



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

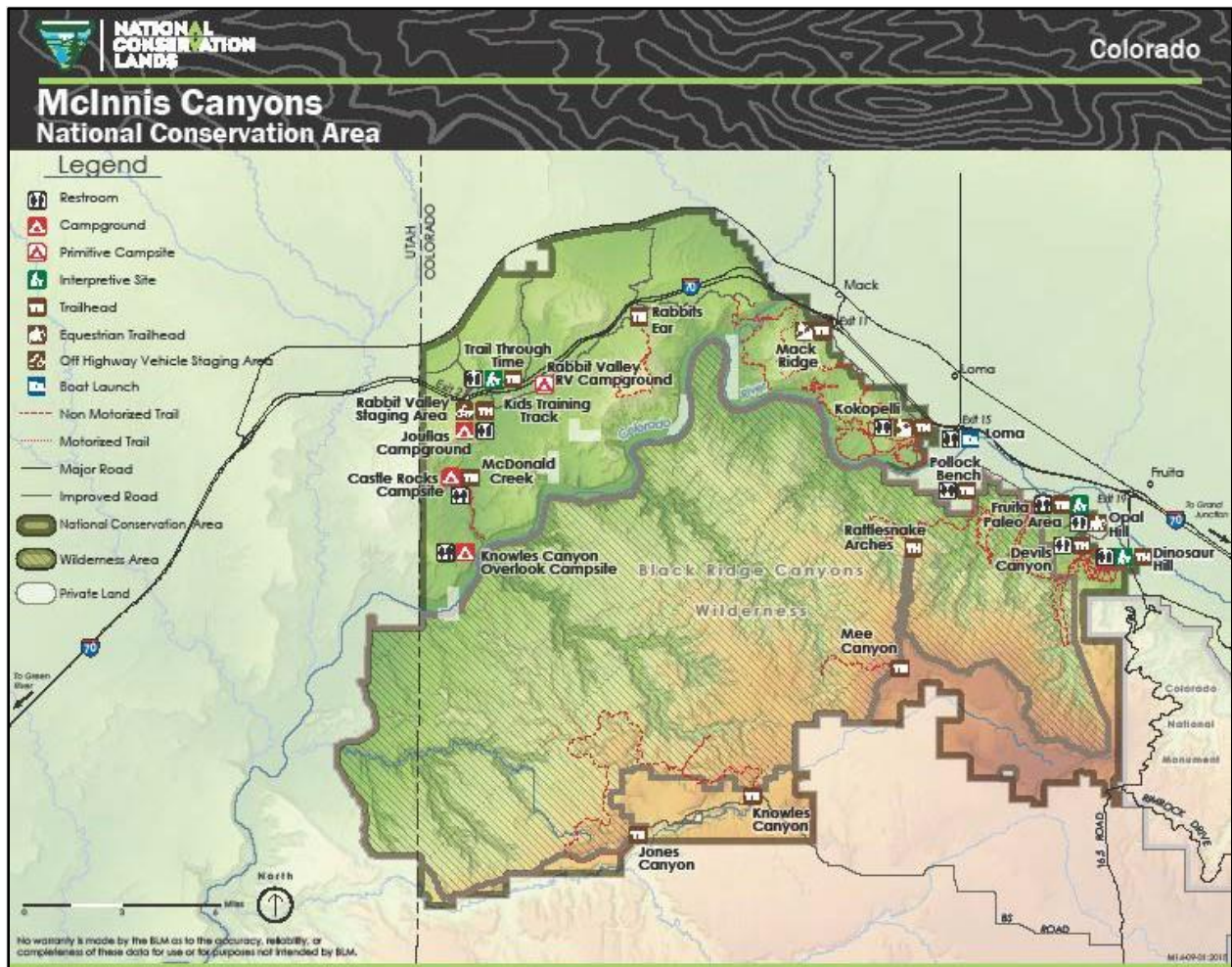
Colorado
2023: Annual Manager's Report

McInnis Canyons

National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

Leave No Trace Gold Standard Site Designation

A Leave No Trace Gold (LNT) Standard Site recognizes public lands that implement the highest standard of onsite LNT programs including staff and volunteer training, educational materials, and additional resources. Before becoming a Gold Standard Site, each area undergoes a rigorous review process to gain the special status by showcasing its LNT offerings. To date, there are less than 20 sites across the nation that have received the Gold Standard designation - and only one of those is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). McInnis Canyons and Dominguez Escalante National Conservation Areas are the 2nd and 3rd BLM sites to join the ranks!

Rabbit Valley Campsite Improvements and Permit/Reservation System Outreach

Rabbit Valley is a popular recreation destination for off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, four-wheel drive vehicles, all-terrain vehicles (ATV), dirt bikes, mountain biking, hiking, horseback riding, and camping. The area is also a point of access to the Utah Rims trail system (managed by BLM Moab Field Office). Total annual visitation to the Rabbit Valley area is regularly over 50,000.

The effort to implement the 2018 Rabbit Valley Camping plan, DOI-BLM-CO-S081-2018-0005-EA, was completed this fiscal year. Rabbit Valley now has 75 campsites in five different campgrounds, all of which are thoughtfully constructed and placed to facilitate visitor engagement in different activities while staying in this popular multi-use area.

Projects completed in 2023 includes the following:

- Koniklos Equestrian Campground
 - 3 new campsites constructed with individual corrals.
 - 10 day-use parking spots with several corrals, serving as the new trailhead for equestrian visitation to Wildhorse Mesa.
- Fluffle Group Use Campground
 - 25 campsites with varying capacities to accommodate larger groups.
 - 10 new sites constructed.
 - 15 sites improved.
- High North Campground
 - 13 campsites improved.
- Trailhead improvement
 - Immediately south of I-70 Exit 2, two large areas were improved with delineators to facilitate efficient parking by motorized and non-motorized visitors to Rabbit Valley.

The free, self-issue Individual Special Recreation Permits which were required for overnight camping as of 2021 were superseded as of February 2023. Visitors wishing to engage in overnight camping in Rabbit Valley are now required to reserve one of the 75

campsites on Recreation.gov and pay \$20.00/night. Reservations are required 7 days per week, year-round. BLM recreation employees staffed entrances to Rabbit Valley during peak visitation months to inform visitors of the pending changes and found that the change to the reservation system and fees was generally welcomed, signaling to staff that the area was seeing more demand for camping than there were existing camping opportunities available, and that visitors are increasingly accepting of this type of change in the operational setting of many public lands.

Colorado River Management

The Grand Junction Field Office (GJFO) maintains and manages 34 campsites along a 25-mile stretch on the Colorado River. This year, an additional Career-Seasonal River Ranger was brought on to continue to staff the boat ramps, answer crucial safety questions and concerns, perform patrols, maintain camp sites and facilities, and educate the public on proper boating etiquette and resource protection. The GJFO utilized the Volunteer River Ranger program to better assist permit holders at the Loma Boat Launch and provide support to the Park Rangers during the busiest days. Other projects included Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) removal, upgrading signage, and hazardous tree removal.

Rivers Edge West and BLM Riparian Restoration Coordinator Partner Position

Rivers Edge West (REW) and BLM collaborated to create a Restoration Coordinator partner position to protect the natural qualities of McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area (MCNCA) by removing invasive species that have displaced native vegetation and altered ecological processes in the riparian zone. The Restoration Coordinator has been working alongside BLM staff to restore native flora along the Colorado River and Little Dolores River for the benefit of wildlife and recreationalists.

REW secured funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to protect wilderness characteristics along the Colorado River through invasive species removal projects, maintenance and monitoring. These projects are funded for five years, with on-the-ground work beginning in 2024. The Restoration Coordinator and BLM staff collaborated to prioritize sites for the project implementation.

REW and BLM staff partnered to conduct vegetation monitoring along the Colorado River and Little Dolores River in MCNCA. REW provided two trained interns that monitored approximately 700 acres of riparian habitat and mapped the location of invasive species. The Restoration Coordinator worked with BLM staff to provide logistical support to transport the monitoring interns to the sites. Data from this effort is being used to direct future vegetation treatments to meet resource management objectives.

Challenges

In recent years BLM has seen a drastic increase in visitor use within MCNCA. Keeping up with public outreach and education, maintenance of facilities, and resource protection has required the GJFO to bring on more staff to keep up with the high use during the busy seasons which are typically spring/fall. In 2023, three career seasonalers were hired as well as two seasonal interns.

Visitors

MCNCA has vast recreational opportunities. The cities of Fruita, Grand Junction, and Palisade continue to market themselves as desirable destinations for the avid outdoor recreator, frequently highlighting proximity to the MCNCA as a reason to visit. Locals enjoy the backyard to backcountry opportunities the NCA has to offer, and this proximity continues to be a primary reason for the Grand Valley's newest residents to make the Western Slope of Colorado their home. The variety of recreational experiences include world-class mountain biking, river rafting, hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, off-highway vehicle (OHV) travel, and wildlife viewing. Visitors can also enjoy a broad range of recreational settings, including remote wilderness, river corridors, and canyon rims and escarpments.

The 142-mile Kokopelli Trail runs through MCNCA to Moab, Utah, and the Colorado River winds its way for 19 miles through the spectacular canyon country of MCNCA. In 2023 there was an increase of popularity of Rattlesnake arches trail. BLM estimates over 320,000 people visited the NCA in 2023.



Partnerships

Colorado Canyons Association

Colorado Canyon Association (CCA) is the Friends group to Colorado's three National Conservation Areas (Dominguez-Escalante, McInnis Canyons and Gunnison Gorge NCA). In FY 2023, they helped BLM staff host river cleanups, trail monitoring classes, educational trips for area youth, and community outreach events. CCA provided crucial assistance in visitor services for the NCAs at the BLM office, organizing volunteer projects, and creating awareness in the community surrounding the stewardship and management of MCNCA.

Colorado Mesa University

MCNCA staff partnered with Colorado Mesa University (CMU) for a variety of projects. MCNCA hosted 4 student interns from CMU's Environmental Science Program. The CMU interns completed Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring studies, while conducting plant inventories, rare plant monitoring, and visitor information services.

Mesa County

BLM has established an assistance agreement with the Mesa County Trails Program, and Mesa County also completes important road maintenance projects in MCNCA.

City of Fruita and the Fruita Trails Initiative

BLM managers met frequently with the City of Fruita and the Fruita Trails initiative to develop projects relating to BLM-managed and City of Fruita lands. The BLM-Fruita partnership centered on a proposal for new mountain bike trails in the Mack Ridge Recreation Management Zone, colloquially referred to as the Kokopelli Loops, and continued assistance from the city for trash removal from trailheads in the Fruita front country.

RiversEdge West

BLM has established an assistance agreement with REW to fund a Riparian Restoration Coordinator partner position that will collaborate with BLM staff to implement riparian restoration activities on BLM-managed lands and oversee monitoring. REW also provides funding and resources to the BLM to accomplish restoration projects and monitoring.

More Great Partners

MCNCA benefitted from strong partnerships with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado State University, Colorado West Land Trust, Western Colorado Conservation Corps, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Grand Mesa Backcountry Horsemen, Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association, Motorcycle Trail Riders Association, Museums of Western Colorado, and School District 51.

Science

eDNA and Disease Studies of Amphibians

Since 2019, USGS, CMU, and MCNCA have partnered to collect water samples and test for traces of non-native bullfrogs and native sensitive amphibian species and diseases. The project continues to be ongoing.

Pollinator Studies

A Presidential memorandum dated June 20, 2014, creates a strategy to promote the health of honeybees and other pollinators directing the BLM to research whether sagebrush restoration impacts pollinators and their habitats. The National Landscape Conservation System Management Studies Support Program funds research on public land activities effect pollinators and their habitats. The BLM created a strategy to promote the health of honeybees and other pollinators and work continues in MCNCA.

Shrub Islands of Opportunity for Arid Rangelands Conservation

Colorado State University is performing important research in MCNCA to determine how sagebrush islands can aid arid rangeland conservation. Restoration of salt desert and sage brush systems is difficult. Research in these systems builds off past research and provides land managers practical tools for success of these critical habitats. This is an ongoing project.

Citizen Science

BLM is also engaging the community in citizen science projects. With citizen science the public can participate in the scientific process, formulate research questions, conduct scientific experiments, collect and analyze data, interpret results, make new discoveries, develop technologies and applications, and solve complex problems. In 2023, BLM and CCA co-sponsored 3 citizen science projects that 59 people participated in.

These projects held in MCNCA include:

- **Greening Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) project:** CCA, Palisade Insectary, and the BLM helped get Advanced Placement Environmental Science students on the Colorado River for the annual National Environmental Education Foundation's Greening STEM project. Students learned about invasive species monitoring and helped with the monitoring and release of biological controls.



- **Chronolog installations:** Chronolog is used by organizations worldwide to create crowd-sourced time lapses that monitor the environment and engage communities in science. There are currently three Chronolog installations in MCNCA that BLM continues to monitor.
- **Sensitive plant species monitoring:** BLM partnered with CCA to train volunteers on a standardized protocol for collecting data on sensitive plant species during seasons that the plants are easily identifiable. Programs like this help BLM gather important ecological data in MCNCA.

Climate Impacts

Drier, warmer conditions can affect restoration response, for example after a fire, trail construction, or other disturbance. Water availability in canyons can also be affected by less snowpack, and warmer and drier periods, which may affect wildlife that depend on these areas.

Climate Resiliency

Ongoing research is being conducted and used to improve climate resilience through better informed and improved management actions. Past internal research on restoration

after fire has been used to improve post-fire restoration techniques and has been implemented in the burned area from the 2020 Sieber Fire.

Ongoing research in partnership with National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and Colorado National Monument will consider past changes in sagebrush and pinyon juniper communities, and inform sage grouse habitat, fuels, and other treatments in these habitats. Ongoing research on amphibian use of canyons in partnership with US Geological Survey, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and CMU will inform habitat, and population management, especially invasive bullfrog management.

Social and Environmental Justice

BLM works with CCA and community partners like the Riverside Education Center, Dual Immersion Academy, and Mesa County Partners to help remove barriers underserved youth may face when visiting and recreating on public lands. These partnerships provide the opportunity for the BLM to host students in a safe and supportive outdoor classroom setting where they can develop new skills and learn about natural and cultural resource management. These partnerships provide hundreds of students with new experiences, such as place-based learning, hiking, rafting, and camping. While gaining new knowledge, experiences, and skills, students also learn about potential careers in public land management and understand that public lands are for all Americans.

Events

Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

The BLM has partnered with CCA for over a decade to turn NCAs into outdoor classrooms for thousands of students and foster a deeper connection between visitors and the land through education, outreach, volunteer, and stewardship programs.

The education programs provide local K-12 students and the public with the opportunity to connect to the outdoors by learning about a variety of topics in a hands-on, exciting, and standards-based way. In 2018, the river education program was developed. This program expansion provides unique and meaningful river education experiences for hundreds of students each year. Local students get to float the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers on day-long and overnight rafting trips with the opportunity to stay at CCA's riverside science and adventure camp, named Catalpa. This unique experience allows students to connect to their public lands in exciting ways. In 2023, BLM and CCA co-sponsored 16 education trips reaching 474 students, for a total of 4,330 hours spent with students in MCNCA.



From hikes and lectures to rafting trips, BLM and CCA's co-sponsored outreach program focuses on the scientific significance and cultural heritage of the NCAs. By educating the community on the importance of our NCAs, BLM and CCA hope to foster a deeper connection between visitors and the land. In 2023, 61 community members participated in seven programs.

Rabbit Valley Highway Cleanup

In partnership with Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), CCA helped clean up their adopted 2-mile section of highway along the Rabbit Valley exit of McInnis Canyons NCA. CDOT provided volunteers with trash bags and reflective safety vests, while BLM provided trash pickers to assist volunteers with the clean-up effort. This is an annual event hosted in October between these partners.

Ruby Horsethief River Clean-Up

The BLM partnered with both CCA and Odell Brewing Company for their annual "Make it Pretty!" campaign. Volunteers and staff floated the Colorado river from the Loma boat ramp to the Westwater take-out removing any trash spotted along the river corridor. This event took place over two days, included 17 volunteers and five host staff (CCA, BLM,

Odell). The group floated 25 miles and removed a boat trailer's worth of trash and contributed 408 Volunteer hours.

National Public Lands Day 'Great Poop Scoop' & Trail Work at Devil's Canyon

CCA and BLM partners hosted their annual National Public Lands Day event at MCNCA's Devil's Canyon with 24 volunteers who worked in tandem to collect the overwhelming amount of dog waste along the main D1/D3 trail, while other volunteers helped naturalize emerging social trails along the D5 connector. Hopefully as these areas continue to be monitored, the work done will deter other visitors from creating other user-created trails in sensitive areas, in hopes that the vegetation in the area can begin to grow and thrive again. This effort contributed 72 volunteer hours.

MCNCA Earth Day Clean-Up

CCA assisted BLM staff in cleaning up a dump site out at Mack Ridge in MCNCA. Two volunteers spent six hours for this clean-up. Dumpster and resources were provided by BLM. Trash removed included mattresses, couches, other misc. furniture, and more.

MCNCA Adopt-A-Trail

The CCA's FY2023 Adopt-A-Trail Volunteer event hosted 214 participants that contributed 464 hours. Volunteers conducted trail monitoring and also picked up micro-trash along various trails in all three of Colorado's NCAs (DENCA, MCNCA and Gunnison Gorge NCA).



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

**McInnis Canyons
National Conservation Area**
Upper Colorado River District Office
Bureau of Land Management
Grand Junction Field Office
2815 H Road
Grand Junction, CO 81506
Phone: (970) 244-3000

Report compiled by:

Jenna Moore, National Conservation Area Manager (Acting)
Amber Koski, National Conservation Area Manager
Anjelica Spencer, Ecologist
Billie Nack, Park Ranger & Visitor Information Services
Zack Kelley, Outdoor Recreation Planner

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