



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Nevada
2022: Annual Manager's Report

Black Rock Desert – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area



Map

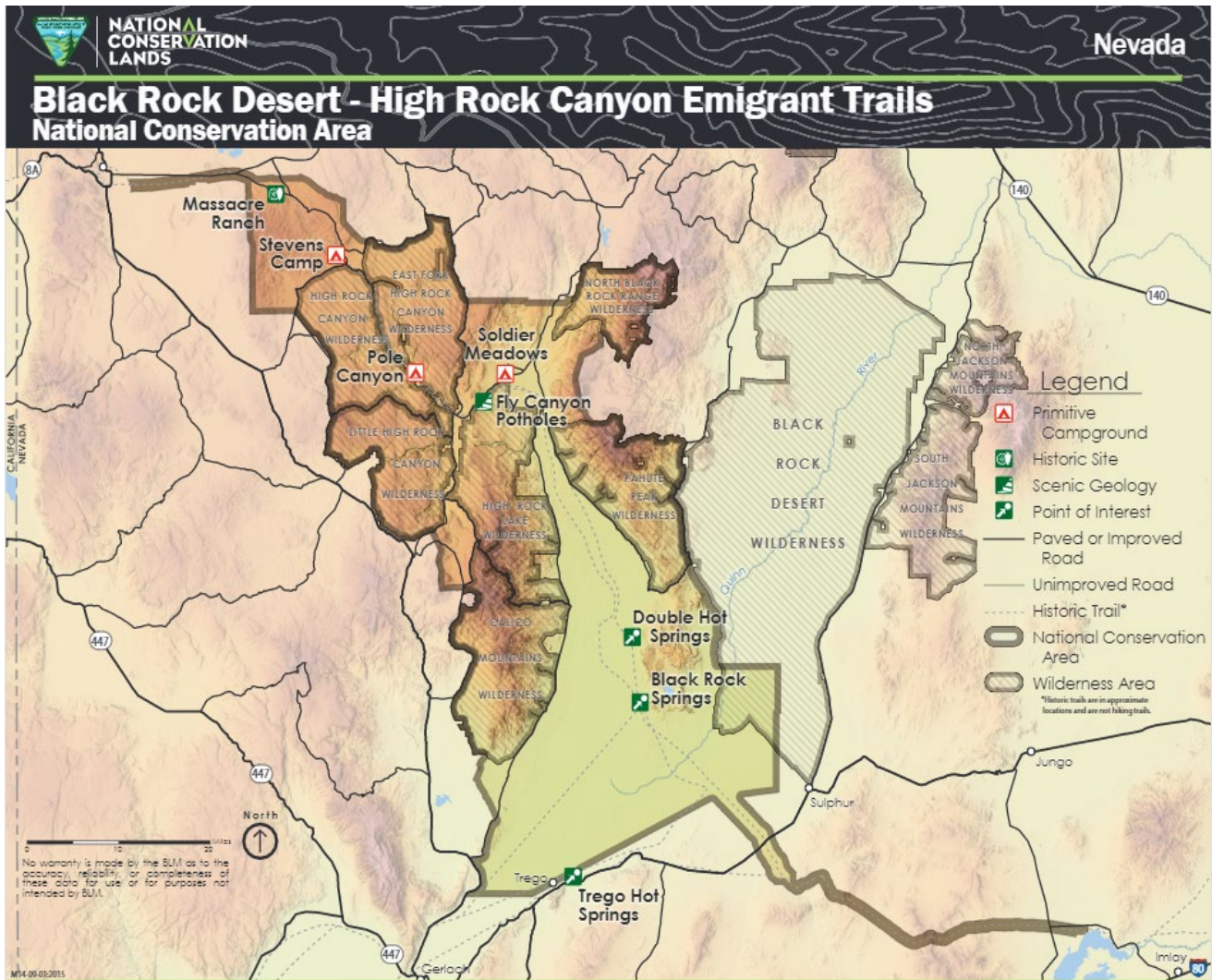


Figure 1: Map of the Black Rock Desert - High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area

Accomplishments

The Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area (Black Rock Desert NCA) had numerous accomplishments in 2022. In the spring, employees hosted a gathering called Black Rock Rendezvous where partner groups led small talks, projects, and outings with the public. For one of the projects, volunteers helped to remove graffiti, litter, and burn scars from a popular camping spot. The Playa recreation area experienced a large increase in visitation during the summer months, especially with the return of the Burning Man Special Recreation Permit. There were an estimated 80,000 people recreating on and around the Playa from July to early September. BLM hosted National Public Lands Day at the end of September in the Solider Meadows Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to help a federally-listed species in the Soldier Meadows Hot Springs stream. In 2022, wild horse and burro gathers resulted in a total of 992 horses captured, 824 removed, and the treatment of 39 mares. The Black Rock NCA was able to celebrate the 9th Annual Artist in Residence Program and hosted three artists, Courtney Sennish, Lisa Rock, and Mark Maynard.

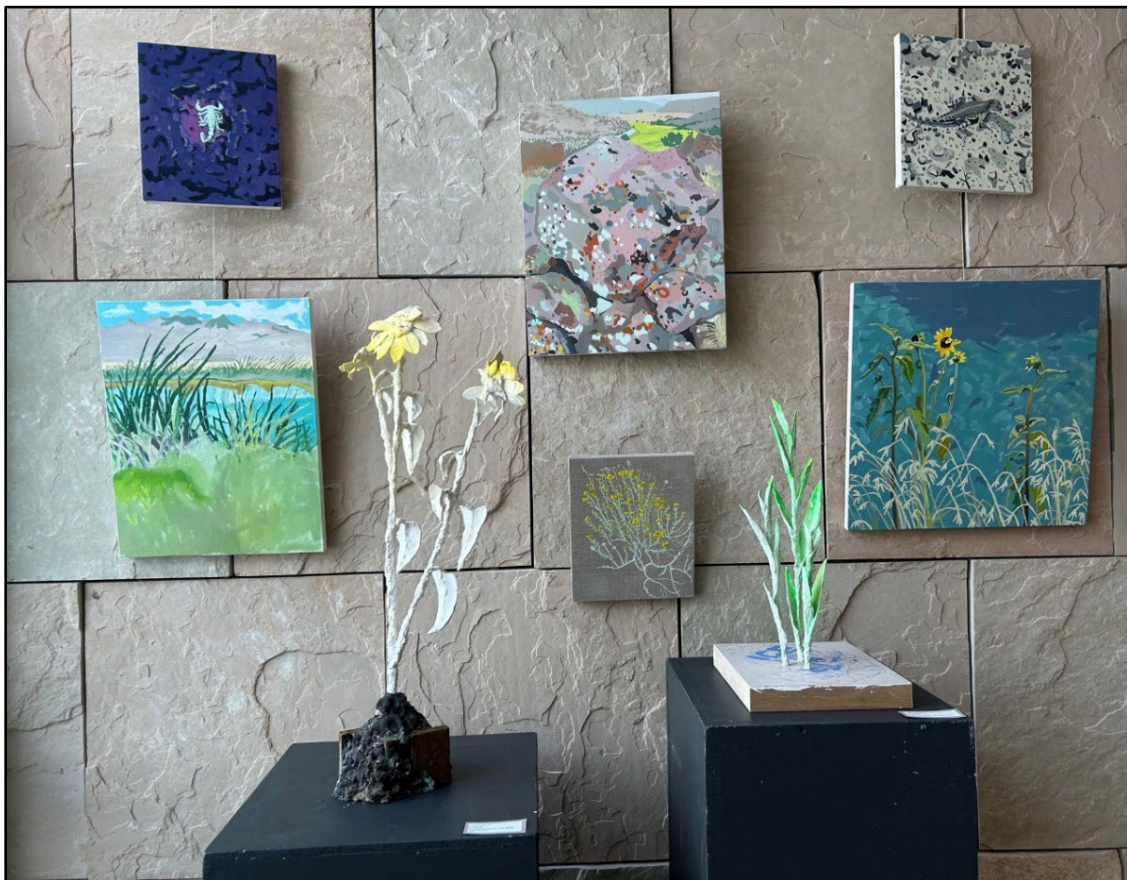


Figure 2: Art created in the 2022 Artist in Residence Program. Photo Credit: Stacey Wittek

Challenges

In 2022, BLM faced the challenge of responding to visitor related impacts to the Black Rock Desert NCA's many resources. The BLM documented instances of careless recreation, that if left to continue, could cause irreparable damage to resources. Some of these user-related impacts included graffiti, littering, burn scars on the playa from unpermitted fireworks, abandonment of vehicles, vehicles getting stuck on the playa, and vehicular trespass into sensitive areas including dunes and wilderness.



Figure 3: Friends of Nevada Wilderness removing graffiti from the Black Rock Desert NCA. Photo Credit: FNW

BLM's goal is to provide opportunities for a diverse range of recreation experiences while also protecting the cultural and ecological resources of the Black Rock Desert NCA. As part of the response to protect the Black Rock Desert NCA's many sensitive resources, the BLM partnered with Friend's groups and many members of the public to help clean-up graffiti, remove burn scars, rehabilitate vehicle trespass routes, and install signs to protect sensitive areas from future trespass.



Figure 4: Stuck vehicle on Black Rock Playa during fourth of July weekend. Photo Credit: BLM

To help reduce future visitor use impacts, BLM relies on partner organizations to provide information to visitors of the NCA, help educate the public about the sensitive areas, and identify areas where visitors can recreate while minimizing their footprint. The BLM encourages the public to reach out and ask about road and playa conditions before they visit so they are informed and can be better prepared. Moving into the future, the BLM plans to increase monitoring of sensitive areas in the NCA, continue working with partner organizations, and promote Leave No Trace and Tread Lightly principles.

Visitors

Black Rock Desert NCA visitation increased dramatically in 2022 with an estimated 156,229 visits and 1,420,431 visitor days, mostly due to the return of the Burning Man Event. Many NCA visitors enjoy short stays while they camp. The Black Rock Desert NCA sees its highest levels of visitation during the summer when permitted events attract visitors from across the West and around the world. The activities that take place on the Black Rock Playa each year usually include art festivals, amateur rocketry, land sailing, filming, and off highway vehicle use.

Individuals use the Black Rock Desert Playa to access the NCA's largest area for dispersed camping and open OHV use, where visitors generally stay a few days to two-weeks. The Black Rock NCA is also a popular destination for hunters seeking small and large game animals such as bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, mule deer, mountain lion, quail, and chukar. Off-roading tours, rock hounding, and hot spring use are also common activities throughout the Black Rock Desert NCA.



Figure 5: Vehicle driving across the Black Rock Playa
Photo Credit: Steve Drewniany with Four Points Adventures LLC

Partnerships

The Black Rock Desert NCA would like to highlight two of our long-standing partnerships, Friends of Nevada Wilderness (FNW) and Friends of Black Rock-High Rock (FBRHR). Both non-profits receive BLM funding through multiple-year assistance agreements that are managed by NCA staff members. This year, each of our partners participated in a host of events and activities that focused on improvements to recreation sites, habitat preservation, and educating the public about Leave No Trace principles.

- Friends of Black Rock-High Rock
 - AmeriCorps staff conducted routine clean-ups and public outreach around the Playa during the summer months.
 - 2022 Artist in Residence Program hosted three artists to create NCA-inspired art.
- Friends of Nevada Wilderness
 - In April and June 2022, a field crew removed unnecessary fencing around the Soldier Meadows ACEC.
 - In July 2022, two outings were organized to repair downed fencing around the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Instant Study Area.



Figure 6: FNW group photo at the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Instant Study Area. Photo Credit: FNW

Science

The Black Rock NCA has several research projects that are actively occurring or were completed in 2022. Information from these studies will inform management decisions and assist in improving other resource conditions.

- From fiscal years 2021-2023, the Desert Research Institute (DRI) will conduct research in NCA hot springs to study the spatial and temporal variability in hot springs to determine water quality for recreational use as well as assist with identifying compositions in the water that will help with future management decisions regarding geothermal and energy projects.



Figure 7: Black Rock Hot Spring Water Sampling. Photo Credit: Dan Saftner, DRI

- From fiscal years 2021-2024, the University of Nevada Reno will conduct American Pika surveys in the NCA to gather valuable information on this Nevada state protected mammal. Pikas are temperature sensitive and monitoring them in their habitat is the best way to inform managers on how to best protect this species.
- From fiscal year 2020-2026, the Yale Climate & Energy Institute, Greeley Memorial Laboratory will be conducting a woody biomass decomposition study as part of a nationwide experiment to slow wood decomposition and improve the design for future wood carbon containment projects.



Figure 8: Black Rock Playa Air Quality Monitoring Photo Credit: Air Resource Specialists

- During fiscal year 2022, Air Resource Specialists conducted air quality monitoring of particulate matter (PM_{10} and $PM_{2.5}$) on the Black Rock Playa, a Pleistocene era lakebed covering approximately 200 square miles. Particulate matter $\leq 10\mu m$ (PM_{10}), and particulate matter $\leq 2.5\mu m$ ($PM_{2.5}$) concentrations are regulated by the EPA under the Air Quality Division's National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS).
- From fiscal year 2021-2022, the University of Rochester conducted air quality monitoring across the Black Rock Desert Playa by studying particulate matter and meteorology in Pershing County, Nevada at the Black Rock Playa, where tens of thousands of recreators visit. The air monitoring measures were conducted to ensure worker, volunteer, and public health and safety.



Figure 9: Trego Hot Springs. Photo Credit: BLM

Finally, in 2022, the Black Rock Field Office (BRFO) partnered with the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) through the Management Studies Support Program (MSSP) to study various hot springs with the intent to increase the effectiveness of future resource management. MSSP supports management-driven research to directly inform a pertinent and pressing management question. Under this specific project, UNR is researching thermal characteristics of popular hot springs in the Black Rock National Conservation Area.

With increasing geothermal prospects and future exploration occurring adjacent to the Black Rock NCA, data from this project can be used as a baseline inventory of current hot spring conditions. This project is important for the BLM because the hot spring data collected could be used to assess impacts from future projects and to better manage thermal areas, which are visited by an increasing number of people every year for recreation. An additional MSSP project has been submitted for FY 2023 and is in evaluation.

Climate Impacts and Resiliency



Figure 10: Mahogany Creek in the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Instant Study Area. Photo Credit: BLM

In 1973, the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Instant Study Area (LCT ISA) was established as a Natural Area to protect the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout (LCT), a federally protected threatened fish species. The LCT ISA consists of stands of quaking aspen, mountain mahogany, different species of willow, and several creeks that provide for LCT spawning areas. To protect the quality of the water in the streams, 20 percent (approximately 2,400 acres) of the LCT ISA was fenced to exclude grazing from wild horses, burros, and livestock. Based on the LCT Status Review prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the fish within the LCT ISA are some of the most resilient LCT populations range wide due to abundance, age class structure, genetic health, hybrid status and population size. However, there are still challenges with drought conditions observed over the past decade and how this may affect the resiliency of the habitat and species. Part of the 5-year recovery plan is to continue management of the recovery of the population to improve resiliency.

In 2022, BLM partnered with FNW to help maintain the enclosure fencing within the LCT ISA and protect the headwaters of Mahogany creek. FNW held two campouts during July, maintained over 4,000 feet of enclosure fence, and scouted over 4 miles for future maintenance.

Social and Environmental Justice

The Black Rock Desert NCA's Resource Management Plan lists many objectives concerning public outreach and visitor services. Through special recreation permits (SRPs), establishing local partner groups, and using local suppliers for goods and services the BLM is able to achieve these objectives.



Figure 11: Group of recreators during the Fourth of July weekend.
Photo Credit: Mathew Gilbuena, The Everywhen Project.

In 2022, the BLM administered several SRPs that have helped the local community become a desirable recreation destination, promoted a more vibrant local economy, and brought more job opportunities to the area. The Black Rock NCA permitted the 2022 Burning Man Event, which returned to the Black Rock Playa after a two-year pandemic absence. There were approximately 80,000 visitors over the nine-day event and over 140 personnel were recruited from across the BLM and other organizations to assist with monitoring it. Apart from managing the largest SRP in the bureau, the Black Rock Desert NCA also managed dozens of other permits that aided in the growth of several different recreation industries. These SRPs included guided hunting, off-road tours, competitive events, an art festival, and amateur rocketry.

Events

Black Rock Rendezvous - May 27-30, 2022

Black Rock Rendezvous kicked off with over 50 people listening to talks and lectures ranging from geology and archaeology to rocketry and reducing plastic pollution. In the afternoon FBRHR led a nature walk to learn about high desert plants, BLM led a hike up Mormon Dan Peak and led a rockhounding tour where 24 people dug for opals and volcanic rocks such as obsidian and rhyolite. BLM also led two stewardship projects to help protect the Playa. The first project included six volunteers building a protective fence around a broken wellhead to prevent recreationists from running into it or getting stuck in the wet Playa from the water coming out of the well. The second project included five volunteers cleaning up a large burn scar that was caused by illegal fireworks on the Playa. In the evening, over 104 people joined to participate in the Dutch oven cook-off and listen to live bluegrass music. On the final day, volunteers assisted with BLM led stewardship projects focused on Trego hot springs. A protective fence was built around sensitive dunes, graffiti was removed from granite boulders, and litter was picked up near the camping areas and the hot spring. The event ended with Black Rock Trivia led by BLM, with topics ranging from geography, geology, flora, fauna, and human history of the NCA.



Figure 12: 2022 Black Rock Rendezvous – Mormon Dan Peak Hike

National Trails Day - June 4, 2022

BRFO held the annual National Trails Day event at Upper High Rock Canyon Trail located near the Steven's Camp Recreation Area. With the help of partner groups, FNW and FBRHR, a total of 14 volunteers attended the event with the addition of two staff members from both friend's groups and four BLM employees. Volunteers installed a new registration box for visitors to check in and find pamphlets about the trail. They also improved the trailhead by adding additional signage to deter vehicle use and re-lined the start of the trail with stones. BLM, partners, and volunteers cleared one mile of trail by cutting back brush, removing fallen Aspen trees, and redefining the trail tread. Another group of volunteers worked around the Steven's Camp Cabin to clean and clear the interior of trash, spiderwebs, and generally tidy up the popular camping location. This group also cleared vegetation along the walking path from the cabin to the nearby vault toilet. In total, about two truck beds of trash was removed from the cabin.



Figure 13: 2022 National Trails Day – Upper High Rock Canyon Trail

National Public Lands Day – September 25, 2022

The goal of this annual event was to conduct projects for the benefit and recovery of the federally listed Desert Dace (*Erecmichthys acros*), a minnow-like fish dependent on warm thermal springs only found in the Soldier Meadows area. In total, 40 volunteers travelled to the remote location to participate in this year's National Public Lands Day (NPLD) event. BLM, partners, and volunteers worked together to monitor critical habitat for Desert Dace, install protective barriers, re-naturalize trespass routes, remove obsolete fencing, and clean up the Soldier Meadows Public Cabin. All those involved expressed deep appreciation for the ability to participate in another year's NPLD. Many of the volunteers have a long and proud history of participation spanning decades. We look forward to continuing the tradition of working with volunteers to improve public lands for many more years to come.



Figure 14: 2022 National Public Lands Day - Soldier Meadows

Words From the Staff

As of February 2023, there are several staff vacancies in the Black Rock Desert NCA: Field Manager, Project Manager, Range Management Specialist, Range Technician, Natural Resource Specialist, Wildlife Biologist, and three Outdoor Recreation Planners. The current team of five specialists are working through the challenge of having limited personnel while also supporting the Black Rock Desert NCA's many unique resources, including managing for habitat, monitoring rangeland conditions, protecting sensitive cultural resources, and issuing permits. As we move into 2023, the NCA staff will pursue new partnerships focused on conservation, provide new educational and interpretive content on our National Historic Trails, and support law enforcement services related to public use and recreation. We encourage the public to visit the Black Rock Desert NCA and safely experience the wide-open Playa, responsibly camp in the rugged desert, and drive on designated routes to enjoy the unique landscape. Feel free to call us and ask about road conditions, camping opportunities, or to get involved with future public events. Enjoy your public lands!

- The Staff at the Black Rock NCA



Figure 15: Black Rock NCA staff member giving thumbs down at a burn scar on the Playa.



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Black Rock Desert – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails

National Conservation Area

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