NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Utah

2023: Annual Manager's Report

Red Cliffs

National Conservation Area

Map

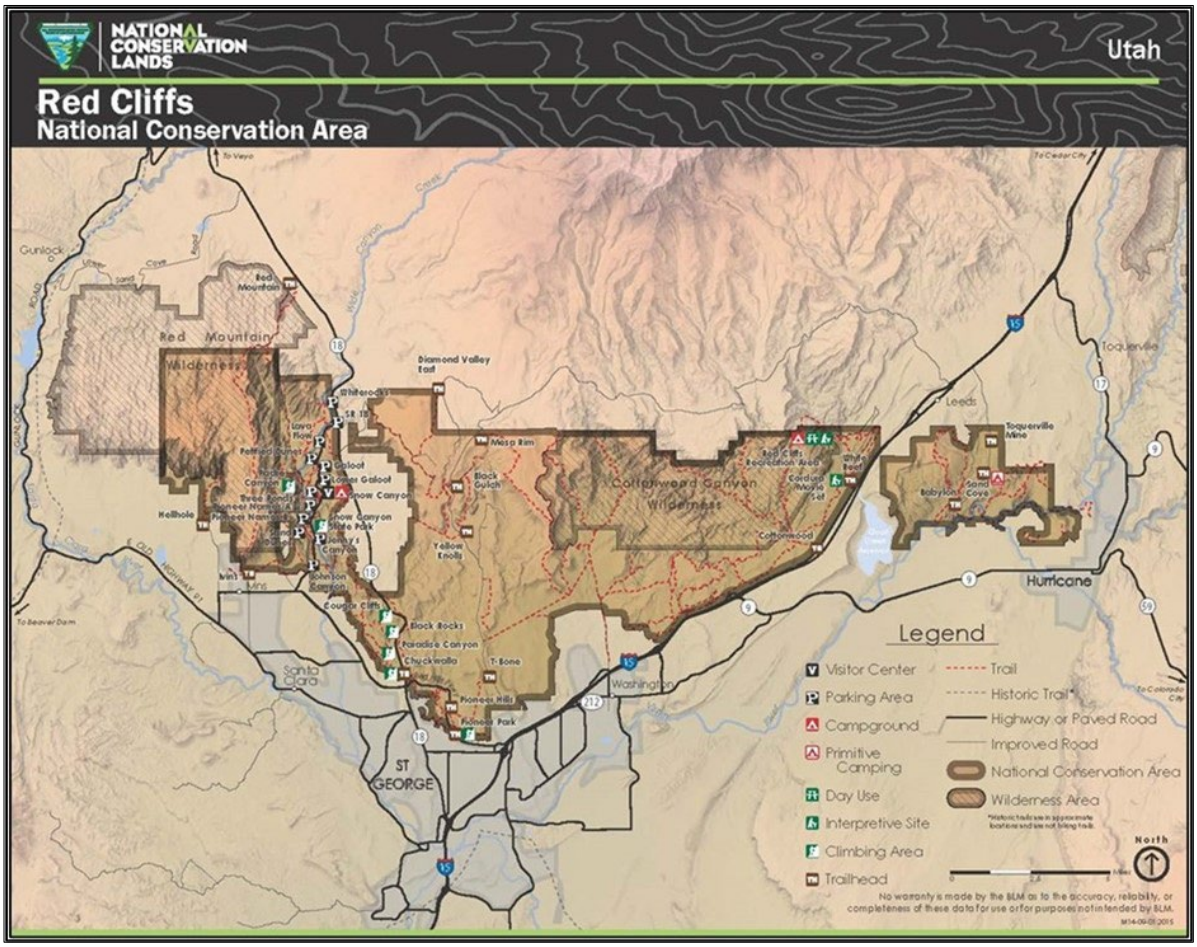

Figure 1: Map of Red Cliffs NCA.

Accomplishments

This year Red Cliffs NCA staff, assisted by youth crews and local volunteers, completed a trail rehabilitation project for the Red Reef Trail. This short but very scenic trail starts in the Red Cliffs Recreation Area campground, parallels Quail Creek through Red Reef Canyon, then enters the Cottonwood Canyon Wilderness. More than 100,000 visitors annually hike this trail, primarily in the spring when seasonal snow melt from the Pine Valley Mountains creates waterfalls and plunge pools along Quail Creek.

A popular trail since the 1960s, over time the original trail route had eroded and become increasingly difficult to follow. Visitors attempting to hike the steep, sandy slopes in some areas of the canyon had created a braided network of social trails. In January of 2023, three American Conservation Experience (ACE) youth crews helped NCA staff to define a single trail, by rebuilding 2,640 feet of trail tread, installing native rock retaining walls, and raking out dozens of social trails. Volunteers from the local Outback Hiking Club joined the crews and helped to plant and cage more than 400 mature, nursery grown native species, including prickly pear cactus, snow leopard and golden cholla, and narrow leaf yucca, along the trail, to discourage social trailing. As the photo below shows, this project created a sustainable trail that visitors can hike and enjoy, while eliminating resource damage.

Figure 2: ACE crews improving the Red Reef Trail

Challenges

In FY23, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), as co-lead agencies, took steps to begin the preparation of a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) to reconsider the approval of the Northern Corridor right-of-way (ROW) to the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), which would cross the Red Cliffs NCA. As part of this process, the FWS would consider an amendment of the Incidental Take Permit (ITP) issued to Washington County for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise (tortoise). An environmental services contractor was hired to assist the agencies with the preparation of the SEIS and core interdisciplinary resource specialists were identified by the BLM and FWS to work on this NEPA process. Challenges related to the SEIS include the abbreviated timeframe for its completion by November 2024, the complexities of interagency coordination, and the controversial nature of the project on a local and national level.

As background, in 2018 UDOT applied for a ROW grant for the Northern Corridor Project (a multi-lane highway project) on BLM-managed and non-federal lands in the NCA and the overlapping multi-jurisdictional Red Cliffs Desert Reserve (Reserve). To process UDOT's application, the BLM needed to consider amending the St. George Field Office and Red Cliffs NCA Resource Management Plans (RMPs). The FWS needed to complete a NEPA process to evaluate Washington County's application to renew its ITP, supported by an updated Habitat Conservation Plan that described the Northern Corridor highway as a potential changed circumstance that would be offset with the addition of a new sixth zone to the Reserve, as the primary conservation strategy. Between 2019-2021, the BLM and FWS jointly prepared an EIS to analyze the environmental impacts associated with the proposed actions and reasonable alternatives.

On January 13, 2021, the Secretary of the Interior signed a Record of Decision (ROD) that approved the BLM RMP amendments and UDOT's Northern Corridor ROW application. The BLM signed and issued the ROW grant to UDOT the same day. The FWS Regional Director for Interior Regions 5 and 7 also signed a ROD approving the issuance of an ITP to Washington County on the same day. In June of 2021, seven conservation groups filed complaints with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, claiming that the BLM and FWS decisions violated National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act. As part of the ongoing litigation, the United States Department of Interior, BLM, and FWS filed a motion with the Court requesting remand and partial vacatur of the BLM's and FWS's 2021 decisions. In addition to that motion, the Federal Defendants and the plaintiffs signed a settlement agreement in August of 2023 that included a commitment that the BLM and FWS would prepare an SEIS and publish new decisions by November 2024.

Visitors

Local residents and visitors to the area enjoyed the outdoor recreation opportunities that are available in the NCA that include hiking, mountain biking, and equestrian trail riding on over 130 miles of designated non-motorized trails; camping in developed and primitive campgrounds; backpacking in the Cottonwood Canyon and Red Mountain Wilderness areas; and rock climbing at multiple designated climbing sites-all just a few minutes' drive from downtown St. George.

Many of the 25 Special Recreation Permit (SRP) holders who operate in the NCA offer commercial guiding services for rock climbing, mountain biking, equestrian trail riding, and shuttles to trailheads.

In FY23, digital traffic/visitor counters recorded 607,680 visits and 100,166 visitor days in the NCA, a decrease from the approximately 625,000 visits tallied in FY22. The decline was, in part, attributable to a month-long closure in January 2023 of the popular Red Cliffs Recreation Area for deferred maintenance of the campground and day use facilities and potentially high gas prices. These deferred maintenance projects were funded through the Great American Outdoors Act.

Figure 3: Popular recreation activities in Red Cliffs NCA.

Partnerships

In March and April, highly qualified volunteers assisted the NCA Archeologist to complete archeological field investigations of approximately 193 acres along two reaches of the White Reef and adjacent areas along Leeds Creek in the NCA. The White Reef is a prominent northeast-southwest trending formation in which ore-grade silver chloride and sulfides were discovered in a sandstone matrix, a geological anomaly that baffled 19th century mining experts.

The focus of the field investigations was to identify and document historic mining features associated with the late 19th and early 20th century Harrisburg (Silver Reef) Mining District. This silver mining district was important in the history and economic development of Washington County, as an estimated $8.5 million dollars in ore values were extracted from its mines in less than 10 years of active mining, beginning in the 1870s. As a result of the field work, 22 previously undocumented sites and 35 artifacts were recorded in the NCA, in furtherance of BLM's heritage preservation responsibilities mandated by Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Figure 4: Archeologists surveying in Red Cliffs NCA.

Science

During FY23, the NCA biologist, assisted by ACE Biological Resource Associates and volunteers, continued a long-term monitoring program for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise, a number of BLM Sensitive species (e.g., Gila monster, kit fox, and bats), and other wildlife in the NCA. The program's goals are to determine the current distribution, abundance, age structure, diet, home range, and habitat use of these species. The data being collected by field monitoring is providing a baseline from which to evaluate current population status and trends and will assist with the updating of species-specific management goals.

As part of this program, ACE Resource Associates survey and map native vegetation communities and noxious weed infestations. They also help to design and implement habitat restoration projects for fire-damaged wildlife habitats. The vegetation studies and habitat restoration projects help to improve the quality of habitats for at-risk and other wildlife species in the NCA.

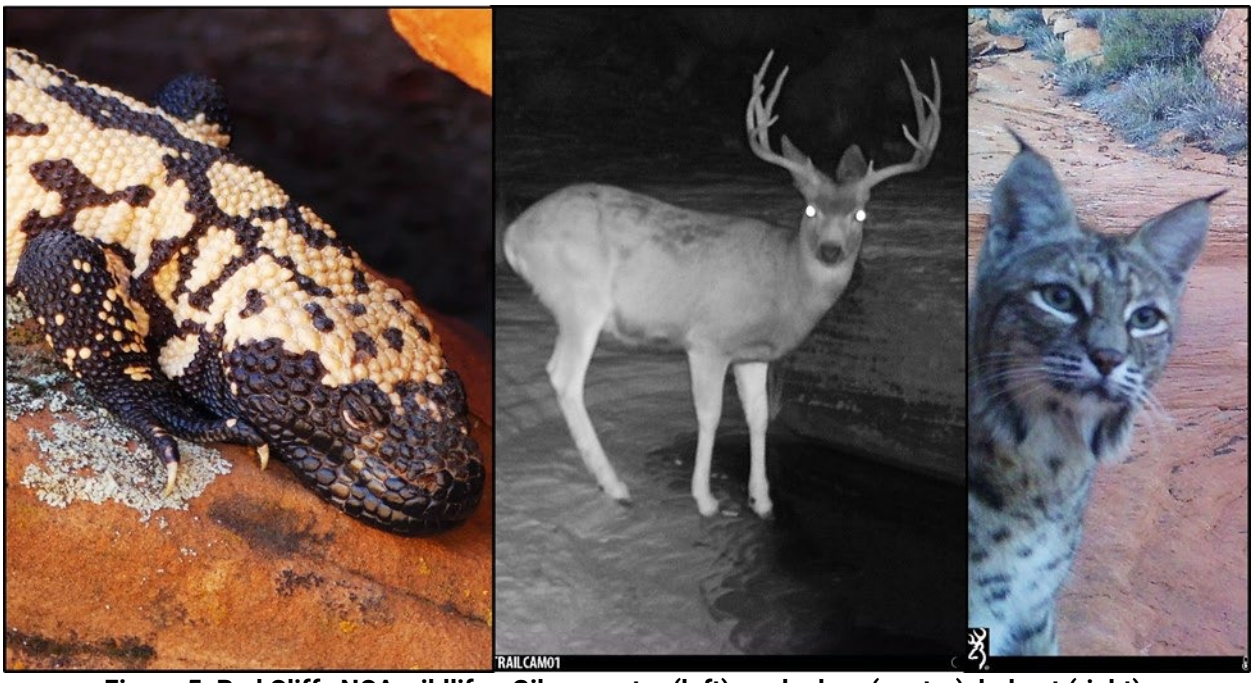

Figure 5: Red Cliffs NCA wildlife - Gila monster (left), mule deer (center), bobcat (right).

Climate Impacts

Prolonged periods of drought, in concert with elevated annual temperatures, erratic precipitation patterns, and wildfires continue to impact and alter the native vegetation communities of the NCA. The photo below shows the blackened landscape of an area of the NCA immediately after the 2020 Lava Ridge Fire. Exotic invasive annual brome grasses proliferate after fires, outcompete native species, and serve as fine fuels that contribute to increases in wildfire frequency, extent, and intensity. Climate change impacts are threatening ecosystem integrity and resiliency in the NCA and across the Mojave Desert.

Figure 6: Red Cliffs NCA after the 2020 Lava Ridge Fire.

Climate Resiliency

On-going efforts to create more climate resilient landscapes include working with partners and academic researchers to plan large and small-scale habitat rehabilitation projects for arid landscapes. One approach that is currently being implemented in the NCA is the hand planting of mature, nursery grown native species to create “fertile islands” in fire-damaged areas. Plant survivorship is measured during these projects to determine which native species can be successfully and cost-effectively used in fire-damaged vegetation communities.

Social and Environmental Justice

During FY23, youth corps crews from ACE and the Utah Conservation Corps assisted the NCA Outdoor Recreation Planner and Biologist with a variety of projects, including trail construction and maintenance, wildlife monitoring, and wildlife habitat rehabilitation projects in the NCA. ACE Emerging Professional's in Conservation (EPIC) Resource Associates complete internships with the NCA Biologist, gaining field and office experiences in wildlife and threatened and endangered species population and habitat condition monitoring. Both ACE programs provide young professionals with "on the ground/in the field" experiences that support their development as future conservation leaders and federal agency employees.

Exceptionally qualified candidates are recruited by ACE for its programs, helping to meet BLM's objectives of providing meaningful project and internship experiences for youth, and fostering a sense of public land stewardship in the next generation.

Figure 7: ACE interns working in the Red Cliffs NCA.

Events

In January of 2023, ACE youth crews assisted with a BLM-Utah Division of Wildlife Resources-sponsored project to rehabilitate 15 acres of fire damaged critical habitat for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise. The crews carried in over 550 pounds of seed and raked the seeds into the topsoil, to assist germination and discourage seed removal by birds and ants. The seed mix included native species such as globemallow, brittlebush. bitterbrush, desert trumpet, white bursage, creosote bush, galleta, sideoats grama, and purple threeawn. When mature, these diverse native species will provide food, shade, and shelter for tortoises, and benefit local pollinator species. A rare winter snowstorm on the first day of the project turned the NCA into a winter wonderland!

Figure 8: ACE crews reseeding native plants in Red Cliffs NCA.

Words from the staff

Dear Friends of Red Cliffs NCA

The Annual Manager's Report for Fiscal Year 23 highlights some of the important projects that the NCA staff and our partners were able to complete to conserve, protect, and enhance the resources and values of the NCA. This year, as in the past, recreational use of the NCA exceeded 600,000 visits, by locals and visitors from all over the world. Popular trailheads were full of vehicles, trails were crowded with hikers and mountain bikers, and the Red Cliffs Recreation Area campground remained full during much of the year. We were able to maintain facilities and make improvements to the campground and day use facilities, with funding provided by the Great American Outdoors Act. Youth crews from ACE and the Utah Conservation Corps helped us to repair trails that were damaged by snow and heavy rain during the winter months of 2023.

We were able to continue our efforts to rehabilitate fire-damaged areas within the Cottonwood Trail Fire that burned over 1,400 acres of critical habitat for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise in 2020. With the help of ACE crews, 15 acres of damaged habitat was re-seeded with native species that benefit desert tortoise and other wildlife.

Our efforts to inventory and monitor at-risk wildlife species populations, cultural resources, and the Cottonwood Canyons and Red Mountain Wilderness areas were furthered by contributions from dedicated volunteers, and community partners who support the conservation purposes of the NCA.

We thank all of you for your support of the Red Cliffs NCA!

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Red Cliffs NCA

Red Cliffs

National Conservation Area

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