



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

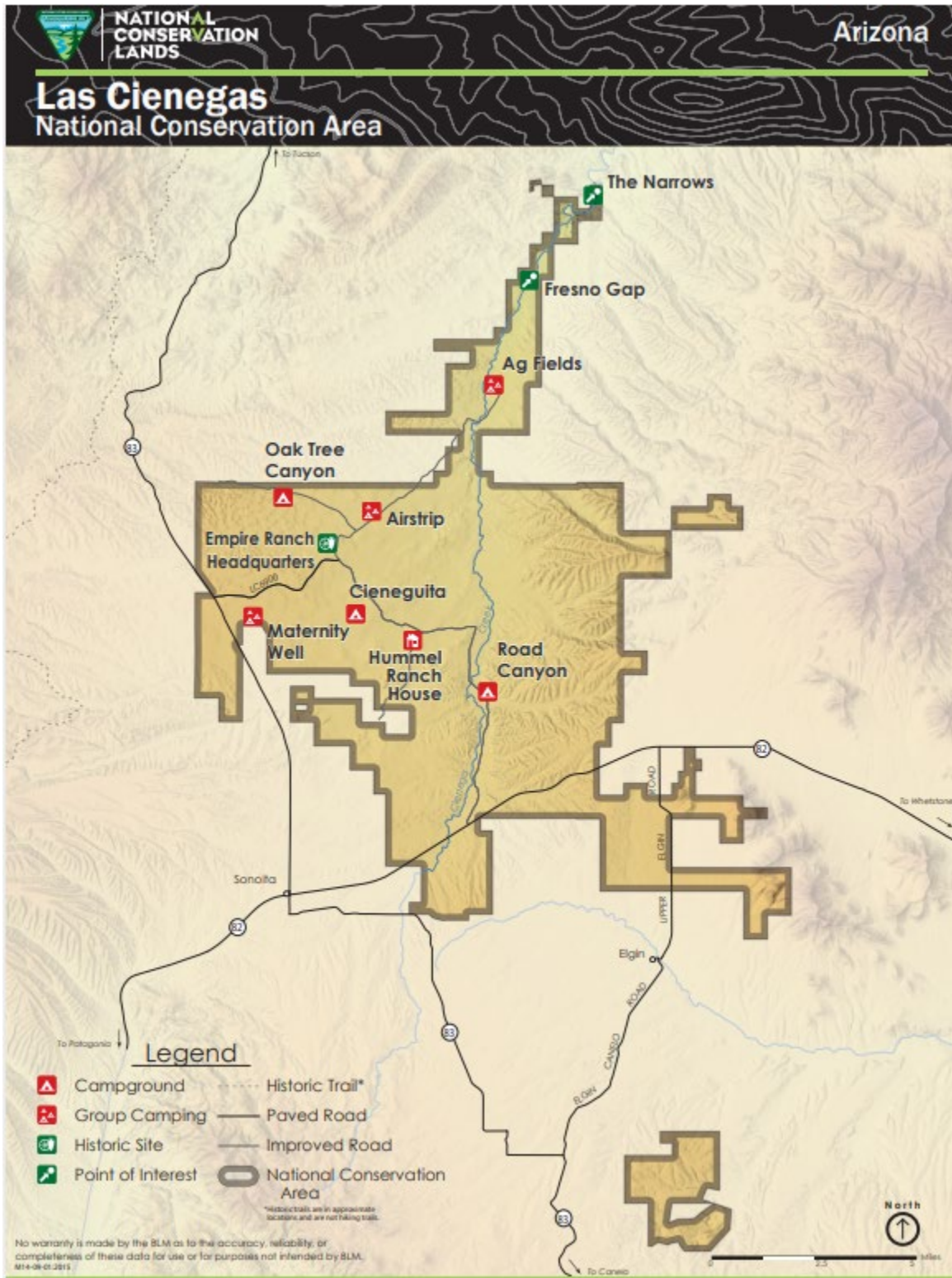
Arizona
2022: Annual Manager's Report

Las Cienegas

National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

In 2022, Tucson Field Office (TFO) Staff, partners, and volunteers continued to implement work within Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (Conservation Area) to provide for public use and enjoyment, while also protecting and enhancing the area's resources of value. A few of the many accomplishments achieved in 2022 are highlighted below.

Springwater Wetland Fence Repair

- TFO staff repaired the Springwater wetland fence, which was damaged from monsoon rains in 2021. The fence prevents cattle from entering the wetland area, which provides a habitat for federally threatened and endangered species. Those species include the Gila Topminnow (endangered), Chiricahua leopard frog (threatened), Mexican garter snake (threatened).



Empire Ranch Foundation Events

- The Empire Ranch Foundation, a partner of the TFO, held several events for the public at the historic Empire Ranch. Events included the two-day Cowboy Festival, Christmas at the Ranch, the Spring Trail Ride, and National Day of the Cowboy. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) staff supported the events by educating attendees on the BLM's mission, Gila District operations, and recreational opportunities within the Conservation Area.



Recreation Activities and Events

- TFO staff administered 28 Special Recreation Permits in the Conservation Area. Permitted activities included equestrian rides, all-terrain vehicle tours, bird dog field trials, guided hunting trips, and recreation events.

Huachuca House Reopened

- After the Huachuca House Visitor Contact Station was temporarily closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, it reopened to the public in July after receiving approval by the BLM Arizona State Office. The Empire Ranch Foundation operates the building and assists the BLM by engaging with public users with answers to questions about the Empire Ranch and the Conservation Area.

Arizona Conservation Corps Service Work

- The Arizona Conservation Corps completed recreation sign installation and trail maintenance in July. The youth crew installed campsite identification site signs at the Cieneguita and Oak Tree Canyon Camp Areas, installed group site information

signs at Maternity Well and Airstrip Group Sites, updated public information flyers at eight kiosk locations, and installed “No Camping within Wildlife Water” signs at various locations within the Conservation Area. The youth crew completed trail tread repairs caused by summer monsoon storms along the half mile Heritage Discovery Interpretive Trail at the Empire Ranch.



Grassland Restoration

- The TFO completed 1,566 acres of grassland restoration within the Conservation Area. This work entailed mechanical mesquite thinning to maintain previous investments and initiate treatments in untreated areas. Grubbed mesquite trees were made available to public and local tribal entities through free use permits. To date, 268 tons of mesquite has been removed under these permits.

Huachuca Water Umbel and Agave Planting

- The TFO staff planted 16 plugs of the water plant at Maternity Pond to help increase the population of the endangered Huachuca water umbel, a riparian and wetland plant species. Additionally, the TFO partnered with Bat Conservation International and Borderlands Restoration Group to plant over 300 agave plants at two sites to enhance nectivorous bat habitat.



Cienega Creek Fall Fish Surveys

- Every fall, fish population and habitat surveys are conducted at Cienega Creek and tributaries in order to detect nonnative fishes and to monitor trends in the fish populations and associated habitat for the endangered Gila chub and Gila topminnow. In October 2021, pools were inventoried, and fish were monitored with the assistance of BLM staff, volunteers, and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Summer floods brought large sediment loads into the creek causing infill of some pools downstream of Woods Canyon and Pump Canyon. The October pool inventory within the creek reflected a 26% loss in available pool habitat when compared to 2019. This specific type of habitat is essential for the survival of Gila chub. The pools that were sampled this year indicate Gila chub populations within the lower creek appear to be in stable condition. Fish captured represented various age classes. There were no nonnative fish captured during surveys.



Challenges

Primary challenges include the threat of wildfire and damage to both cultural and natural resources from inappropriate recreational use of the landscape, unpermitted activities, and over-use due to unprecedented numbers of visitors and recreational vehicles. Monsoon rain events in 2021 resulted in damages to fences within the Conservation Area. These damages are still being assessed. Another ongoing challenge is limited access to lower Cienega Creek due to road damages.

Visitors

Approximately 107,096 visitors came to the Conservation Area in fiscal year 2022. Visitor data was recorded with new traffic counters purchased from special recreation permit fee dollars at several locations throughout the Conservation Area, recreation field monitoring by BLM staff and volunteers, and visitation numbers recorded at the Empire Ranch from docent and visitor contact station volunteers. Partner data indicated that the Conservation Area had 350 education participants, 2,200 interpretive participants, and a total of 12,500 volunteer hours.

Partnerships

Cienega Watershed Partnership

<http://www.cienega.org>

Formed in 2006, the Cienega Watershed Partnership is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to coordinate and help resource landscape stewardship initiatives for the landscape region that runs from Saguaro National Park and the Rincon Wilderness to the Canelo Hills south of Sonoita, and from the crown of the Santa Rita Mountains east to the crown of the Whetstone Mountains. The Cienega Watershed Partnership also coordinates the activities of two *ad hoc* organizations: the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership and the Cienega Corridor Conservation Council. Cienega Watershed Partnership projects include YES!, FROG, Oral History, and Back Then. The Cienega Watershed Partnership supports the annual Science on the Sonoita Plain Meeting, the State of the Watershed Workshops, and the Biological Planning meetings. The Cienega Watershed Partnership has been instrumental in assisting with monitoring leopard frogs, removing bullfrogs and crayfish on BLM and adjacent private lands, maintaining water supplies at wildlife waters, and reintroducing Chiricahua leopard frogs grown from University of Arizona grown stock.

Empire Ranch Foundation

<http://www.empireranchfoundation.org>

The Empire Ranch Foundation is a non-profit volunteer organization established in 1997. Acting in cooperation with the BLM, the Empire Ranch Foundation's purpose is to protect, restore, and sustain Empire Ranch historical buildings and landscape as an outstanding western heritage and education center. The beneficial relationship between the BLM and Empire Ranch Foundation was formalized through a financial assistance agreement. To ensure mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities, a Memorandum of Understanding is in the process of being finalized between BLM and Empire Ranch Foundation. The Empire Ranch Foundation receives funding through the support of its members, individuals, and businesses, through public donations, corporate and foundation contributions and grants, and through the proceeds of special fundraising activities.

The Empire Ranch Foundation provides staffing for the Huachuca House Visitor Contact Station at the Empire Ranch Headquarters several times a year. Docent tours are offered twice monthly, in addition to cultural events such as the annual Empire Ranch Cowboy Festival, which typically brings over 2,500 visitors to the Conservation Area during the two-day event. Volunteer workdays are held every month to support maintenance and preservation efforts. Empire Ranch Foundation provided approximately 4,000 hours of volunteer service during fiscal year 2022.

University of Arizona

Nonnative bullfrogs were suppressed again in the basin surrounding the Conservation Area to maintain a bullfrog-free aquatic habitat for threatened and endangered species conservation through a cooperative agreement with the University of Arizona. Bullfrogs nearly eliminated the populations of both Chiricahua leopard frogs and aquatic garter snakes from the area, but TFO staff working through partners and the Arizona Game and Fish Department had eliminated them from the Conservation Area by 2015. Invasive, nonnative species such as bullfrogs, crayfish, and nonnative fish are continually being monitored both within the Conservation Area and on adjacent private land and suppressed by partner groups with financial assistance from BLM and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. As a result of these efforts, Cienega creek, its tributaries, wildlife ponds, and wetlands are free of aquatic invasive species, a rarity in waterbodies of the southwest.



Science

Current research efforts conducted within the Conservation Area are summarized below.

Cultural:

- Cultural resource research is focused on identifying and evaluating early agricultural period archaeological sites (Cienega Watershed Partnership).

Botanical Projects:

- Arizona eryngo, listed as an endangered species in 2021, was reintroduced into Las Cienegas Wetlands.

Avian Research:

- A remote telemetry receiving station was installed on the Appleton Whittell portion of the Conservation Area in March 2022. This installation was in concert with the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies and the Audubon Society. The station is part of the Motus network, a worldwide network of automated, continuously receiving telemetry stations designed to yield information about the migratory movements of bats and birds.
- Acoustic avian monitoring was conducted to obtain project and site-specific

information about the frequency and duration of avian use, acoustic bird song recorders were placed in Empire Gulch. This information will be used to address project level National Environmental Policy Act requirements to mitigate impacts to Migratory Bird Treaty Act species, and avian species listed under the Endangered Species Act.

- The Kestrel Reproduction Dynamics Study investigated how American Kestrel breeding attempts and the associated metrics (nest initiation date, clutch size, brood size, number of fledglings, and overall success) differ across landscapes with various amounts of human modification. Eight artificial nest boxes were placed throughout the Conservation Area. During fiscal year 2022, 13 young Kestrels fledged from these nest boxes. The research was conducted by Hawk Watch International.
- The Chestnut Collared Longspur Study, conducted by the Tucson Audubon Society, is an ongoing study on how existing livestock water sources within the Conservation Area are being used by chestnut collared longspurs. To do this, Tucson Audubon Society placed acoustic bird song recorders near livestock waters for a period of several weeks.



Events

2021 Empire Ranch Cowboy Festival

<http://www.empireranchfoundation.org>

This is an annual festival, sponsored by the Empire Ranch Foundation, held the first Saturday and Sunday in November and draws more than 2,500 visitors who come to the Empire Ranch to enjoy Western heritage demonstrations, arena and livestock exhibits, cowboy cooking and Western entertainment.

2021 Christmas at the Ranch

<http://www.empireranchfoundation.org>

This is an annual event, sponsored by the Empire Ranch Foundation, held in December, and draws more than 400 visitors to celebrate the holiday festivities at the Empire Ranch. Visitors enjoy entertainment from Saguaro Shutters and the Tucson Desert Harmony Chorus. Guided trail rides are offered for visitors to explore both the Empire Ranch and other destinations within the Conservation Area.

2022 Southern Arizona Quail Forever Family Day

<http://www.saquailforever.com>

This is an annual event, sponsored by Southern Arizona Quail Forever, held the first Saturday in March and draws more than 250 visitors at the Airstrip Group Site to participate in outdoor educational skills such as firearms safety, archery demonstrations, GPS use, wildlife identification, Leave No Trace etiquette, and off-highway vehicle education.

2022 Spring Trail Ride

<http://www.empireranchfoundation.org>

This is an annual event, sponsored by the Empire Ranch Foundation, held the first Saturday in April, and draws over 400 visitors. The Empire Ranch Foundation provides wagon rides and four different trail ride opportunities. Docents from the Empire Ranch Foundation provide guided interpretive talks during the wagon rides.

2022 National Day of the Cowboy

<http://www.empireranchfoundation.org>

This is another annual event, sponsored by the Empire Ranch Foundation, held in July centered around cowboy culture and heritage including demonstrations, docent tours, and vendors and non-profit exhibits. The event kicked off with the reopening of the Huachuca House Visitor Contact Station. Over 350 participants were entertained with western skills demonstrations such as ranching tool uses, reata making, and saddle making.



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Las Cienegas National Conservation Area

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