



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

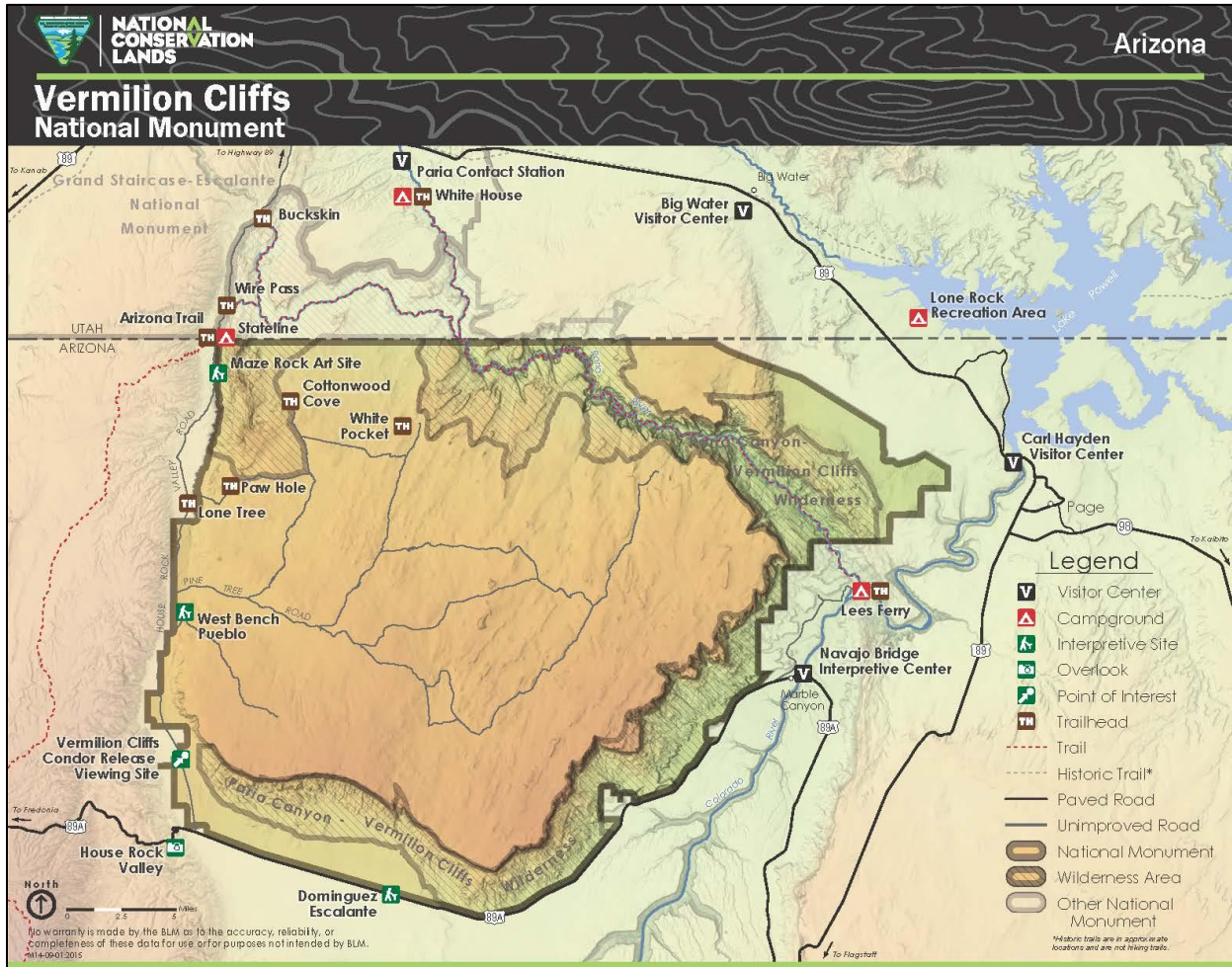
Arizona
2021: Annual Manager's Report

Vermilion Cliffs

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

The Vermilion Cliffs National Monument (VCNM) had many accomplishments this year, despite challenges presented by COVID-19. A couple of the accomplishments are listed below.

On January 8, 2021, the Deputy Secretary of the Interior signed three decision records resulting from the Environmental Analysis for a “Proposed Change in Management of Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness.” This culminated a 1 ½ year process. The decisions brought changes in visitor use numbers to Coyote Buttes North special management area where “The Wave” is located. These decisions also addressed needed infrastructure to support activities within the wilderness. This infrastructure was planned at trailheads that are located outside the wilderness. In coordination with the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) Kanab Field Office, trailhead construction began on both the Buckskin Gulch and Wire Pass Trailheads. The Kanab Field Office and VCNM jointly manage the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness. These two trailheads support Coyote Buttes North, Paria Canyon Overnight and Day Use permitting. Originally, the Wire Pass Trailhead’s vehicle capacity was approximately 30 vehicles. Capacity was exceeded on almost a daily basis, which overflowed into the road as well as into the surrounding vegetation. This trailhead expansion included hardening of surfaces and parking lot and kiosk delineation. Additionally, restroom facilities were doubled.

During the spring of 2021, staff completed implementation of the travel management plan and installed the last of the carsonite signs throughout the monument.

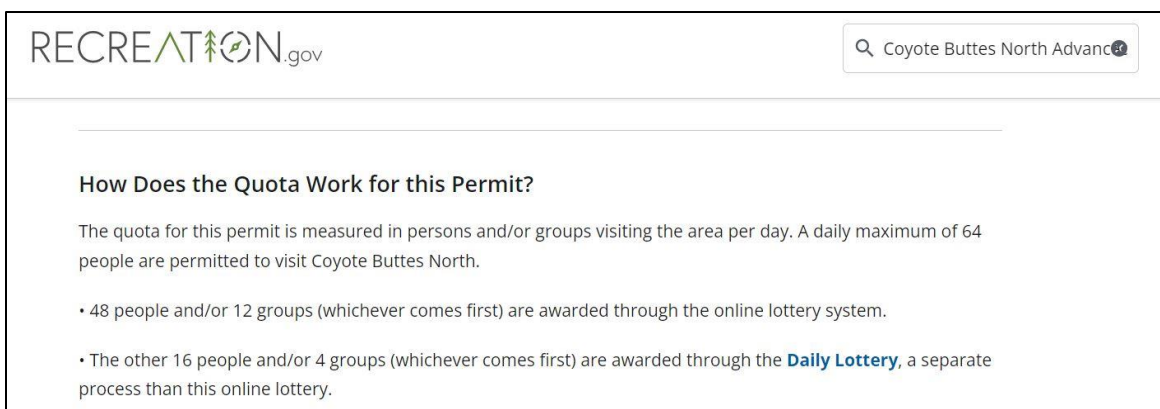


Photo 1: Screenshot of the Coyote Buttes North Advanced Lottery’s recreation.gov page.



Photo 2: Wire Pass Trailhead expansion project midway through construction. Left parking lot is new. Right parking lot's original footprint is where cars are parked in the photo. Shortly after photo was taken, the right parking lot was completed.



Photo 3: Newly installed vault toilets at the Wire Pass Trailhead.

Challenges

Staffing levels were a challenge this year for Vermilion Cliffs. In the fall of 2020, the Monument Manager began a 6-month detail filling in behind the Arizona Strip Field Manager who supported the State Office during the administration's transition. With the monument manager position temporarily vacant, two Arizona Strip Field Office employees temporarily promoted into the position and did an incredible job supervising staff and managing the National Monument.

In addition to the movement associated with the details, VCNM lost two of our three staff in early August to Safford BLM and the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area. These two employees were incredible people and accomplished so many hard and incredible projects. They have been sorely missed. It has been extremely challenging filling these vacancies. Seven months after their departure, we have finally filled the positions. During that time, we had one staff member on a term position here on the monument.



Photo 4: VCNM Outdoor Recreation Planner on the left.

Visitors

Despite COVID-19 travel limitations, VCNM visitation was estimated at 211,323 visits. This estimate is based on numerous traffic counters across the monument. Monument staff have initiated discussions about developing a visitor use plan. This plan would entail protocol, location, and standard operating procedures of data collection. In addition, staff are pursuing other methods and technologies to gather more accurate data relative to recreational activities and numbers. Besides 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 VCNM. It runs along the southern edge of the national monument while providing a spectacular view of the Vermilion Cliffs. Access to the monument is limited off the highway, as the cliffs and wilderness area butt up to the highway. The roads that access the national monument are unpaved and minimally maintained. Most of the time, House Rock Valley Road is accessible in a two-wheel drive, high-clearance vehicle; however, any access to the Paria Plateau or 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 search and rescue or other means of 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.



Figure 5: White Pocket. Popular destination for visitors.

Partnerships

The VCNM continues partnering with the Arizona Game and Fish Department in the lead reduction program. Lead poisoning is the leading cause of mortality in California condors. This program consists of supplying hunters in northern Arizona with lead-free ammunition to use on their big game hunts in hunting units that include VCNM. The program is voluntary but shows participation rates close to what they are in states that ban lead ammunition (i.e., California). The lead reduction program is critical to the success of the California condor recovery program. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has a similar program.

The Peregrine Fund continues to manage the California condor reintroduction program. The VCNM 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. The Peregrine Fund releases approximately 12 to 15 birds annually into the wild. There are now 110 free-flying condors in the Utah-Arizona area from a low point of 22 birds in 1982. In 2021 there were 4 documented wild-fledged condors. Through an Assistance Agreement and a Memorandum of Understanding with The Peregrine Fund, VCNM and the BLM continues to contribute funds, time, and other resources to support this effort.

The Glen Canyon Conservancy provided valuable services for VCNM and the visiting public. Through funding from the BLM, the Glen Canyon Conservancy supported two full time seasonal employees stationed at the Paria Contact Station in October and November of 2020 and March through September of 2021. These employees were critical points of contact for the public entering into the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness and VCNM. They disseminated information on current conditions, discussed wilderness safety, ethics and local rules while distributing hiking permits, etc.

Volunteer projects managed by VCNM staff included the following: safety patrols at Coyote Buttes North, monitoring route conditions and wilderness boundaries in the Ferry Swale area, travel management (i.e., sign installation and maintenance), and Paria Canyon clean-up. Additionally, VCNM volunteers staff the Public Lands Information Center in St. George, Utah, answered questions from members of the public via phone calls, emails, and in-person visits. Common questions were related to backcountry permits, safety, Leave-No-Trace, Tread Lightly, restrictions, and weather conditions. Total volunteer hours contributed to the monument in fiscal year 2021 were 766.25, still down significantly from years past as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Climate Impacts

Drought conditions persisted from 2020 into 2021, although 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.

Rangeland trend monitoring indicated that many grasses and forbs did not grow or put forth seed during the summer months. Later, into the late summer and fall, monsoonal moisture 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.

Climate Resiliency

Included in the “Vermilion Cliffs National Monument and Arizona Strip Field Office Infrastructure Associated with the Proposed Change in Management of Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness Decision Record”, signed by the Deputy Secretary of the Interior, was authorization to construct an administrative site. The site, up to 3.5 acres in size, will be constructed to support VCNM maintenance, monitoring, and administration of the wilderness area. The administrative site will consist of a fenced area to store materials and supplies. The parking area will be hardened with appropriate materials (road base). The site will be authorized under a right of-way grant. In addition, staff will be able to camp at the site. This will significantly reduce the amount of driving back and forth by staff, which reduces carbon emissions.

Social and Environmental Justice

During the summer of 2019, VCNM successfully transitioned the online permitting for Coyote Buttes North, Coyote Buttes South, and Paria Canyon Overnight to recreation.gov. Both Coyote Buttes North and South also have permits issued in person in Kanab, Utah, through a walk-in lottery and a first come/first served process respectively. Due to numerous reasons, the BLM sought to transition those permit systems to recreation.gov with system designs similar to the walk-in lottery that improved safety, efficiency and benefited the gateway communities surrounding VCNM in both states. The VCNM staff proposed an idea utilizing a geofence system that

required applicants to be within a geofence area to apply. At the time, recreation.gov did not have the capability to design such a system.

Last spring, recreation.gov approached VCNM and the Kanab Field Office staff informing us that they now had the capability to design such a system and asked us to be the pilot program in the nation for all agencies participating on recreation.gov. We were scheduled to begin the process in late summer and initiated the process at the end of fiscal year 2021. At the time of writing this report, programming has been written, content developed, testing completed, press release issued, and the system is 4 days from going live and accepting the first applications. This will transition the walk-in lottery only held in Kanab, Utah, to a system that allows applicants to apply within a geofence that is approximately 2.1 million acres in size. It now includes the following towns or communities in Arizona: Page, Greenhaven, Marble Canyon, Vermilion Cliffs, Jacob Lake, White Sage, Fredonia, Moccasin, and the Kaibab Paiute Indian Reservation. The geofence area will include the following towns or communities in Utah: Big Water, Paria, Johnson Canyon, Kanab, Mt. Carmel, Orderville, Glendale, and East Zion.

Events

On Saturday, September 25, 2021, the 26th Annual California Condor Release took place. This event takes place annually on National Public Lands Day. Hosted by the VCNM, condors are released into the wild from the holding pens atop Vermilion Cliffs. Until 2020, spectators watched in person from below at the California condor release viewing site. In 2019, an estimated 1,000 individuals attended in person. Last year, COVID-19 in conjunction with more advanced streaming technology, allowed the team to explore additional ways to reach the thousands of interested publics throughout the world of this incredible event. Due to the success of that event, the team decided to continue the in person and streaming options. Despite COVID-19, an estimated 250 people attended in person with over 5,200 views during and after the event.



Figure 6: Photo of California condors.



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