



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

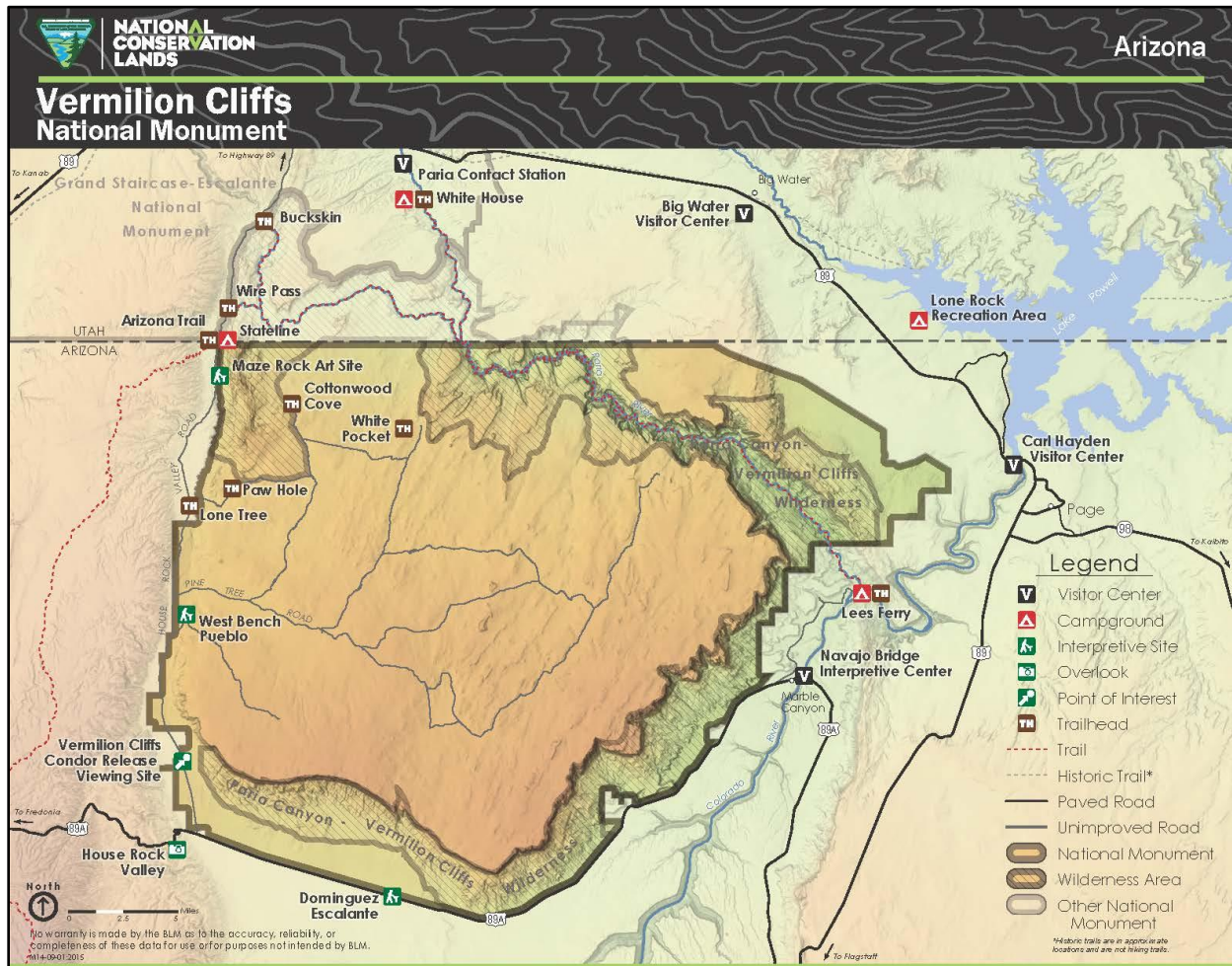
Arizona
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Vermilion Cliffs

National Monument



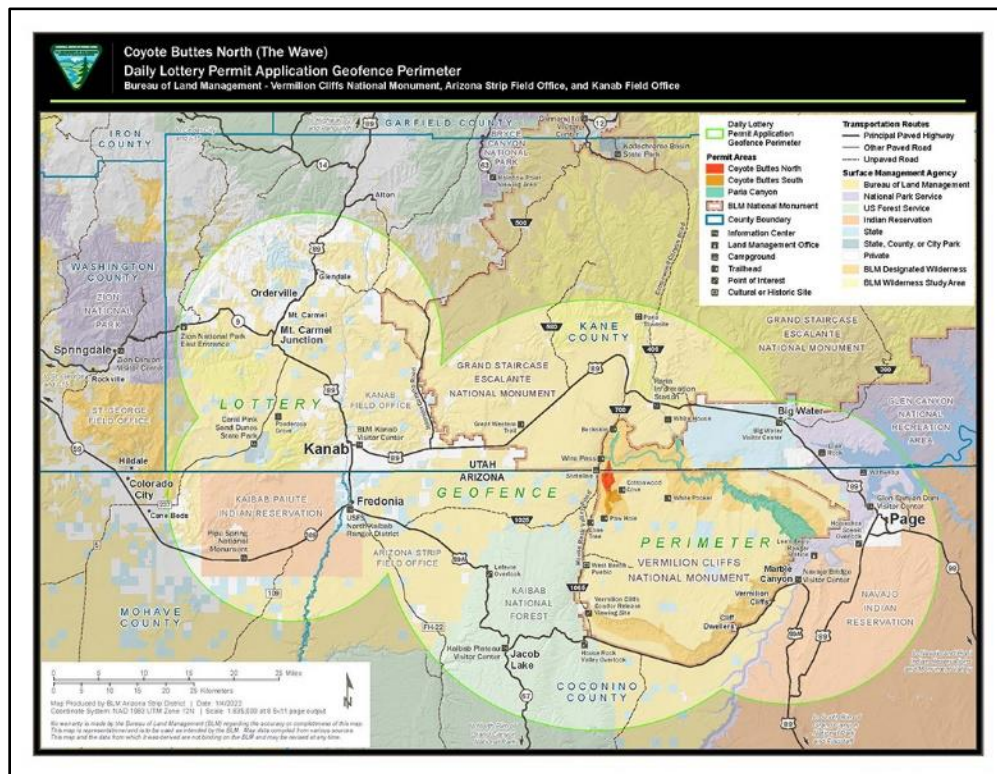
Map



Accomplishments

The Vermillion Cliffs National Monument (Monument) hired a permanent Monument Manager, which has brought new enthusiasm and energy to prioritizing needs.

On November 1, 2023, the Monument implemented the final phase in all permits moving to e-commerce. The final permit system to transition was Coyote Buttes South Daily Lottery, which uses the same mobile geofence system as Coyote Buttes North (the Wave). The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Arizona, and BLM Utah worked with city and county governments, as well as Recreation.gov to continue implementing this innovative way for the public to apply for and secure a permit. The mobile geofence system allows applicants to use the location-based service to apply for a permit from their cell phone or other location-enabled mobile device, while maintaining elements of the legacy “walk-in” system. Permits are only available to people using the system within intentionally set geographic boundaries. This new system provides a safer and more convenient process than the in-person lottery system, where hopeful applicants would wait in a designated facility. Upon successful submission of an application for a permit within the geofence area, applicants are free to explore in the communities and on public lands where they will continue to receive notifications. Successful applicants are required to pick up permits within an allotted time at either of the permitting offices located in Kanab, Utah, or in Page, Arizona, at which time they receive a required safety brief.



Challenges

Currently, the Monument has one Manager, two Outdoor Recreation Planners and one Park Ranger. One other Outdoor Recreation Planner (Kanab Field Office, Paria Canyon District) is funded through recreation fees as well as two Park Rangers who are partially funded. These positions assist with the management and patrols of the Wave. Coordination poses a challenge as some trailheads for the Monument are located on the Utah side which is under the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. A new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is in the works to communicate how the Monument and surrounding areas will be managed with all parties involved. Coordinated funding and labor will also be addressed in a separate agreement. Another challenge that the Monument faces is increased visitor use. Visitor use continues to rise, and many visitors are not fully prepared for the climate and remoteness. As a result, the number of search and rescue (SAR) events has continued to increase, resulting in additional costs for BLM and local law enforcement. Due to the remoteness of the Monument, cell service is often difficult to obtain. That also poses a challenge for both SAR, law enforcement, and the overall public.



Visitors

The Monument visitation was estimated at 240,373 visits, an increase of 11,718 over the previous year. This estimate is based on numerous traffic counters across the monument and information provided to us by authorized guides and outfitters. Monument staff developed new protocol to collect visitation data and completed much needed maintenance to the traffic counter program. These efforts increased the accuracy of visitation data and help staff better understand when and where visitation is occurring throughout the monument. In addition, staff are pursuing other methods and technologies to gather more accurate data relative to recreational activities and numbers. Aside from a few hunters and grazing permittees, special recreation permit holders and the recreating public comprise most visits to the National Monument.

Highway 89A is the only highway near the Monument. Running along the southern edge of the Monument, it provides spectacular views of the Vermilion Cliffs. Off highway access is limited as the cliffs and wilderness area are adjacent to the highway. The roads that access the Monument are unpaved and minimally maintained. Most of the time, the House Rock Valley Road is accessible in a two-wheel drive, high-clearance vehicle. However, any access to the Paria Plateau or the east side of the Monument near Page, Arizona, requires four-wheel drive, high-clearance vehicles. Visitors range from prepared, experienced backcountry visitors to those that come ill-prepared and often need SAR or towing services. Many who seek to visit Vermilion Cliffs, strive to obtain permits to three of the special management areas (Coyote Buttes North, Coyote Buttes South, and Paria Canyon Overnight). The majority of those that venture out on the Paria Plateau visit the spectacular White Pocket rock formation, pictured below.



Partnerships

The Monument has several partners who provide information that helps educate and protect the public. The staff at BLM Arizona's St. George Public Lands Information Center, BLM Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Visitor Center, and Paria Contact Station answer a wide range of questions and educate visitors about how to visit the area safely and responsibly. They also issue permits, compile visitor data, and report emergencies to the proper authorities. Paria Canyon overnight backpackers typically start at the Wire Pass, Buckskin, or White House trail heads and sometimes travel south through Paria Canyon to finish near Lee's Ferry in Marble Canyon where the GCNRA has allowed them to conveniently park their vehicles in the NPS-managed parking lot. Hikers are now only required to place their permit on the dashboard for entrance to the area and parking for the duration of their trip.

The Glen Canyon Conservancy and the BLM coordinate to provide pertinent maps, books, hiking gear, souvenirs, and safety items such as sunscreen, hats, and water bottles for sale at the Paria Contact Station.

A partnership with the National Weather Service provides online links to updated weather forecasts, and site-specific heat and flash flood advisories. This project is constantly improving with the advancement of technology.

The Page-Lake Powell HUB and Kane County Office of Tourism both partner with the BLM to distribute Coyote Buttes permits won through the geofence Daily Lottery. Both locations also offer safety briefs to permit holders and answer numerous questions from visitors. Their partnership saves the BLM many hours of labor.

The BLM partners with the Intergovernmental Internship Cooperative (IIC) based at Southern Utah University. The IIC partners with various land management agencies and others, and this partnership offers valuable internship opportunities. Through the IIC partnership, agency partners mentor interns providing real world work experience that complements their academic pursuits and helps prepare students for successful careers, including jobs in government with agencies like the BLM.

The Monument continues partnering with The Peregrine Fund and Arizona Game and Fish Department to educate about non-lead programs and to manage the California condor reintroduction program. The Monument is home to the condor's release site, where The Peregrine Fund brings captive raised condors to be released into the wild. This partnership has existed since 1996 and has been a tremendous success. From a low point of 22 birds in 1982, The Peregrine Fund releases approximately 12-15 birds annually into the wild. Through an assistance agreement and a Memorandum of Understanding with The Peregrine Fund, the Monument and the BLM continues to contribute funds, time, and other resources to support this effort.

Climate Impacts and Resilience

Even with the increased snowpack from the winter of 2022-2023, drought conditions continued to persist through 2023. Later summer and early fall monsoonal moisture brought some relief. Perennial vegetation experienced drought-related impacts with many juniper trees showing drought stress. Future monitoring will tell if drought induced mortality occurred. Average rainfall for the four areas in the Monument was 13.5 inches.

This is the normal amount for the area. Two Remote Automatic Weather Stations located near the condor release site showed 10.4 inches.

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 re-growth, showing the resiliency of drought-tolerant species. Livestock operators, for the most part, reduced their herds accordingly to compensate for the lack of forage. Cumulative drought impacts may be felt into the next growing season, pending winter and spring conditions.

The Arizona Game & Fish Department installed the third wildlife water catchment in a series of four being installed around the Monument (pictured below). The fourth catchment is due to be installed in April 2024. These catchments ensure that a perennial water source is available for desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, mountain lion, California condor, bats, birds, and other wildlife species inhabiting these areas. The catchments are needed to encourage utilization of habitat that is currently devoid of water and to allow better movement between wildlife waters that are up to 15 miles apart.



Social and Environmental Justice

The Monument has become an international tourism destination. Visitors come from all 50 states and many foreign countries. The area is well known throughout the world and many tourists place a visit to the Wave as their primary destination when visiting the United States. To bridge language gaps and encourage visitor safety, the BLM began investing in translation materials 20 years ago. Today, maps and interpretive information are available in English, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish.

Permit fees for the Monument are comparable with other local hikes. A market analysis of similar facilities and hiking areas was completed to make sure the fees do not exceed what is currently being charged for use of other nearby public land locations.



Events

Because of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) impact on the Arizona/Utah condor flock, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, The Peregrine Fund, BLM, the Monument, and Southwest Working Group condor partners determined, for the health of the condors, not to hold the annual release but instead BLM hosted a site improvement project. The event was a service project that allowed public land and condor enthusiasts to work with biologists and field staff from the Southwest Working Group to improve the Monument condor release viewing site in preparation for the highly anticipated 2024 condor release.

Despite a cold and rainy day on Public Lands Day 2023, we had over 40 participants that pulled weeds, ultimately filling 150 bags, and constructed an approximate 600 square foot patio made of locally sourced flagstone.



As the Southwest Working Group continues to support the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Incident Command Team and partners in development and implementation of conservation strategies, such as the vaccine trials, to aid California condors considering Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, the site improvement project provides the public with the opportunity to gather with friends, fellow condor enthusiasts, and agency specialists to continue to celebrate the ever-resilient condor.

"While we were deeply saddened by the losses the Arizona/Utah flock suffered from the spread of HPAI this spring, The Peregrine Fund and its partners have a renewed passion, vigor, and dedication to our collective goal and have been working tirelessly throughout this incident to manage the situation by caring for birds, monitoring the flock and improving our facilities to better accommodate birds if HPAI returns in the fall," said Condor Reintroduction Program Director for The Peregrine Fund, Tim Hauck.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and our partners are committed to condor recovery and conservation, and we appreciate the BLM's efforts to continue to provide the public opportunities to observe our cooperative efforts to re-establish the free-flying condors to the southwest," remarked the US Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Shaula Hedwall.

By 1982, only 22 California condors survived in the wild, in an effort, to avoid extinction of the species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partners began to capture the remaining wild condors. Five years later, all remaining wild condors were in captivity and a captive breeding program to save the species was underway.

As of July 2023, there are nearly 100 condors free flying Arizona skies. The world population of endangered California condors (captivity and the wild) numbers more than 550 individuals, with more than half flying free in Arizona, Utah, California, and Baja, Mexico.

The Arizona-Utah California Condor conservation effort part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's larger recovery strategy for the species and is a cooperative program with federal, state, and private partners, including The Peregrine Fund, the Monument, and BLM Utah's Paria River District, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Grand Canyon and Zion National Parks, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and the Kaibab and Dixie National Forests among many other supporting groups and individuals.



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Vermilion Cliffs

National Monument

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