



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

**Montana-Dakotas**  
2023: Annual Manager's Report

# Pompeys Pillar

## National Monument



# Map



# Accomplishments

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In 2023, several important projects were accomplished at Pompeys Pillar National Monument (PPNM).

When the Yellowstone River flooded in the summer of 2022, the Elk River trail sustained damage. This year PPNM staff worked to re-route and rehabilitate the trail, remove sand, rocks and tree branches that had been deposited by the flood and removed tall grasses that had grown and begun to obscure the path. This was not the only trail to receive improvements. PPNM staff installed two new information kiosks at key trailheads and new trail signs with names, distance, and hazards at trail intersections to improve navigation. While out enjoying the newly improved trails, visitors may see one of three recently added American Kestrel nest boxes and hopefully their new residents, as they were installed to encourage more avian habitation. Local news station KTVQ featured the newly improved trails at PPNM with a TV news segment and online article promoting the Monument.

After being vacant, two key positions, the park ranger - visitor use lead and the park ranger – interpretation lead were filled this year. The new visitor use lead transitioned PPNM from using Collections and Billings System point-of-sale system to Recreation.gov to ease entry fee sales transactions and improve pass accountability. Other accomplishments included recalibrating the TRAFx infrared trail counters at unstaffed entrances to the Monument to track recreational visitation more accurately and leading the visitor survey effort. The new interpretation lead provided interpretive opportunities for visitors despite limited staffing and facilitated several events including the annual Signature Day event and a Dark Skies presentation.

This summer, PPNM conducted a Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) Visitor Satisfaction Survey in coordination with the BLM's National Operation Center and Washington State University with the results yielding a 100% satisfaction rating.

New benches were purchased for the interpretive center to allow for visitors to relax before and after ascending the Pillar.

A revamped brochure and rack card for the Monument were also created this year to showcase the new trail system.

The construction phase for the rock stabilization project finally began. More specific information about the project is outlined under the Science heading.

# Challenges

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This season, PPNM was slightly understaffed. Despite this challenge staff still hosted school groups and several events by prioritizing objectives and taking on extra workloads. With the maintenance worker position vacated early in the spring, staff and volunteers took up the work of mowing, tree-trimming, etc. Throughout the season, individuals were offered overtime and took up a multitude of tasks to ensure visitors were satisfied with their visit. Below, rangers give an interpretive talk at the PPNM amphitheater.

The rock stabilization project is an ongoing project and challenge at the site. Contractors were delayed and started later than expected. At the present time, work is expected to be finished by April 2024.

Infrared trail counters were down throughout the summer because of technical issues, which means staff had to be vigilant with their counts. Counters were repaired after the season ended.

Like other locations, seasonal staff are challenged with finding affordable housing for the season. Currently, salaries for GS-05 seasonals are not very high for the area, so we anticipate this to be an ongoing challenge in the future.



# Visitors

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Pompeys Pillar welcomes thousands of visitors every year from all over the world. This year, our total visitation was approximately 22,425. This is slightly less than previous years, but still consisted of a wide cultural audience. Visitors in our count were comprised of school groups, road-trippers, tour groups, local visitors, and international visitors. This count also includes visitors to the 432-acre Pompeys Pillar Area of Critical Environmental Consern (ACEC), who are typically hunters and other recreationists.

Even with a smaller staff, thousands of interpretive talks/tours were presented to the public. Topics ranged from the history of Pompeys Pillar, diversity of people who carved on the Pillar, plant and animal identification, and more. Over the season, 469 junior rangers completed the booklet and were sworn in. Below, visitors listen to information about Pompey's Pillar.



# Partnerships

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Monument staff worked closely with our partners throughout the year to provide visitors with the best experience possible, to foster fun events for the public and meet resource restoration goals on the Monument and within the broader ACEC. These partners include the Friends of Pompeys Pillar, Daughters of the American Revolution, National Park Service - Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, Western Heritage Center, and several volunteers. In addition, Pheasants Forever and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks aided in restoration and monitoring projects in the ACEC. We also were fortunate to have Montana Conservation Corps Fellows and Interns join our ranks this season.

Thanks to our partners, we were able to provide unique interpretation programs, e.g. demonstrating weapons the Corps of Discovery would have used on their expedition and how a frontier camp would have looked. These partnerships helped us broaden our understanding and enhance our ability to create more connections between our visitors and the amazing resources found at the Monument.



# Science

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Billings Field Office (BIFO) biologists, along with Pillar staff and interns, performed several scientific projects throughout the year. The first of these was part of a decade-old restoration project on the adjoining ACEC. We are working to restore old farmland to a more natural state by planting native vegetation and perennials. BIFO biologists also conducted bumble bee surveys on our site and found two sensitive species – *Bombus occidentalis* and *B. pensylvanicus*. These two species are currently under review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for possible listing under the Endangered Species Act.

BIFO biologists also conducted point counts for cavity nesting birds in the riparian woodland areas of PPNM. Cavity nesters rely on primary cavity excavators, i.e. woodpeckers, or naturally occurring cavities to make their nests. Surveys indicated a healthy number of primary cavity excavators, which in turn supports secondary cavity nesting species, such as nuthatch species, chickadees, and swallows.



The rock stabilization project construction contract was awarded in May 2023 to contractor Triptych Construction, LLC. There have been some delays during this project, but it is expected to finish in April 2024 prior to the start of the season, May 1. The stabilization work will address key areas of the sandstone formation and protect them from the effects of erosion. Specifically, the work included water diversion at the top of the Pillar. This will attempt to control water from flowing into the large cracks at the top and hopefully prevent the freeze thaw cycle from degrading the sandstone. Geotextile, gravel, curbing, and drain, as well as a drainpipe were installed. Work also included encapsulating the shale stone layer below the signature blocks to prevent further erosion. This included rock bolting, underpinning, structural shotcrete, and architectural shotcrete. Work also included supporting turtle rock head with rock bolts and a support. The BLM is doing this because we want to continue to allow the public to access the only remaining visible evidence of the Corps of Discovery's trail and other significant markings and inscriptions. We want future generations to have the same opportunities to experience this unique feature of the American landscape. We also have a duty to ensure that the public has a safe and enjoyable visit to Pompeys Pillar National Monument.





# Climate Impacts

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The spring and early summer months of 2023 offered higher rainfall percentages than normal. The abundance of green grass and nutrients provided ample sustenance for local species and migratory birds. The Yellowstone River also rose accordingly, but nowhere near the levels of 2022. One drawback was the increased presence of mosquitoes, which can carry several diseases. However, staff were outfitted with mosquito-foggers and spray to ward off the pesky insects plus a rudimentary mosquito scale on the front of the interpretive center helped visitors gauge their presence.

Another positive of the higher-than-normal rain levels was that fires were minimal in the area. In fact, area fires did not start until late in the summer and did not affect site visitation. We will continue to monitor the local climate and plan accordingly for its effects on the Monument.



# Climate Resiliency

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Weather station data can provide additional insight into the weather conditions at the Monument. This data will continue to be monitored. Flooding can always be anticipated due to the proximity of the Yellowstone River. One building that could be impacted by a major flood event is the Education Center built in the early 1990s.

Annual prescribed burning occurred on approximately 74 of the 432-acre ACEC this year. The acreage is divided into units that are burned on a three-to-four-year rotation.



# Social and Environmental Justice

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During the season, PPNM partners with the National Audubon Society and schools from across the region to facilitate educational programs at the site. Fees are not charged to students, teachers, or chaperones for these trips. PPNM also has fee-free days throughout the season, as designated by the BLM.

For Spanish-speaking visitors, there are bilingual pamphlets available. Besides the Audubon Society, the Monument collaborates with other local, non-governmental groups who focus on interpretive and educational efforts for underserved communities, such as the Rimrock Foundation.

We frequently consult with the eight federally recognized tribes in Montana to ensure tribal viewpoints are factored into our decisions. The Monument was populated by native tribes thousands of years before Clark engraved his signature; PPNM strives to include tribal viewpoints for all projects, such as the rock stabilization, and new events and programs. Below, is a photo of a metal and glass tipi-shaped structure located at the interpretive center with flags of the eight Montana tribes flanking it.



# Events

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Pompeys Pillar hosted several events in 2023. The annual Signature Day Event on July 25 featured several booths with geological information, Pillar history, settler lifestyle, and Native American influence on the area. A “frontier camp” was also set up, where visitors could learn more about life on the frontier in the early 1800s. Staff and volunteers also wore buckskin garments and cooked food from recipes the Corps of Discovery frequently used. PPNM also hosted “Rock the Run” with the help of the Friends of Pompeys Pillar. This 5K race attracted over 40 competitors and was organized by numerous volunteers from the Friends and Daughters of the American Revolution. One month later, the Monument hosted local high school students as they participated in a cross-country meet.





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## **Pompeys Pillar**

### **National Monument**

Eastern Montana / Dakotas District Office  
Bureau of Land Management  
Billings Field Office  
5001 Southgate Drive  
Billings, MT 59101  
Phone: 406-896-5013

[To view photos of PPNM visit Flickr](#)

**Report compiled by:** Abram Johnson, Garrett Christensen, and John Reffit

*Pompeys Pillar National Monument (PPNM) encompasses 51 acres on the banks of the Yellowstone River with a massive sandstone outcrop covering about 2 acres at its base and rising 120 feet high toward Montana's Big Sky. The area's premier location at a natural ford in the Yellowstone River, and the Pillar's geologic distinction as the only major sandstone formation in the area, have made the site a celebrated landmark and outstanding observation point for more than eleven thousand years of human occupation. Hundreds of markings, petroglyphs, and inscriptions left by visitors have transformed this geologic phenomenon into a living journal of the American West. A National Historic Landmark since 1965, the land was acquired by the Bureau of Land Management in 1991 and was designated as a National Monument in January 2001. There are over 432 acres of public land associated with the monument, located about 25 miles east of Billings, Montana.*

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