



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

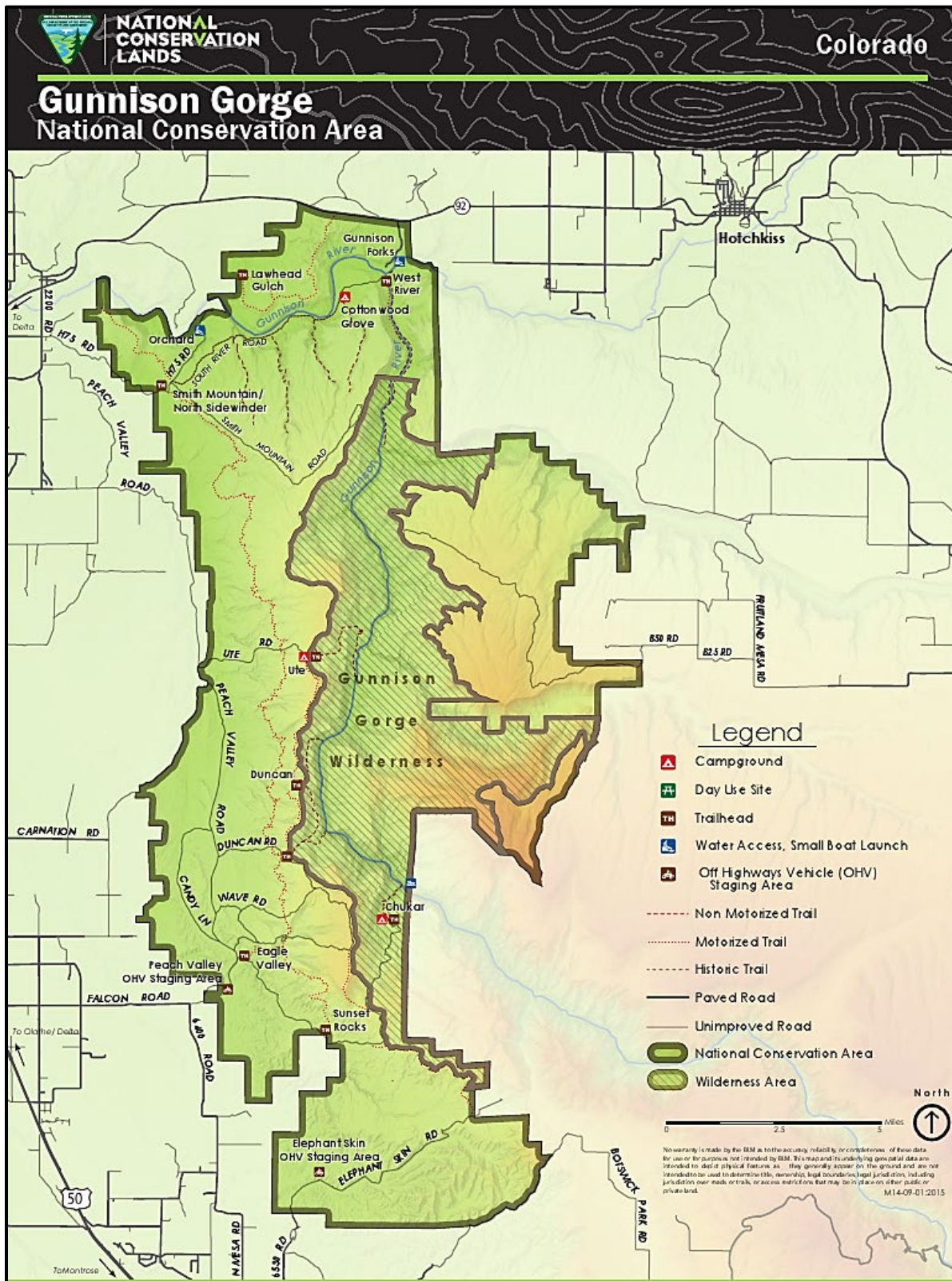
Colorado
2022: Annual Manager's Report

Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

Outreach and Education

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area's (GGNCA) outreach, education, and youth engagement programs were made richer, more robust, and more inclusive through partnership with our Friends' group, Colorado Canyons Association (CCA). A few highlights include:

- CCA got nearly every Delta County 9th grader out for an educational float trip on the Gunnison River in GGNCA. BLM was represented on each trip.
- CCA hosted a public webinar and an interpretive night sky program in GGNCA in support of the Gorge becoming certified as an International Dark Sky Place.
- CCA, BLM, and a number of partners successfully returned to the full in-person Cottonwood Days educational event post-pandemic. This is a curriculum-based learning program that takes place within GGNCA along the banks of the Gunnison River. Over 400 6th grade students in the Delta County School District and Olathe Middle School participated in this event.



Eagle Rock Shelter Cultural Site

Archaeological research indicates that this important cultural site in GGNCA has been a home to people for 129 centuries (12,900 years). As one of the oldest known human occupation sites in North America, Eagle Rock Shelter has generated significant public and scientific interest. Squarely within the ancestral homeland of the Nuuch (Ute) people, Eagle Rock Shelter is deeply connected to modern Nuuch people.

In 2022, the BLM received the final interpretive plan developed by History Associates, Incorporated, to help guide how the story of Eagle Rock Shelter is told. BLM will continue to interpret the site in partnership with the Ute Tribes.

Recreation Site Improvements

Planning and environmental analysis on three sites in the Gunnison and North Fork Rivers Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) was completed in 2021. In 2022 work was completed at:

- Gunnison Forks—expanded trailer parking.
- Cottonwood Campground—added two campsites and improved one access road.
- Orchard Boat Ramp—improved the site road.

Connecting with Communities

GGNCA issued the City of Delta a Special Recreation Permit to hold an ultra-marathon/fun run in the NCA. The event was held in April and was enjoyed by many participants.

GGNCA continues to work with Delta County and community partners on a proposed singletrack trail system in the Gunnison and North Fork Rivers Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA).

GGNCA continues to partner with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and Trout Unlimited to in the recovery of rainbow trout in the Gunnison River. Rainbows were nearly lost to whirling disease, but disease-resistant populations are now recovering well.

Challenges

Drought

Like other lands in southwestern Colorado, prolonged severe drought continues to take its toll on natural communities in GGNCA as well as on the grazing program and the permittees who depend on it. Some permittees have opted for non-use of their permits due to drought, and others have taken significant cuts in the number of livestock they turn out, and/or shorter duration of their authorized grazing season.



Staffing

In 2022 the GGNCA Outdoor Recreation Planner (ORP), moved on to a new position with the National Park Service. It was a good move for her career, but the position at GGNCA was vacant from May to September, and much of the ORP work did not get completed during that time. The NCA was able to hire a very capable person into the position, and that person has been coming up to speed quickly.

In 2022 the NCA had difficulty hiring seasonal employees. Due to new security screening protocols, many had their start dates delayed by up to a month from the desired start date. Once on board, however, things went smoothly.

Increasing Visitation and Visitor-use Monitoring

Visitation in GGNCA is increasing in general, which is an expected trend. However, in the Gunnison and North Fork Rivers SRMA it is increasing at a higher rate. Since the GGNCA Resource Management Plan does not set an upper limit on social encounters in this SRMA, there is no built-in threshold to indicate when high visitor-use levels may be negatively affecting desired outcomes, particularly in the river corridor down-river from the Gunnison Forks. In response, management has implemented an enhanced visitor-use monitoring program. A combination of traffic counters, dedicated monitoring personnel, and SRP reporting will help to determine whether and when use levels exceed the capacity of the SRMA. Additionally, the University of Alaska and Colorado Mesa University will be conducting surveys of river users during the 2023 season.

There is increasing interest from potential commercial outfitters to operate within the river corridor. The monitoring information will help inform decisions on whether to issue new permits.

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. Visitors to the NCA have a variety of recreation opportunities. For example: for solitude they may hike into the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness; for thrill, they may ride their dirt bikes in Peach Valley; for endurance, they may run the Sidewinder Trail.

In 2022, an estimated 165,000 visitors experienced the NCA. We expect that number to go up in the future as more people discover their public lands. A noteworthy pattern is that each year more visitors are choosing to use commercial outfitter services to enjoy

their public lands, bypassing the hurdle of planning and acquiring gear for a specific activity. River outfitters in the Gorge saw a strong season in 2022, recovering swiftly after the COVID pandemic. Outfitters in the NCA offer clients guided whitewater rafting, float fishing, walk-wade fishing, interpretive hiking, stand-up-paddleboarding trips, not to mention logistical support, horse pack-in service, vehicle shuttle services, and OHV skills courses.



Partnerships

Partners and volunteers play a huge role in helping BLM meet the management objectives of the 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 (pictured below), while others hike to Eagle Rock Shelter to learn about the cultural significance of the site to the three Ute Tribes. CCA also hosts several “Adopt-a-Trail” volunteers, who regularly patrol GGNCA, clean up trash, talk to visitors, and report on the conditions of our well-loved trails. This year, in addition to CCA important partners included:

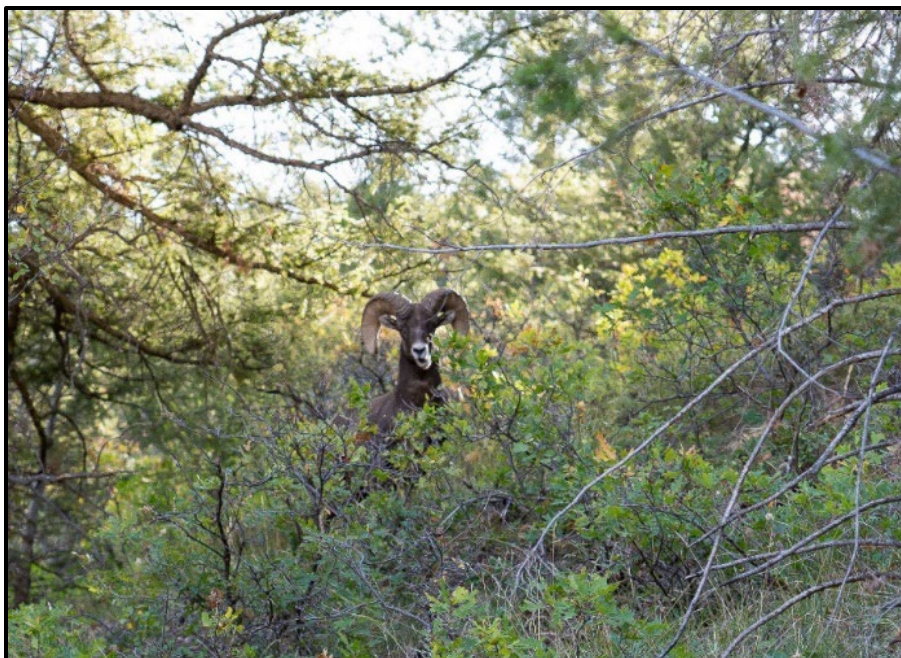
- The Gunnison Gorge Anglers chapter of Trout Unlimited

- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- The Nature Connection
- The Ute Indian Museum
- Montrose County
- Delta County
- The US Forest Service
- Western Colorado Conservation Center
- Our many permitted commercial outfitters.

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.

Science

The BLM wildlife program expanded efforts to inventory Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in the NCA through a partnership with CPW and the National Park Service. This came about because of increasing ranger and citizen sightings of bighorn sheep in the canyon. A helicopter survey in December resulted in the detection of 42 individual sheep, in 10 groups, and evidence of significant recruitment (13 lambs). This was the first helicopter survey of the bighorn sheep population in the GGNCA since 1995 and the results suggest there is likely a total population in excess of 60 animals, and as many as 170. (Photo below was taken in Black Canyon National Park during a joint BLM-NPS river and wilderness monitoring patrol in September 2021).



A 2021 monitoring summary of the endangered Clay-loving buckwheat authored by GGNCA ecologist Ken Holsinger states: “Our population monitoring and observed climate trends between 2012 and 2021 would indicate that even with sufficient fall and, to a lesser degree, winter moisture that high spring temperatures during clay-loving buckwheat’s most active growth period may limit water uptake. As a result, above average spring temperatures compounded by ensuing hotter summer temperatures may well exceed the physiological adaptations by clay-loving buckwheat for its desert environment resulting in mortality events that can act to drive population trends downward. Undoubtedly, these effects are likely compounded by persistent drought observed between 2017 and 2021 where precipitation was well below average. Excessively hot spring temperatures are likely also acting to limit germination, seedling establishment and survival negating good seed production that may have occurred in the previous year.”

Climate Impacts

The West is in the grip of a prolonged drought that includes GGNCA. Beginning in the Fall of 2019, a moisture deficit blanketed most of GGNCA with precipitation in the 43-56% range of the 30-year average. During this period, the U.S. Drought Monitor categorized the drought as Extreme to Exceptional. The exceptional drought can be seen in the early dormancy of the vegetation attempting to conserve resources and prevent complete mortality. As the drought continues and more vegetation succumbs to the dry conditions, increased soil erosion occurs as less vegetation is present to stabilize soils and intercept runoff.

Climate Resiliency

Rock structures built in 2018 show some promise for capturing runoff and encouraging vegetation to further slow runoff and keep more moisture on the landscape. Gunnison Sage Grouse depend on mesic areas for portions of their life cycle. The photo below shows formerly eroded drainages beginning to capture runoff after a monsoon rain event during the summer of 2021.



Social and Environmental Justice

The NCA welcomed its third AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer in 2021. The AmeriCorps VISTA program places volunteers with organizations to build capacity around social and environmental issues, with a focus on poverty reduction. Over the course of the three VISTA terms, GGNCA has deepened its work with and commitment to serving all Americans including those historically underrepresented or marginalized from outdoor spaces. The GGNCA's Junior Ranger book was translated into Spanish with the goal of more family-oriented programs for the local Latinx community.

BLM's work on the interpretation of Eagle Rock Shelter (covered in more detail in the Accomplishments section) continues to strive to include robust and meaningful input and collaboration from the Ute Tribes.

Events

The NCA, in collaboration with CCA and Western Slope Conservation Center, began working toward certification from the International Dark Sky Association as Dark Sky Place. Outreach events, including a well-attended stargazing scavenger hunt, two rounds of sky quality data collection, and close partner coordination have positioned the NCA to submit its application in 2023. The goal is to celebrate the NCA's night sky resource while highlighting the many benefits that dark skies provide for the natural and human environment.



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Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area

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