



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Idaho  
2023: Annual Manager's Report

# Craters of the Moon

National Monument and Preserve







# Accomplishments

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It was a good year at Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve. A healthy snowpack last winter and a wet spring improved rangeland condition from the drought in 2021. A lack of wildfires in 2023 gave the Monument a much-needed reprieve as well. Many miles of road have been improved over the last few years to create fire breaks and improve fire suppression access. The last few miles of the Brigham Point Road fuel break were completed in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023.

Important work to rehabilitate previously burned areas continues. This year post-fire work included the McRae and Potter Butte chemical weed treatments and the Laidlaw Brush Experimental aerial seeding (1,243 acres). Additionally, 150,000 acres within and adjacent to the Monument were aerially surveyed to map and inventory noxious weeds.

Recreation and cultural resources staff began a major graffiti cleanup effort at Bear Trap Cave in the southern Monument. A [short educational video](#) was produced for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Idaho social media and a new interpretive sign was created for the cave, which will be installed in Spring 2024. Due to the extent of the graffiti in Bear Trap Cave, additional cleanup efforts are planned in 2024 as well.



Carey Kipuka – Lisa Cresswell photo credit



# Challenges

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Vandalism cleanup efforts began at Bear Trap Cave with the use of Elephant Snot, a product made for graffiti removal. Unfortunately, after a layer of paint was removed, even older graffiti was discovered underneath it. A much larger effort will be needed to remove all the paint in FY24. New interpretive signage will be installed in FY24 as well.

Staff turnover continues to occur, even after a robust hiring effort in FY22. In FY23, the Monument lost a wildlife biologist, a fuels ecologist, a rangeland management specialist, a rangeland technician, and a botanist. A National Park Service (NPS) botanist associated with the Monument also took a new position out of state. With so many vacancies Bureau-wide, many newer staff are taking the opportunity to move when positions come open elsewhere. This trend will most likely not slow down until more positions are filled across the Bureau.



Bear Trap Cave clean up efforts – Lisa Cresswell photo credit



# Visitors

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The rugged, more remote BLM portion of Craters of the Moon National Monument sees relatively few visitors. Due to the undeveloped nature of the interior of the Monument, visitors to the BLM backcountry consist mainly of grazing permittees, hunters, Idaho Department of Fish and Game officers and BLM staff. In contrast, more than 200,000 people visit the NPS-managed portion of the Monument, conveniently located on U.S. Highway 20, every year.

Six new location and directional signs were updated and installed in the BLM backcountry in FY23. Directional signage with QR codes installed in FY22 appears to have reduced the number of misdirected visitors mistakenly entering the backcountry, improving visitor experience overall.



Cattle drive - Lisa Cresswell photo credit

# Partnerships

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The NPS and the Craters of the Moon Natural History Association coordinate and partner with the BLM. BLM Idaho is planning on partnering with the University of Idaho to conduct pygmy rabbit surveys both in and outside of the Monument in FY24.

Every spring, the BLM partners with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to complete sage-grouse lek surveys. However, there were no assigned lek routes in the Monument in 2023, so no surveys were completed.

In the future, the BLM will partner with The Nature Conservancy to apply for Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) FY25 Core Project funds for the potential acquisition of the Huddles Hole and Snowdrift Crater Farm properties. These private inholdings contain approximately 1,825 acres and 320 acres, respectively. If approved, acquisition is anticipated within 18 months of receiving the funds.



Bluebird couple at Snowdrift Crater – Lisa Cresswell photo credit



# Science

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The Laidlaw Brush Experiment project area is 1,243 acres within Laidlaw Park Allotment. The treatment area has burned two to four times in the last 20 years. The entire project area burned in the 2007 Bear Den Butte fire and again in the 2016 Laidlaw fire. The project is designed to be an experimental plot for sagebrush restoration, analyzing the effectiveness of various seeding treatments. The burned area was aerielly treated with Imazapic in the fall of 2021, followed by an aerial seeding in February 2023 (Wyoming sage, Basin sage and Western yarrow). The seed mix was designed to provide species and structural diversity important to greater sage-grouse, other sagebrush-steppe obligate wildlife, big game, and pollinators. The area was then hand planted with 75,000 Wyoming sagebrush in the fall of 2023. The objective of these treatments is to establish a desirable shrub community that more closely matches the structural and species composition and diversity of the native plant community to help achieve a healthy, functioning rangeland. Vegetation monitoring was completed in 2021 and will resume in 2024 to assess the effectiveness of these seeding treatments. Restoring sagebrush is crucial to improve populations of sagebrush obligates, like greater sage grouse and pygmy rabbits.

Because pygmy rabbits are believed to be in decline and range-wide estimates are unavailable, researchers from the University of Idaho created a collaborative survey effort aimed at estimating current pygmy rabbit occupancy rates and trends in Idaho. Using a [story map tool](#), local BLM and Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologists can sign up for various survey locations and report findings for those locations. Survey locations are placed across southern Idaho, including several points within the Monument. Surveys will start during Winter 2023-2024. DNA studies of fecal pellets will be used to confirm pygmy rabbit presence or absence.

In 2023, the BLM Monument manager submitted a District-wide Native American ethnographic study proposal for funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which would include the Monument. If funding is granted, contracted work on the study would begin in 2024. Such a study will assist in building better relations with the local Tribes, as well as to fulfill the obligations to identify areas of importance to Tribes and find collaborative ways to better manage these areas in support of Secretarial Order 3403 and Executive Order 13007.



Bear Trap Cave - Lisa Cresswell photo credit

# Climate Impacts

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Large wildfires over the last decade have cleared much of the native sagebrush steppe of native plants that would have offered some resistance to weed establishment. As a result, invasive weed populations are increasing overall in the Monument, according to herbicide weed treatment data points and weed inventories that occur within the Monument each year. Rush Skeletonweed is especially prevalent. Two BLM staff will attend herbicide applicator training in FY24 to increase capacity to treat weeds, both in and outside of the Monument.



Monkeyflowers



# Climate Resiliency

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The BLM continues to implement proactive measures to create and maintain a climate resilient landscape capable of resisting wildfires and capturing carbon. In 2023, 260 acres of the newly upgraded Brigham Point fuel break were treated for weeds. BLM implemented several chemical treatments on post-fire rehabilitation seedings, which allows the seedings to become better established and able to withstand weed invasions, making them more resistant to wildfires. BLM also partnered with Pheasants Forever in the Fall of 2022 to plant sagebrush seedlings to reestablish the healthy sagebrush steppe for which the Monument was designated. The NPS portion of the Monument has taken measures to increase [sustainability](#) as well.

Other climate resiliency efforts include requesting FY24 funding to repair several existing wildlife guzzlers in Laidlaw Park. The guzzlers will benefit elk, deer and pronghorn by collecting water when winter snow melt and spring rain doesn't fill the natural playas. If funded, repairs will be done in summer or fall 2024.



Sagebrush planting crews – Nic Carlson photo credit



# Events

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In June, the BLM and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) met with John Molyneux and Jerry Cenarrusa, the landowners and willing sellers of two inholdings within the Monument, known as Huddles Hole and Snowdrift Crater, respectively. The field visits furthered the relationships between the landowners, BLM, and TNC. The BLM outlined the funding process through the LWCF and acquisition process. This included the application review, processing steps, and timeline. The landowners also provided insightful history of both properties. Currently, the LWCF application for funding of the properties is undergoing review with the BLM Headquarters. The BLM received letters of support from the NPS, Butte and Blaine County commissioners, and the Wood River Land Trust. All parties involved look forward to continuing the acquisition process once funding is secured.

Members of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes accompanied BLM archaeologist Daryl Ferguson to monitor archaeological cave sites in the southern Monument near the Wapi Flow. Monitoring the sites together helps the BLM understand their significance to the Tribes and further build the relationship.



Big Blowout Butte in Laidlaw Park - Lisa Cresswell photo credit



# Words from the staff

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All things change, and this year has been no different. While it was a mercifully quiet wildfire year, the Monument has had a great deal of staff turnover. It's been challenging saying goodbye to the good friends we've worked hard with and who have had such an impact on the land. At BLM, we've said goodbye to a wildlife biologist, a fuels ecologist, a rangeland management specialist, a rangeland technician and a botanist. We've also bid farewell to an NPS botanist.

With the new year will come new staff, and we will rebuild our team again. I am confident that they will be dedicated professionals that will carry on the legacy of Monument management for the American public just as their predecessors did.

Lisa Cresswell, Monument Manager



Big Blowout Butte - Lisa Cresswell photo credit





**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

## **Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve**

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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mypubliclands/albums/72157633600345803/>

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