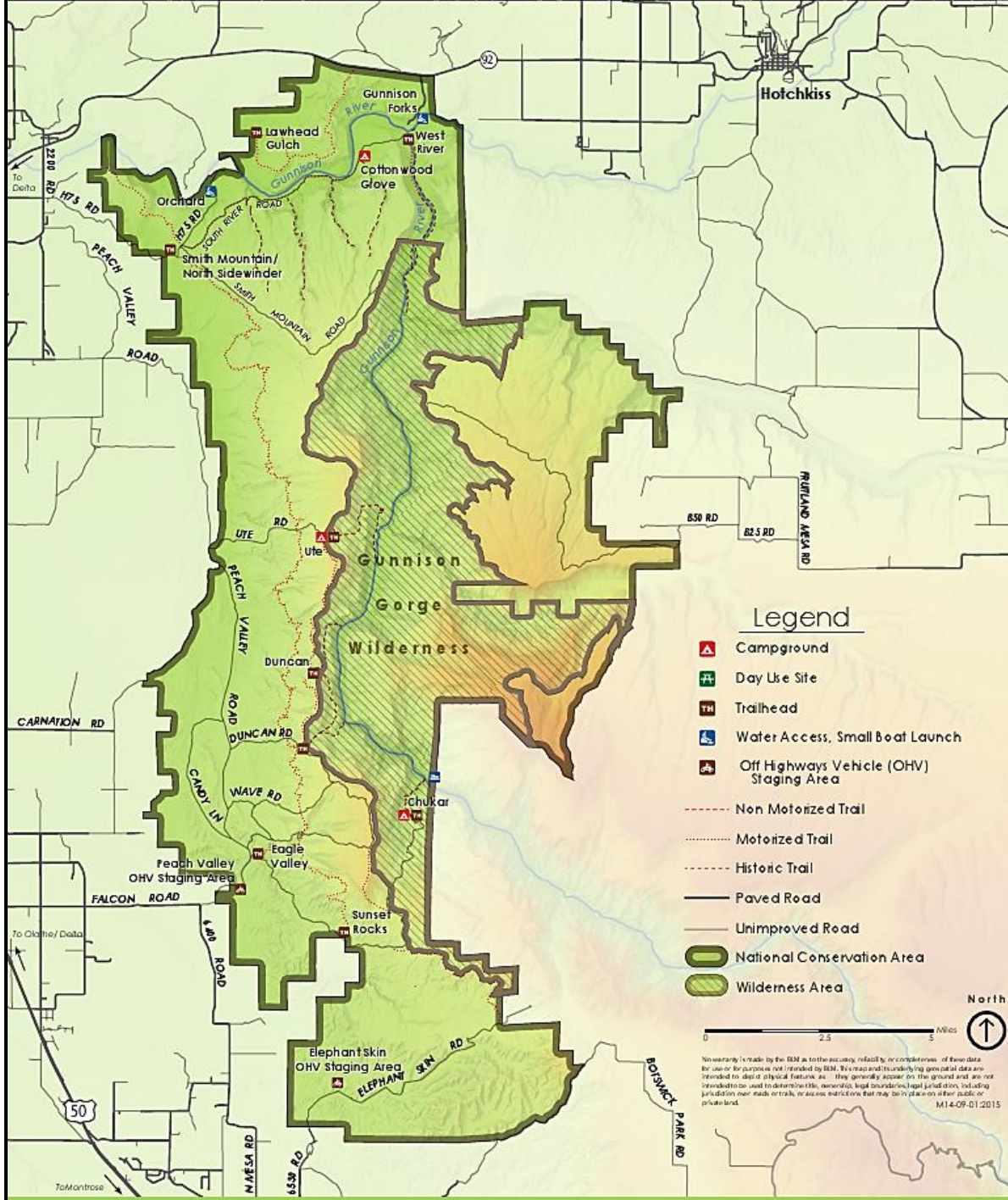
Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area





Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area



Legend

- Campground
- Day Use Site
- Trailhead
- Water Access, Small Boat Launch
- Off Highways Vehicle (OHV) Staging Area
- Non Motorized Trail
- Motorized Trail
- Historic Trail
- Paved Road
- Unimproved Road
- National Conservation Area
- Wilderness Area

0 2.5 5 Miles

North

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Accomplishments

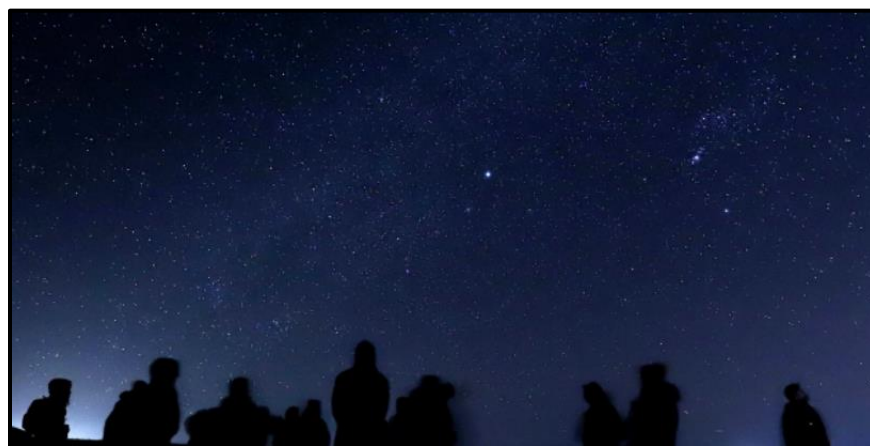
Colorado Canyons Association

GGNCA's outreach, education, and youth engagement programs were made richer, more robust, and more inclusive through the work of our friends' group, Colorado Canyons Association (CCA). A few highlights include:

- CCA's Americorps VISTA intern continued to improve distribution and accessibility of the GGNCA Junior Ranger Program. The [Junior Ranger Guide](#) is now available in Spanish. The patches that kids earn upon completion are cool, too:



- CCA hosted a public webinar and an interpretive night sky program in GGNCA in support of the Gorge becoming certified as an International Dark Sky Place.



- CCA got nearly every Delta County 9th grader out for an educational float trip on the Gunnison River in GGNCA.

Eagle Rock Shelter cultural site

Archaeological research indicates that this important cultural site in GGNCA has been a home to people for 129 centuries (12,900 years). As one of the oldest known human occupation sites in North America, Eagle Rock Shelter has generated significant public and scientific interest. Squarely within the ancestral homeland of the Nuuch (Ute) people, Eagle Rock Shelter is deeply connected to modern Nuuch people.

In 2021 BLM contracted with History Associates, Incorporated to develop an interpretive plan to help guide how the story of Eagle Rock Shelter is told. Several partners including Dr. Dudley Gardener (primary archaeological investigator) and the three Ute Tribes will provide input into the development of the plan.

Recreation Site Improvements

Planning and environmental analysis on three sites in the Gunnison and North Fork Rivers Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) was completed in 2021. As a result, the following recreation site improvements will be completed in 2022:

- Gunnison Forks Day Use Site improvements
 - Expanded boat trailer parking will help alleviate congestion at the site.
 - Site road repairs and facility improvements will make site more welcoming to visitors.
- Cottonwood Grove Campground
 - Graveling of a site road will help people avoid getting vehicles stuck in deep sand.
 - Aging perimeter fencing will be replaced with more durable fencing materials.
 - Two additional campsites will be added.
 - The universally accessible fishing pier will be maintained.
- Orchard Boat Ramp access road will be graveled to eliminate seasonal mud holes and help eliminate multiple braided routes. This is important to curtail off-route driving in Federally threatened Colorado hookless cactus habitat.

Connecting with Communities

GGNCA issued the City of Delta a Special Recreation Permit to hold an ultra-marathon/fun run in the NCA. The event was held in April and was enjoyed by many participants.

GGNCA continues to work with Delta County and community partners on a proposed singletrack trail system in the Gunnison and North Fork Rivers SRMA.

- GGNCA continues to partner with CPW and Trout Unlimited to in the recovery of rainbow trout in the Gunnison River. Rainbows were nearly lost to whirling disease, but disease-resistant populations are now recovering well.



Challenges

Drought

Like other lands in southwestern Colorado, prolonged severe drought continues to take its toll on natural communities in GGNCA as well as on the grazing program and the permittees who depend on it. Some permittees have opted for non-use of their permits due to drought, and others have taken significant cuts in the number of livestock they turn out, and/or shorter duration of their authorized grazing season.



Cottonwood Days 6th Grade Education Program

GGNCA, CCA, and Delta and Olathe Schools were set to return to our long-running in-person education program on the banks of the Gunnison River this year. Busses were scheduled, Port-a-Potties rented, volunteer educators trained, and partners scheduled, but just days before the program was to start BLM learned that it did not meet the group size limits of new departmental COVID-19 policy. BLM cancelled the program just 3 school days before it was to begin. GGNCA and CCA made our best efforts to modify group sizes and reschedule for the spring so that the current group of 6th graders would still have the opportunity to experience this education event, but it's looking like it will be difficult to fit into the spring school schedule.

CCA and BLM plan to adapt the program in 2022 to better adapt to COVID-19 group size policies.

Seasonal Hiring

In 2021 BLM in general struggled with hiring seasonal employees, and Colorado BLM specifically had a difficult time with seasonal staffing. Social effects of the pandemic, stagnant federal pay scales, scarcity of affordable housing, and structural issues with our hiring process all contributed to the difficulty of recruiting seasonal employees in 2021.

In GGNCA our river ranger crew was down to three rangers from what had been a minimum of four in past seasons. Initially we were unable to hire any Off-highway Vehicle (OHV) rangers, but after a second, late season attempt, we were able to hire a three-person crew in late August. Starting so late in the season, the amount of trail work they could accomplish was quite limited.

The BLM Colorado Human Resources office recognized some of the structural problems and has developed new, improved processes for seasonal hiring in 2022. That should be helpful, but affordable housing and competitive pay remain serious concerns.

Increasing Visitation and Visitor-use Monitoring

Visitation in GGNCA is increasing in general, which is an expected trend. However, in the Gunnison and North Fork Rivers SRMA it is increasing at a higher rate. Since the resource management plan does not set an upper limit on social encounters in this SRMA, there is no built-in trigger to indicate when high visitor-use levels may be negatively affecting desired outcomes, particularly in the river corridor down-river from the Gunnison Forks. In response, management has implemented an enhanced visitor-

use monitoring program. A combination of traffic counters, dedicated monitoring personnel, and SRP reporting will help to determine whether and when use levels exceed the capacity of the SRMA. There is increasing interest from potential commercial outfitters to operate within the river corridor. The monitoring information will help inform decisions on whether to issue new permits.

Visitors

Visitors come to the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area for a diverse number of activities, including but not limited to, whitewater rafting, Wilderness exploration, fishing, camping, hiking, mountain biking, hunting, wildlife viewing, and OHV riding. The NCA tailors to fulfilling the experience that the visitor seeks: for solitude they hike into the Gunnison Gorge; for thrill, they ride their dirt bikes in Peach Valley; for endurance, they run the Sidewinder Trail.



In the year 2021, an estimated 165,000 visitors experienced the NCA. We expect that number to go up in the future, as more and more people are discovering public lands. A noteworthy pattern is each year, more visitors are choosing to employ an outfitter and guide service to enjoy their public lands, bypassing the hurdle of planning and acquiring gear for a specific activity. Outfitters in the Gorge saw the busiest season ever, offering clients whitewater rafting, float fishing, walk-wade fishing, interpretive hiking, stand-up-paddleboarding trips, not to mention logistical support, horse pack-in service, and vehicle shuttle services. Below is a photo of one of the Chukar Trail horse-packers, letting his horse cool-off before heading back up the trail for more gear.

With more visitors each year, we strive to enhance the education and interpretation aspects of our recreation program.

Partnerships

Partners and volunteers play a huge role in helping BLM manage the NCA. CCA co-hosts a variety of educational field trips for local K-12 school groups. Students float the Gunnison river and learn about the riparian ecosystem (pictured below), while others hike to Eagle Rock Shelter to learn about the cultural significance of the site to the three Ute Tribes. CCA also hosts a number of “Adopt-a-Trail” volunteers, who regularly patrol the NCA, clean up trash, talk to visitors, and report on the conditions of our well-loved trails. This year, CCA made Junior Ranger kits available at local libraries for kids and



their families to explore and learn the NCA. These outreach and engagement efforts are critical to building an ethic of stewardship in the local community that will contribute to responsible recreation and use of the landscape.

Science

The BLM wildlife program expanded efforts to inventory Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in the NCA through a partnership with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the National Park Service. This came about as a result of more and more ranger and citizen sightings of bighorn sheep in the canyon. A helicopter survey in December resulted in the detection of 42 individual sheep, in 10 groups, and evidence of significant recruitment (13 lambs). This was the first helicopter survey of the bighorn sheep population in the GGNCA since 1995 and the results suggest there is a likely a total population in excess of 60 animals, and as many as 170. (Photo below was taken in Black Canyon National Park during a joint BLM-NPS river and wilderness monitoring patrol in September 2021).



A 2021 monitoring summary of the endangered Clay-loving buckwheat authored by NCA ecologist Ken Holsinger states: "Our population monitoring and observed climate trends between 2012 and 2021 would indicate that even with sufficient fall, and to a lesser degree, winter moisture that high spring temperatures during clay-loving buckwheat's most active growth period may limit water uptake. As a result, above average spring temperatures compounded by ensuing hotter summer temperatures may well exceed the physiological adaptations by clay-loving buckwheat for its desert environment

resulting in mortality events that can act to drive population trends downward. Undoubtedly, these affects are likely compounded by persistent drought observed between 2017 and 2021 where precipitation was well below average (Figure 8). Excessively hot spring temperatures are likely also acting to limit germination, seedling establishment and survival negating good seed production that may have occurred in the previous year.”

Climate Impacts

The West is in the grip of a prolonged drought including the GGNCA. Beginning in the Fall of 2019, a moisture deficit blanketed most of GGNCA with precipitation in the 43%-56% range of the 30-year average. During this period, the U.S. Drought Monitor categorized the drought as Extreme to Exceptional. The exceptional drought can be seen in the early dormancy of the vegetation attempting to conserve resources and prevent complete mortality. As the drought continues and more vegetation succumbs to the dry conditions, increased soil erosion occurs as less vegetation is present to stabilize soils and intercept runoff.

Climate Resiliency

Rock structures built in 2018 show some promise for capturing runoff and encouraging vegetation to further slow runoff and keep more moisture on the landscape. Gunnison Sage Grouse depend on mesic areas for portions of their life cycle. The photo below shows formally eroded drainages beginning to capture runoff after a monsoon event during the summer of 2021.



Social and Environmental Justice

The NCA welcomed its third and final AmeriCorps VISTA in 2021. The AmeriCorps VISTA program places volunteers with organizations to build capacity around social and environmental issues, in particular poverty reduction. Over the course of the three VISTA terms, GGNCA has deepened its work with and commitment to serving all Americans including those historically underrepresented or marginalized from outdoor spaces. The GGNCA's Junior Ranger book was translated into Spanish with the goal of more family-oriented programs for the local Latinx community.

In 2021, the BLM awarded a contract to an interpretive firm to work on developing an interpretive plan for Eagle Rock Shelter, a 13,000-year-old site with great cultural and archaeological significance. Telling the story of the site from the Ute perspective and in

collaboration with the three Ute tribes remains the top priority for this plan, which will be finalized in 2022.

Events

The NCA, in collaboration with Colorado Canyons Association and Western Slope Conservation Center, began working towards becoming a Dark Sky Park, achieved through certification with the International Dark Sky Association. Outreach events, including a well-attended Stargazing Scavenger Hunt, two rounds of sky quality data collection, and close partner coordination have positioned the NCA for a winter of 2022 application submittal, with the hopes of becoming the first BLM Dark Sky Park. The goal is to celebrate the NCA's night sky resource while educating the surrounding communities about the many benefits of dark skies!



Words from the staff

Gunnison Gorge NCA outdoor recreation planner, Robin Lewis, was married by lead Gunnison Gorge river ranger, Rooster Barnhart, during a float through the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness in June. A rainbow over the 2018 Buttermilk fire rehab area (also in the NCA), where Robin first got to know her now husband, felt like an auspicious sign from a landscape that holds great significance, personally and professionally.





NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area

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