



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Nevada
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Black Rock Desert – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area



Map

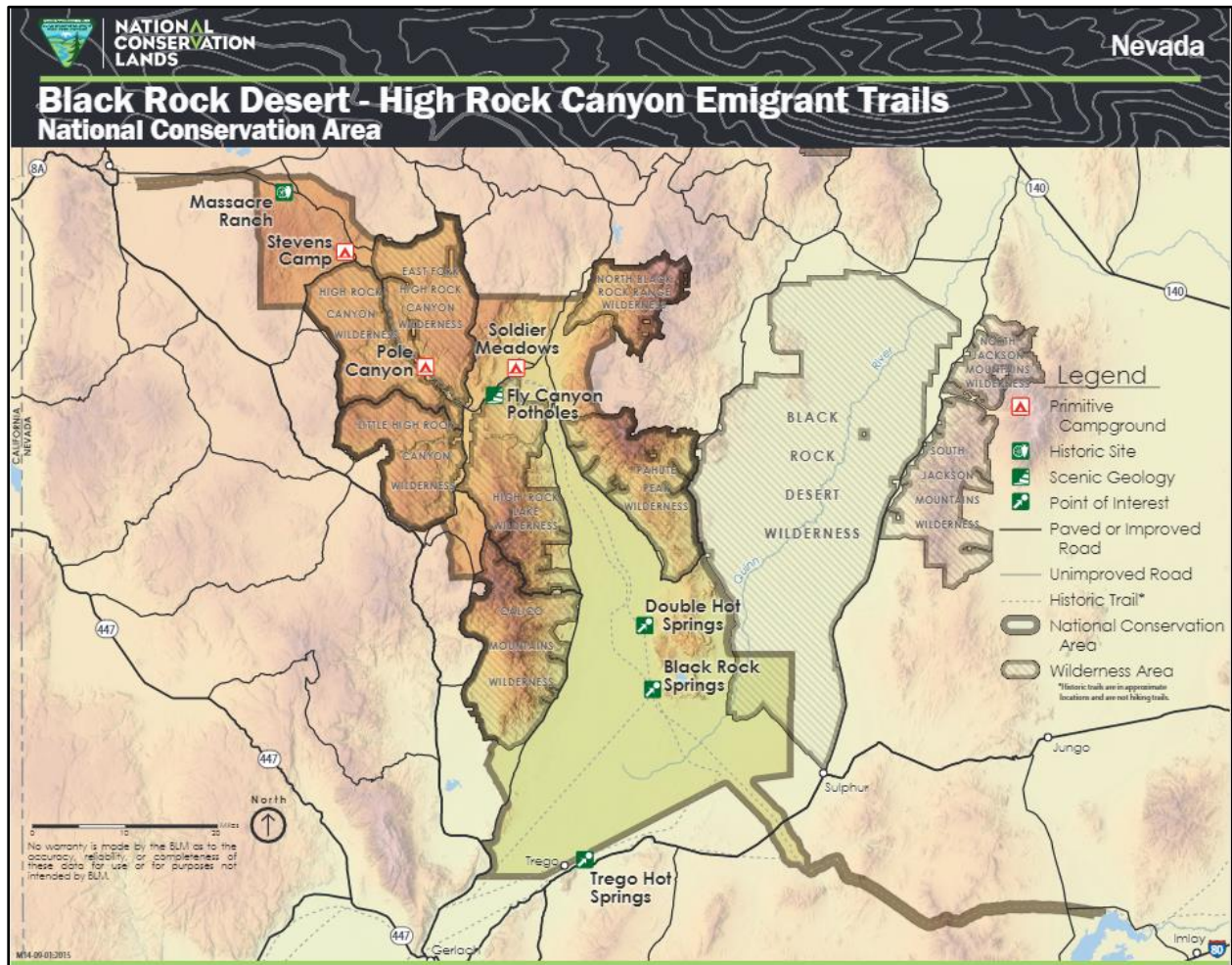


Figure 1. Map of the Black Rock Desert – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area

Accomplishments

In 2023, the Black Rock Field Office (BRFO) achieved notable accomplishments across various fronts. BRFO successfully issued and oversaw special recreation permits (SRP) within the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area (NCA) that encompass a diverse range of activities, including rocket launches, outfitter and guide operations, and research projects facilitated by local colleges. The BRFO also issues the Burning Man SRP, the largest SRP within the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In 2023 the event faced formidable challenges from adverse weather conditions, but successfully fulfilled all public safety and monitoring responsibilities.

The BLM, volunteers, and local partner groups collaborated on projects aimed at supporting resource protection within the NCA. These stakeholders pooled their expertise, resources, and passion to address diverse challenges facing public lands and undertook a spectrum of activities ranging from habitat restoration and invasive species management to trail maintenance and educational outreach.

The BRFO has taken proactive measures to enhance visitor experiences within the NCA by implementing strategic upgrades, including the updating of interpretive signs and the installation of traffic counters. The updated signs signify a commitment to providing visitors with informative and safe recreational opportunities while preserving the unique natural and cultural heritage of the area efforts. The additional traffic counters further enabled comprehensive monitoring of visitor influx, facilitating informed decision-making and resource management. This, in turn, strengthened reporting mechanisms and paves the way for increased funding opportunities.

Finally, the field office proactively pursued funding to support critical infrastructure projects, underscoring the commitment towards sustainable resource management and habitat preservation. These projects include road maintenance and installation of a cattleguard within the Soldier Meadows Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and installation of a cattleguard, fence maintenance, and the construction of a hardened crossing in the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Instant Study Area (ISA).

Challenges

The BRFO acknowledges the challenges posed by staffing shortages, exacerbated by factors such as the high cost of living in the Winnemucca area. In response, the office has adopted a proactive approach to recruitment, recognizing the importance of attracting a diverse pool of talent from various backgrounds, thereby enhancing operational efficiency and capacity. We recognize the unique contributions that veterans bring to the workforce, including their leadership skills, discipline, and problem-solving abilities. We also value the importance of engaging with colleges and universities to attract young, talented individuals who are passionate about environmental stewardship. By offering career development opportunities, the office aims to cultivate the next generation of leaders in public land management. Addressing the issue of the high cost of living in Winnemucca, the office is exploring innovative solutions such as offering relocation assistance, housing subsidies, or flexible work arrangements to make employment more attractive to prospective candidates.

The unusual wet weather in 2023 posed significant operational challenges for the BLM staff tasked with managing the Burning Man event. Typically, the Black Rock Desert experiences arid conditions, but the unexpected rainfall created muddy and difficult terrain. BLM staff had to adapt quickly to the changing conditions, implementing contingency plans to mitigate the impact of the weather on event logistics, participant safety, and environmental conservation efforts. This included adjusted monitoring strategies and support to participants navigating the wet conditions.

Despite the challenges posed by the wet weather, BLM staff demonstrated resilience and professionalism in managing the event effectively. Their efforts ensured that Burning Man could proceed safely and responsibly, while also protecting the delicate ecosystem of the Black Rock Desert. Through proactive planning and collaboration with event organizers and participants, the BLM successfully navigated the challenges presented by the unusual wet weather conditions, reaffirming their commitment to stewardship and public safety in managing this iconic event.



Figure 2. Wet Playa conditions during the 2023 Burning Man Event – Photo Credit: Mike Kraus



Figure 3. BLM's Joint Operations Center during the 2023 Burning Man Event – Photo Credit: Ryan King

Visitors

The NCA visitation decreased in 2023 with an estimated 130,802 visits and 1,393,422 visitor days. This decrease of visitors was attributed to the inclement weather throughout the spring and summer. Many NCA visitors enjoy short overnight stays while they camp. The NCA sees its highest levels of visitation during the summer when permitted events attract visitors from all across the west and around the world. The activities that take place on the Black Rock Playa each year usually include art festivals, amateur rocketry, land sailing, casual filming, and casual off highway vehicle use.

Individuals use the Black Rock Desert Playa to access the NCA's largest area for dispersed camping and OHV use, where visitors generally stay a few days to two-weeks. The NCA is also a popular destination for hunters seeking small and large game animals such as bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, mule deer, mountain lion, quail, and chukar. Off-roading tours, rock hounding, star gazing, and hot spring soaking are also common activities throughout the NCA.



Figure 4. Visitors enjoying a campfire at Steven's Camp. Photo Credit: Sam Mills

Partnerships

The BLM partners with non-profit organizations dedicated to improving the NCA through stewardship projects and educational experiences. This year, each of our partners participated in a host of events and activities that focused on improvements to recreation sites, habitat preservation, and educating the public about the NCA.

- Friends of Black Rock-High Rock
 - In 2023, they had 79 volunteers, completed 8 stewardship projects, and dedicated 337 volunteer hours as part of their partnership.
 - Co-hosted the 2023 Artist in Residence Program to support two artists to create NCA inspired artwork.
- Friends of Nevada Wilderness
 - In 2023, they had 120 volunteers, completed 6 projects, and dedicated 1,483 volunteer hours as part of their partnership.
 - Assisted with the Whitebark Pine project to help monitor health of threatened species.
 - Co-hosted the Interpretive Camp at the 2023 Burning Man Event along with the BLM and the California Trail Interpretive Center.
- Stewards of the Black Rock Desert
 - Started a new partnership with the BLM focused on responsible recreation on the Black Rock Playa and surrounding areas.
 - Assisted with visitor use monitoring during Summer 2023



Figure 5. Volunteers removing fencing from the NCA. Photo Credit: Meg Tait

Science

In 2023, the BLM partnered with the U.S. Geological Survey to conduct a citizen science project focused on monitoring Desert Dace (*Eremichthys acros*) habitat. Desert dace is a threatened fish species only found within hot springs in the Soldier Meadows area. This rare species has the highest temperature tolerance of any minnow in western North America and occupies habitats varying in temperature from 64 – 104 degrees Fahrenheit. The citizen science project focused on teaching volunteers about the Desert Dace and how to monitor its habitat. Volunteers helped collect water-quality information and deployed temperature sensors in Desert Dace occupied streams. Data collected is publicly available on the U.S. Geological Survey's database. This collaborative monitoring is showing that our intensive restoration efforts in the Soldier Meadows area is improving habitat and Desert Dace populations while still allowing for public visitation to the site for recreation hot spring soaking.



Figure 6. Citizen Science Project for Desert Dace habitat monitoring. Photo Credit: Megan Berner

Climate Impacts

The American pika (*Ochotona princeps*) is a small mammal found in talus deposits and scree rock formations often found at the base of mountains or cliffs. Throughout its known range, American pika populations are showing signs of shifting within their habitat to higher elevations due to climate change impacts on habitat conditions.



Figure 7. American pika near High Rock Canyon. Photo Credit: Danielle Miles

Since 2021, the Black Rock NCA has partnered with the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) through the Management Studies Support Program (MSSP) to study American pika within High Rock Canyon area. UNR and the BLM established this research project to help monitor potential pika habitat, conduct acoustic and camera trap monitoring to determine species presence, and quantify genetic diversity of pika populations through scat collection and analysis.



Figure 8. Bobcat observed during study. Photo Credit: Danielle Miles

Climate Resiliency

Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in December 2022. The primary threat to Whitebark Pine is White Pine Blister Rust, a non-native fungal disease that harms these trees across the west. Additional threats impacting the health of the species include Mountain Pine Beetles, altered wildfire patterns, and climate change.

The Winnemucca District has two isolated stands of Whitebark Pine, one stand in the Pahute Peak Wilderness and another stand in the Pine Forest Range Wilderness. Both stands of Whitebark Pine are not showing impacts from White Pine Blister Rust; potentially due to their remote locations isolating them from transmission from other populations.

A new project was initiated in 2023 with Friends of Nevada Wilderness volunteers, collecting Whitebark Pine seeds for genetic inventory/storage, propagation, and disease testing. The project involves traveling to Pahute Peak and Pine Forest Wilderness Areas in the spring, caging cones with a mesh cage to protect them from Clark's nutcrackers, and then collecting the mature seeds and cages in the fall. In the years ahead, the BLM and its partners will continue collecting Whitebark Pine seeds to help monitor the health and resiliency of these isolated populations. More information on this project can be found in this [NPR story](#).



Figure 9. Whitebark Pine tree cone cage installation for seed collection. Photo Credit: Olivia Wolff

Social and Environmental Justice

The BRFO maintains a steadfast commitment to ensuring that individuals from all backgrounds and abilities can fully enjoy and access public lands. In line with this principle, the office has prioritized inclusive infrastructure development, exemplified by the construction of accessible tent pads at the Soldier Meadows Campground. These tent pads cater to diverse needs, including an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-accessible pad, which ensures that individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities to experience the natural beauty of the area. Future improvements to further enhance the accessibility of the campground and hotspring soaking area are planned.



Figure 10. Volunteers help construct ADA tent pad in Soldier Meadows. Photo Credit: Megan Berner

The field office also received a \$5,000 grant dedicated to the purchase of signage for interpretive and directional purposes. This grant represents a significant opportunity to enhance visitor experience and safety within our public lands. Interpretive signage serves as educational tools, offering valuable insights into the history, ecology, and recreational opportunities of the area. Additionally, directional signage plays a crucial role in guiding visitors safely through the landscape, ensuring that they can navigate the terrain with ease and confidence.

Events

In 2023, the BLM hosted multiple events in the NCA to help provide environmental education and stewardship opportunities for the public with the support of partners and volunteers.



Figure 11. Rocketry talk on the Playa during Black Rock Rendezvous. Photo Credit: Meg Tait

Black Rock Rendezvous – Over 130 people participated in the three-day event held over Memorial Day on the Black Rock Playa. Although there was sporadic rain throughout the weekend, the event included educational talks, repairing protective fences, rehabbing habitat by erasing tire tracks from the desert, and reinforcing water crossings on hiking trails. The event also had a successful Dutch oven cook-off and Black Rock Trivia in the evenings.

National Trails Day – Twenty-four volunteers, partners, and staff members traveled to Stevens Camp to perform maintenance on the Upper High Rock Trail and to the Stevens Camp Public Cabin. Twelve downed trees were removed from the trail, vegetation was cleared back from the trail tread, trash was cleaned up from the camping area, three monuments were disassembled, and the cabin received a fresh coat of paint on the interior.

National Public Lands Day – Fifty-two volunteers, partners, and staff members traveled to Soldier Meadows to help monitor critical Desert Dace habitat, install accessible tent pads at the campground, remove obsolete fencing, clean up trash in the surrounding area, and repair the Soldier Meadows public cabin.



Figure 12. BLM Interpretive Camp at the 2023 Burning Man Event. Photo Credit: Tara Nasvik

Interpretive Camp

The BLM is proud to have facilitated an interpretive camp at the 2023 Burning Man event, engaging with an estimated 5000 participants to inform them about the agency's mission and activities. This initiative provided a unique platform to showcase the BLM's role in managing and conserving public lands, including the NCA where Burning Man takes place.

Through interactive displays, presentations, and engaging discussions, participants were able to learn about the diverse responsibilities of the BLM, from resource conservation and wildfire management to recreation planning and cultural heritage preservation. The interpretive camp aimed to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges inherent in managing public lands while highlighting the importance of responsible stewardship and sustainable use.

Moreover, the camp served as an opportunity for the BLM to engage directly with Burning Man attendees, addressing questions, concerns, and misconceptions about the agency's role in permitting and overseeing the event. By fostering open dialogue and collaboration, the BLM aims to build stronger relationships with the Burning Man community and promote a culture of mutual respect and cooperation.

Words from the staff

Dear Community Members,

As the field manager of the BRFO, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on the opportunities and challenges we faced in 2023.

Situated in the remote expanse of Northwest Nevada, our Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails NCA stands as a testament to the beauty and resilience of our natural environment. It offers unique opportunities for recreation and the chance to immerse oneself in the awe-inspiring landscapes and diverse ecosystems that define our region. From hiking and camping to wildlife observation and stargazing, there's something for everyone to enjoy.

This past year presented this office with a significant hurdle, critical staff shortages. Despite this challenge, our dedicated team persevered, demonstrating unwavering commitment to our land management principles and the conservation of the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails NCA.

As we move forward, I am confident that we will overcome the obstacles that lie ahead, thanks to the dedication and passion of our team and the support of our community partners. Together, we will continue to uphold our commitment to responsible land management, ensuring that the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails NCA remains a cherished and protected sanctuary for generations to come.

Thank you for your continued support and partnership.

Sincerely,

Mandy L. DeForest
Black Rock Field Manager



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails

National Conservation Area

5100 East Winnemucca Blvd.

Winnemucca, NV 89445

Phone: 775 623 1500

[Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area |
Bureau of Land Management \(blm.gov\)](https://www.blm.gov/locations/national-conservation-areas/black-rock-desert-high-rock-canyon-emigrant-trails-national-conservation-area)

Report compiled by:

Amber Franklin	Outdoor Recreation Planner
James Boerigter	Project Manager
Jim Cutillo	Outdoor Recreation Planner
Kathy Torrence	Wilderness Specialist
Mandy DeForest	Field Manager
Michael Kraus	Archaeologist

The mention of company names, trade names, or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use by the federal government.