



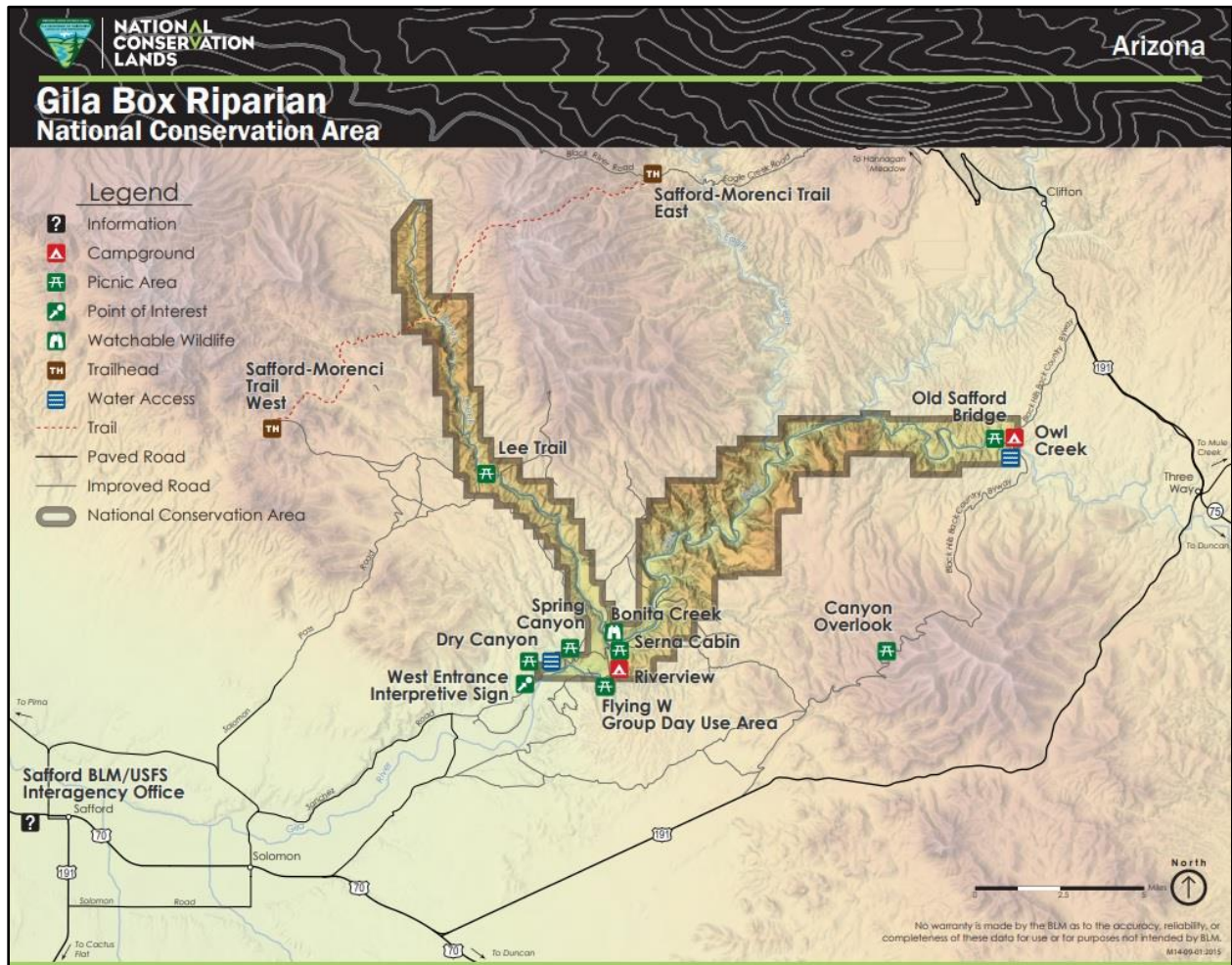
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Arizona
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

The Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area (Conservation Area) has a rich history that dates back at least 3,000 years. The lands and waters of the area have sustained thriving indigenous and Euroamerican communities, including prehistoric Archaic and Mogollon, Apache, Hispanic, White, and even Chinese. Remains of these now abandoned settlements can be found along both the Gila River and Bonita Creek. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has been committed to the protection of these valuable resources through routine monitoring, stabilization, and in some cases, limited restoration. One such case of restoration has been Serna Cabin, located at the confluence of the Gila River and Bonita Creek.

The Serna Cabin was built in the 1920's by the Serna family and was abandoned in 1965. The cabin was restored in 1991 by the BLM with the cooperation of the Coronado Chapter of the Arizona Archeological Society, and their partners, and is currently the centerpiece for the Serna Cabin Picnic Area.

In early 2023, a severe storm ripped off half of the roof of the cabin. The aged roof beams had deteriorated enough that they were no longer able to properly sustain the roof panels. This allowed for sudden, heavy winds to pull them free and flip them over the other half of the roof. In 2024, BLM Gila District Force Account personnel, in coordination with the Safford Field Office Archaeologist, were able to effectively complete repairs using a crane to replace some of the rotted roof beams.



Challenges

The BLM continues its mission to protect riparian areas within the Conservation Area from unauthorized grazing by monitoring for unauthorized livestock. Collaboration between the public, grazing allotment permittees, the San Carlos Apache Tribe, and the BLM is key to rectifying and preventing unauthorized livestock use. Frequent collaboration is needed with permittees to remove livestock, maintain fences, and to document completed inspections and any subsequent corrective actions. The BLM has an exceptional working relationship with the permittees. The BLM coordinates with permittees to work through challenges such as difficult or hazardous terrain, frequent high flood events, and the recreating public not closing gates or cutting fences.

To encourage collaboration, the BLM is in communication with the San Carlos Apache Tribe regarding cooperative work to reconstruct fencing between the Nation and the Conservation Area boundaries. This will assist in preventing livestock from the Tribe traversing to and accessing the Conservation Area and its riparian areas. Through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, funding was acquired for this fencing.

The BLM partnered with Arizona Association of Conservation Districts to inventory the location and condition of exclusionary fences. Coordination is ongoing, with the next step being the prioritization and maintenance of downed fencing and fence in poor condition to further prevent livestock access in riparian areas.



Visitors and Recreation

Visitor opportunities are abundant including camping, hiking, birding, rockhounding, kayaking, rafting, hunting, wildlife viewing, photography, and off-highway vehicle (OHV) driving.

Visitation increased by 33 percent in 2023 with an estimated 42,779 visits and 31,775 visitor days. The Conservation Area is seeing a noticeable uptick in visitors who are travelling and staying longer periods of time.



Partnerships

The BLM Safford Field Office continues to work with multiple partners on various projects in the Conservation Area. These partners include:

- **The Nature Conservancy Aravaipa Canyon and Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserves:** Partnered with the Safford Field Office to remove nonnative fishes from Bonita Creek to benefit native desert fishes.
- **The University of Arizona:** Partnered with the Safford Field Office to remove nonnative fishes from Bonita Creek to benefit native desert fishes.
- **Graham County Chamber of Commerce:** The chamber continues to partner with BLM in helping to educate local visitors.
- **Grazing Permittees:** The grazing permittees continue to be vigilant in keeping incidental unauthorized cattle out of riparian areas within the Conservation Area. This has and continues to be a high priority for the Safford Field Office, and these efforts are bolstered by the coordination of our partners and permittees.
- **Arizona Association of Conservation Districts (AACD):** Working with Safford Field Office to inventory and maintain the exclusionary Conservation Area fences to prevent access of unauthorized livestock.
- **Gila Watershed Partnership:** Continues to assist the Safford Field Office with annual fish monitoring at Bonita Creek and the Gila River.
- **Bureau of Reclamation (BOR):** Continues to work with the Safford Field Office to maintain a fish barrier to prevent nonnative fish from swimming upstream into Bonita Creek. The BOR also provides funding to the Safford Field Office through the Gila River basin native fishes conservation program for nonnative fish removal in Bonita Creek.
- **US Fish and Wildlife Service:** Partnered with the Safford Field Office to monitor threatened and endangered fish in Bonita Creek. Additionally, they assisted with nonnative fish removal from Bonita Creek.
- **City of Safford:** The Safford Field Office staff worked closely with the City of Safford to allow for their operation and maintenance of the city's water supply system, located in Bonita Creek within the Conservation Area. This was a major effort to manage issues associated with a growing beaver population that enhances the values of the Conservation Area but may impact the water supply operation. This relationship is guided by a Memorandum of Understanding between the City of Safford and the BLM.

Science

In 2023, Conservation Area staff, volunteers, and partners continued to implement a program of work to provide for public use and enjoyment while also protecting the Conservation Area's resources. The partner/volunteer engagement activities below demonstrate the importance of managing the Conservation Area as part of the larger landscape.

The BLM Gila District, US Fish and Wildlife Service, BOR, The Nature Conservancy; Aravaipa Canyon Preserve and Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve Chapters, the University of Arizona, and Marsh and Associates personnel spent a week in August at Bonita Creek removing the invasive yellow bullhead (*Ameiurus natalis*), to improve habitat for the native aquatic fauna.

The presence of yellow bullhead poses a threat to the Creek's native fish biodiversity and overall ecological health. The species is known for preying on and competing with the native fish species for food and habitat. The removal efforts support the protection of six native species within Bonita Creek, including federally endangered Gila chub (*Gila intermedia*) and Gila topminnow (*Poeciliopsis occidentalis*).





Personnel used a variety of methods to effectively remove yellow bullhead from the Creek., including targeted trapping and electrofishing tailored to minimize harm to native species, A total of 2,713 Yellow bullhead were removed. Backpack electrofishing captured 2,099 Yellow bullhead, whereas Promar and Gee metal minnow traps captured 578 and 36, respectively. Of the Yellow bullhead removed, adults (n=875) comprised 32.25% and juveniles (n=1,838) comprised 67.75%.

This concerted effort prepared the way for the eradication of yellow bullhead from Bonita Creek and underscores the importance of collaborative initiatives. By leveraging the expertise and resources of multiple agencies and personnel, stakeholders were able to reduce a significant ecological threat to native desert fishes and promote the long-term health and resilience of Bonita Creek’s aquatic ecosystem. Moreover, the project served as a model for future conservation endeavors, emphasizing the value of proactive management strategies and partnership engagement in safeguarding habitats and biodiversity.

Climate Impacts/Climate Resiliency

Drought conditions persisted in 2023, with historically low flow levels in the Gila River. Rangeland trend monitoring indicated that many grasses and forbs did not grow or put forth seed during the spring and summer months. However, as the late summer and fall monsoonal moisture arrived it finally allowed for regrowth, showing the resiliency of drought-tolerant species. In 2023, several small fires occurred around the area of the Conservation Area, but not within the boundary.



Social and Environmental Justice

Consultation with 11 federally recognized tribes is maintained on a consistent basis to ensure that proposed uses and enhancements are carefully analyzed with tribal viewpoints incorporated into the decision-making process. This includes all livestock grazing, recreational opportunities, wildlife enhancements, and cultural resource use and protection. Additionally, tribes are notified of emergency actions such as suppression activities related to wildfire.

The Conservation Area hosts several Special Recreation Permits. The Gila Box uplands support multiple uses that have an economic impact to the local area – including livestock grazing and hunting. For the nine census-designated places most proximate to the Conservation Area, eight meet at least one of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)'s Environmental Justice criteria. The residents of local communities benefit from the many recreation opportunities within close day-trip proximity.

Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area Monitoring Trip

In May of 2023, the Safford Field Office non-renewables team participated in a 2-day monitoring float trip down 22 miles of the Gila River. This stretch runs through the heart of the Conservation Area. The purpose of the trip consisted of multiple goals including resource familiarization, cattle monitoring, cultural site visits, team building, and river cleanup. Participants included two park rangers, an outdoor recreation planner, a realty specialist, a range management specialist, a geologist, and the Non-Renewables Assistant Field Manager. All objectives were accomplished and garbage, including two tires and a refrigerator door, was removed. Late spring wildlife sightings were a constant of the trip with bighorn sheep, mule deer, bats, butterflies, turtles, and more than 20 species of birds recorded.



While the winter/spring season was phenomenal for this stretch of river as far as flows were concerned, the week after the trip flows diminished to historically low levels and remained there for the next eight months. These extreme low flows caused the section to be unnavigable by watercraft causing negative impact to both visitor use and resource monitoring. This was an unusual phenomenon exacerbated by drought conditions and the absence of any significant monsoonal precipitation.





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