



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

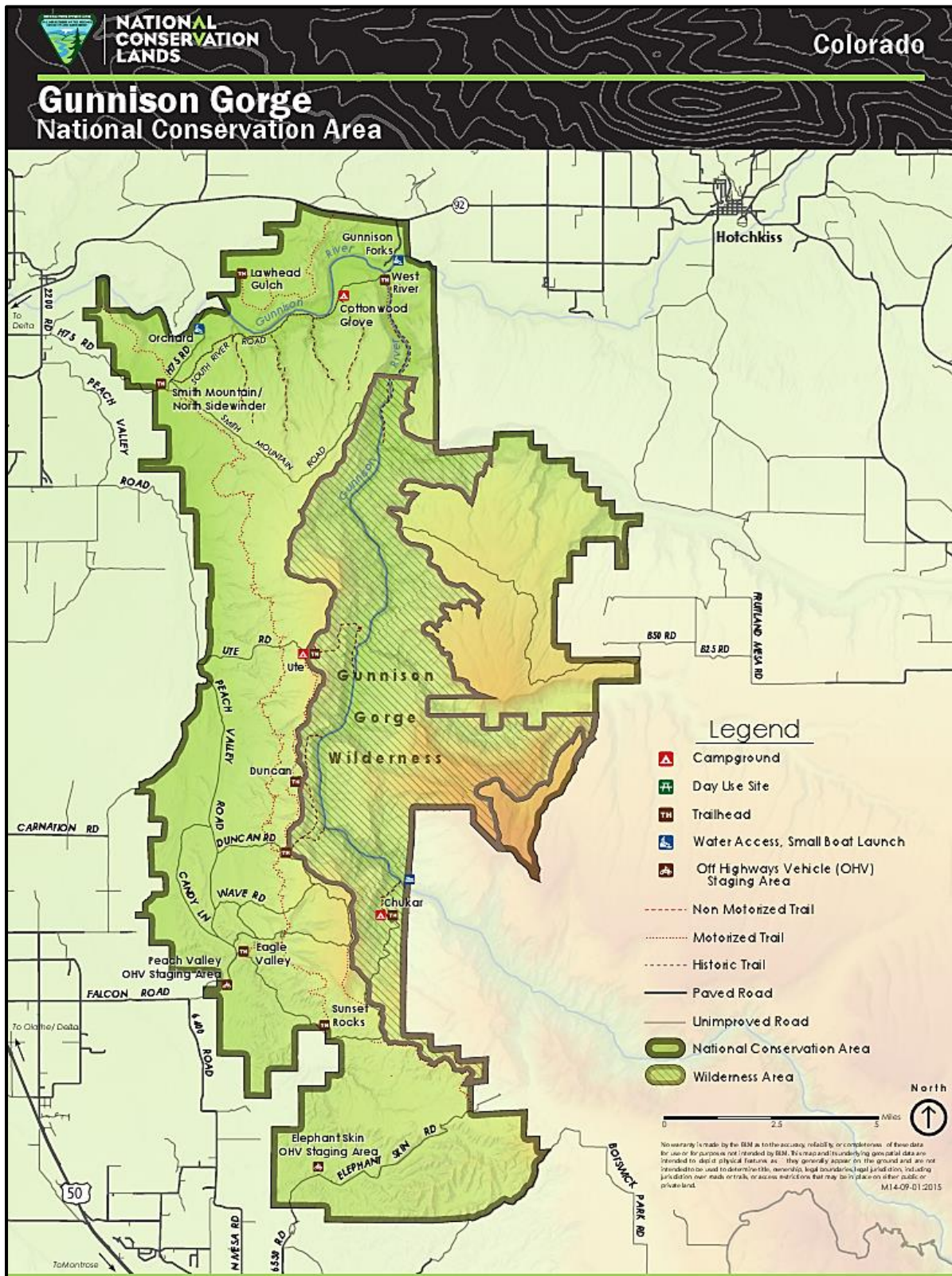
Colorado
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

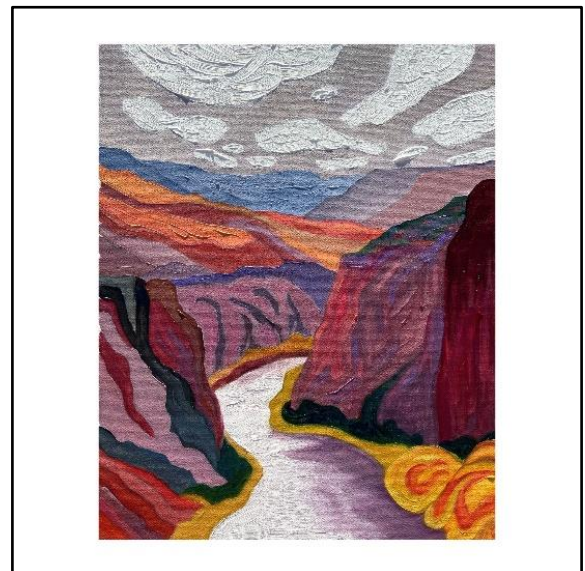
Colorado Canyons Association

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) partnership with Colorado Canyons Association (CCA), an award-winning Friends Group, continued in full force in fiscal year 2023 in Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA). Despite challenges with water levels, CCA conducted over 10 river trips that opened a pathway for underserved youth to experience their public lands in a way that may otherwise be inaccessible to them. 1,391 contact hours means there was plenty of opportunity to imprint a love of stewardship and nature, as well as career pathways! Even more importantly, students were actively exposed to social emotional learning, team building, and resiliency. Our annual Cottonwood Days event reached 367 students in 2023, and 1,468 contact hours involved learning about native and non-native fish (*above*), macroinvertebrates, connection of Ute peoples to the land, the riparian ecosystem, and even the art of flyfishing and fly tying.



Artist-in-Residence

In 2023, BLM co-hosted an Artist-in-Residence, Andrea Stolarczyk, for an entire year. In close collaboration with CCA, Andrea explored the three National Conservation Areas in our backyards, McInnis Canyons, Dominguez-Escalante, and Gunnison Gorge. Throughout the year, Andrea shared her various forms of art all inspired by the landscapes ("Fall in the Gorge," *right*).



Dark Skies

In 2023, BLM and our partner groups polished off the application packet for GGNCA to be recognized as a Dark Sky Park, a certification granted by Dark Sky International (DSI) in recognition and celebration of dark skies and dark sky preservation. Part of the certification requirements is outreach and events that focus on dark sky resources, so look out for materials and events from us in the future!

“Keeping It Wild” Report

In 2023, Society for Wilderness Stewardship placed two Wilderness “dayens” (meaning expert in a particular field) to conduct an inventory of wilderness character. Every 5 years, all wilderness areas across the nation must compile a report of wilderness character (improving, stable, or declining), called Keeping It Wild. Wilderness character is evaluated through the following qualities: untrammelled, undeveloped, natural, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and other features of value. Look out for the published report once it gets finalized in 2024!

Road Improvements

Roads leading into the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness (Chukar, Ute, Duncan, Bobcat) received much needed maintenance in 2023 (Chukar) and early 2024 (Bobcat, Duncan, Ute), which is beneficial to the sustainability and usability of these popular access roads to the Wilderness.

Clay-Loving Buckwheat Protection

In 2023, BLM ecologist and recreation staff took a hard look at the interaction between clay-loving wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum pelinophilum*) and illegal off-route use and worked together to fence off the crucial habitat of this endangered species (*below*).



Eagle Rock Shelter

In 2023, UFO cultural resource specialists continued to monitor both prehistoric and historic cultural resources. Ongoing research at Eagle Rock Shelter continues to provide insight on how people lived and utilized the shelter and the surrounding landscape. The NCA features evidence of Native Americans occupying the landscape in the form of lithic artifacts and pottery (belongings), petroglyphs (stories), plants remains, rock shelters, and wooden structures. These archaeological investigations study the connections between people, landscape, belongings, and stories for the future generations to come.



Challenges

Some of the challenges in 2023 include high water levels that led to flooding of recreation sites (boat ramps, campgrounds, and primitive campsites). The high water caused a double peak release in the Gunnison Gorge, which meant that there were more hazardous conditions to float/fish the river for a longer than normal period of time during the season. Outfitter and guide companies were forced to cancel many high-value trips during the double release.

Our usual challenge is keeping up with illegal trash dumping on our public lands, including in GGNCA. BLM is grateful to receive reports of these dumps from volunteers, but it is a challenge to constantly route resources towards picking up trash.



Visitors

Visitors come to GGNCA for a diverse array of activities, including but not limited to, whitewater rafting, Wilderness exploration, fishing, camping, hiking, mountain biking, hunting, wildlife viewing, and OHV riding. Most recently, pack rafting has become a popular activity in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, due to its practicality of packing, gear minimalism, and ability to navigate the rapids.



Visitor Use Monitoring Studies

In 2023, an estimated 185,000 visitors experienced the NCA, a 12% increase from 2021. It is expected that visitation will continue to increase as outdoor recreation is becoming more and more prominent within the surrounding communities. In order to understand the impact visitation trends have on experiences and benefits in the NCA, BLM has implemented an enhanced visitor-use monitoring program, with traffic counters, staff observations, and SRP post-use reports. Furthermore, in 2023, BLM partnered with University of Alaska and Colorado Mesa University to conduct on-the-ground (and online) surveys of visitors across various recreation sites in the NCA. The results will help influence future allocation models for the river stretches, as well as help BLM understand the general satisfaction of current visitors to our NCA.

Partnerships

Colorado Canyons Association

CCA plays a huge role in the education, interpretation, and stewardship of our 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, while others hike to Eagle Rock Shelter to learn about the cultural significance of the site to the three Ute Tribes. CCA also hosts many “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. CCA also partners with BLM’s biologists to conduct habitat restoration treatments



(below) every year in critical habitat for Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*), a listed threatened species. 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.

In addition to our long-standing partnership with CCA, BLM works closely with and appreciates support from the following community groups and organizations:

- The Gunnison Gorge Anglers chapter of Trout Unlimited
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- The Nature Connection
- Ute Indian Museum
- Montrose County
- Delta County
- The US Forest Service
- Western Colorado Conservation Center
- Westcore
- Permitted commercial outfitters and guides

Science

Clay-loving Buckwheat

In fiscal year 2023, BLM ecologist and range specialists conducted field work and published a research article on a distribution model of an endangered clay-loving wild buckwheat (Zimmer et al., 2023)¹. The model predictions greatly improve the BLM's understanding of the species' habitat and increase our ability to consider potential habitat in planning land use activities (road development, recreation, travel management, etc.).



Photo credit: Phil Krening

Acoustic Bat Monitoring

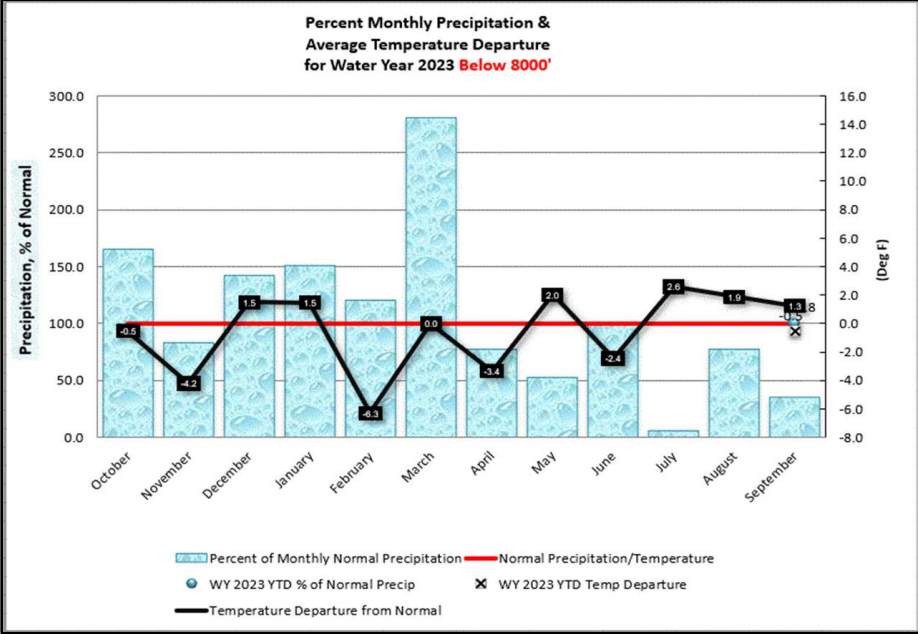
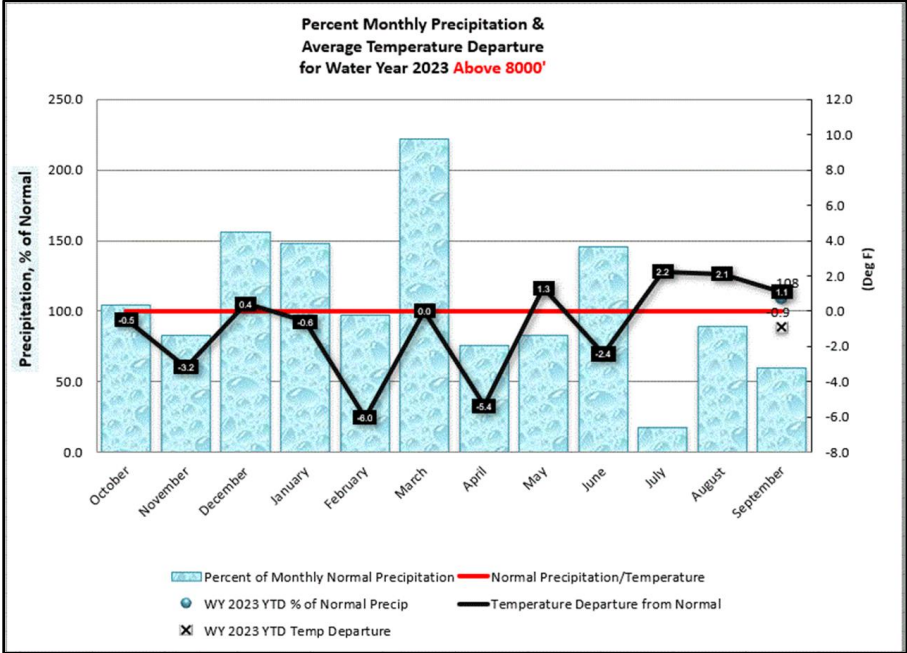
In 2023, the BLM wildlife biology team completed their third year of acoustic bat monitoring in GGNCA. The recordings are processed with a machine-learning algorithm, manually vetted by an expert, then submitted to the NABat project for inclusion in a continent-wide bat monitoring effort². The robust survey design and protocols make this dataset a statistically valuable tool for monitoring trends in bat populations across the continent. Of the 18 species of bats found in Colorado, we have documented 15 in the Gorge! One of the exciting finds this year was the presence of spotted bats (*Euderma maculatum*). Its echolocation call is long in duration and low in frequency. These characteristics make the echolocation difficult to 'capture' with acoustic monitors, but also makes it audible to humans – a rarity!

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.10816>

² <https://www.nabatmonitoring.org>

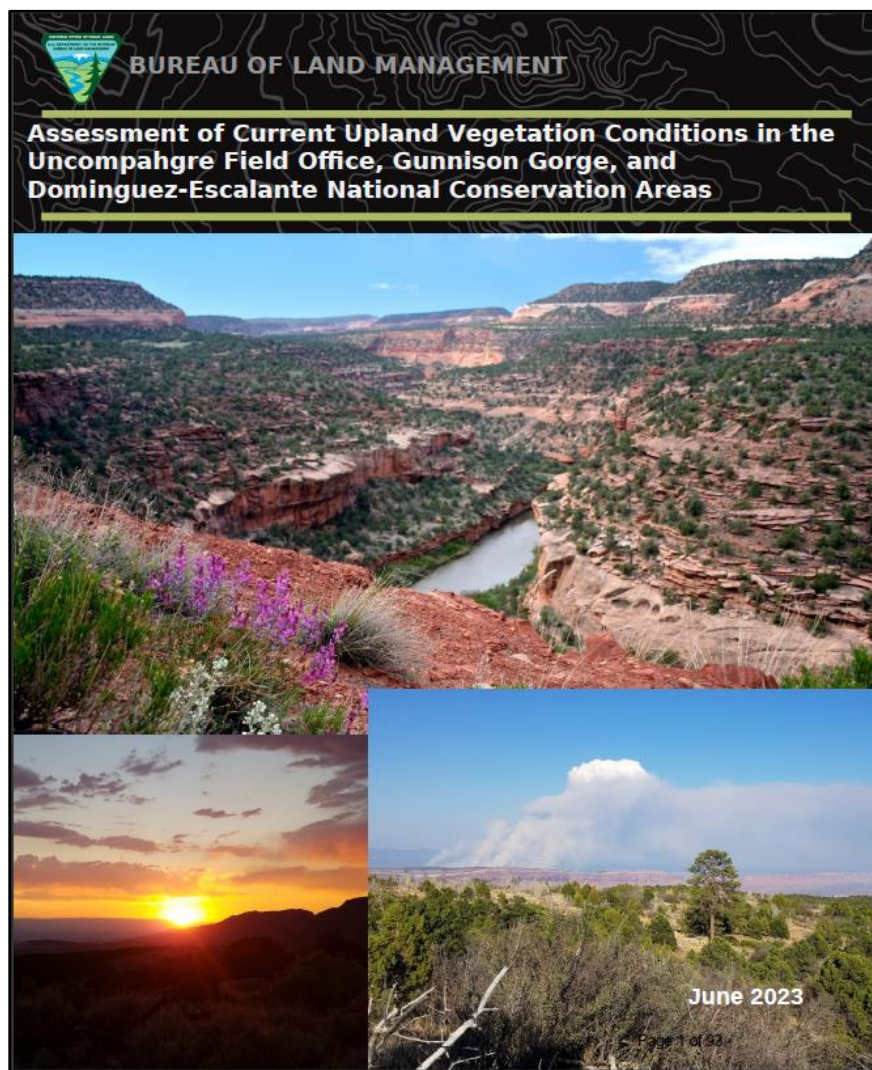
Climate Impacts

The 2023 water year was a year of extremes that ended slightly cooler and wetter than the 30-year average. The first 6 months saw larger than average snowfall and cooler temperatures, but the last half swung in the opposite direction with less than normal precipitation and cooler temperatures. Soil moisture levels reached higher levels than the previous 3 years but dried quickly. The hotter and drier conditions in the 4th quarter drove moderate and severe drought back into the southwestern corner of CO.



Climate Resiliency

In 2023, BLM Uncompahgre Field Office completed the first Terrestrial Assess, Inventory, and Monitor (AIM) panel, which includes GGNCA (Benkendorf et al., 2023)³. The purpose of the report is to understand and quantify the current condition of upland vegetation resources and evaluate the condition relative to the goals and objectives set in the Resource Management Plans. This report focuses on four important ecological indicators to report upland vegetation conditions: bare ground, soil stability, invasive species, and plant functional group cover and composition (trees, shrubs, perennial grasses, and forbs). In support of climate resiliency into the future, this report may be used to guide and justify policy actions, land uses, and adaptive management decisions.



³ Benkendorf, Reed, and K. Holsinger. 2023. Assessment of Current Upland Vegetation Conditions in the Uncompahgre Field Office, Gunnison Gorge, and Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Areas U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Uncompahgre Field Office, Montrose, CO.

Social and Environmental Justice

BLM works with CCA and our community partners to reach underserved youth in our communities. We have built partnerships with groups like the Montrose Recreation Center, Montrose Engagement Center, Outer Range, Friends of Youth and Nature, and Delta County Partners to help remove barriers students and their families may face when visiting and recreating on public lands. These partnerships provide the opportunity for the BLM to host students in an outdoor classroom setting and to provide a safe environment while fostering new skills and knowledge of the resource. These partnerships provide hundreds of youths in our community with new-to-them experiences, such as place-based learning, hiking, rafting, and camping on their public lands. BLM takes an active role to also teach youth about potential careers in public land management. We are striving to build a workforce that reflects the face of the community we serve which will help us better reach underserved youth and help them understand that public lands are for all Americans and see themselves in a career in conservation.



Events

Education, Outreach, & Interpretation

The BLM has partnered with CCA for over a decade to turn our 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. In 2023, 18 adults were engaged in an interpretive bat walk led by a BLM biologist; 30 volunteers came out to give Sidewinder Trail a facelift for Earth Day; 44 underserved students from the Montrose Engagement Center experienced a ranger-led hike into GGNCA, focusing on social emotional learning and interpersonal development. Junior ranger programming was extended further this year to include a “Camping 101” trip with Montrose Library in Cottonwood Grove Campground (9 participants), family event at Eagle Rock Shelter (12 participants), and a ranger-led hike with Montrose Recreation District (11 participants).

Here is a snapshot of our combined impact in 2023:





NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area

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[Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area | Bureau of Land Management \(blm.gov\)](https://www.blm.gov/gunnison-gorge-national-conservation-area)

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