



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

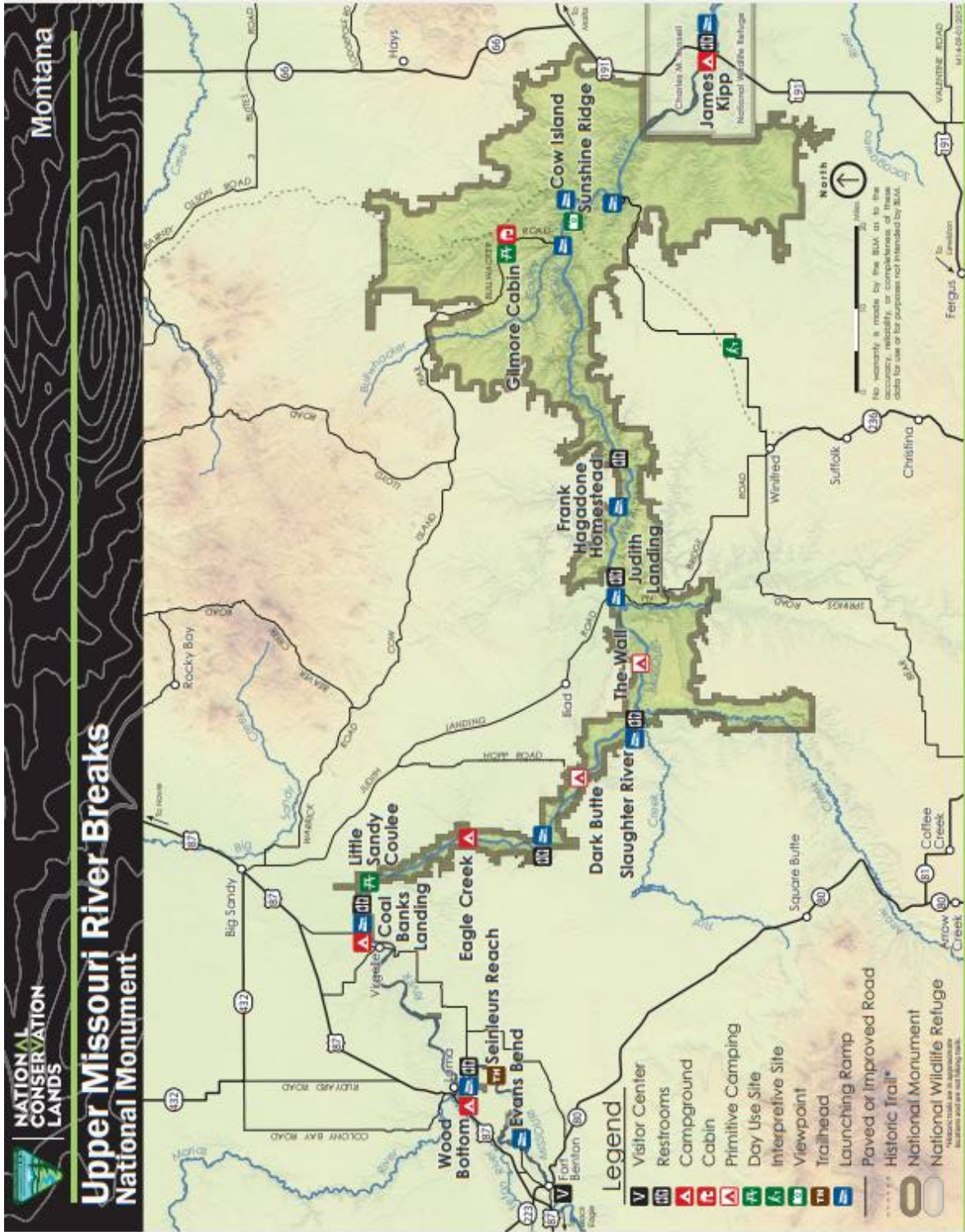
Montana
2024: Annual Manager's Report

Upper Missouri River Breaks

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (Monument) staff celebrated a year full of accomplishments, the most significant of which was the ability to move forward with hiring to fill vacant permanent positions. By the end of 2024, we had all but one of our vacant positions filled with four of those staff reporting to the Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center in Fort Benton. Just two short years before, more than 50 percent of our positions were vacant. With a resurgence of hiring and filling key roles, we are trending in a good direction and riding momentum forward.

A few of our noteworthy accomplishments requiring a heavy administrative lift include the completion of a Monument climate assessment with the University of Colorado-Boulder, publishing our first ever science plan, and completing the environmental analysis and decision for the Left Coulee Access Project to restore public motorized access to a large portion of the Monument!

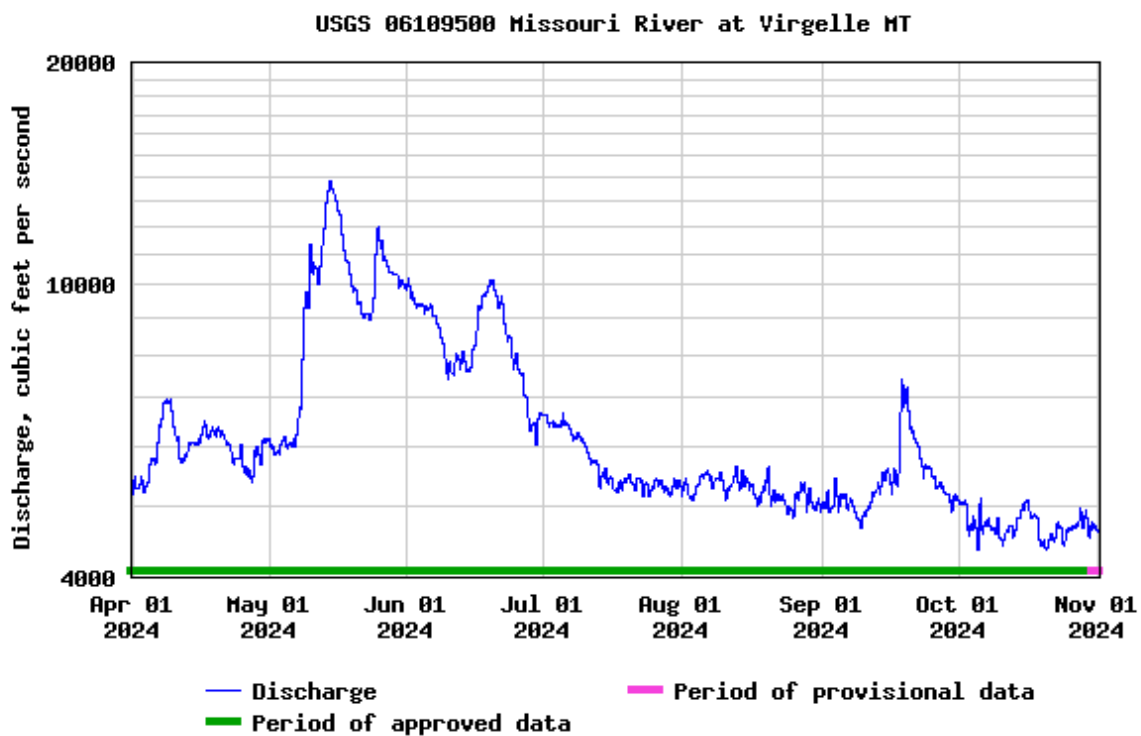
Many great accomplishments took place on the ground as well, with two different prescribed fires successfully implemented in the Monument. In early Spring, over 3,000 acres of BLM managed lands in the Antelope Creek drainage were treated in a multi-agency project with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). A few short weeks later, another 2,500 acres of BLM managed lands were treated with the Two Calf prescribed fire. Both treatments were implemented to maintain the health and resiliency of public lands while reducing fuel loading and enhancing wildlife habitat values.

By mid-summer, staff had the benefit of Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) interns, two MCC work crews, a river ranger, and a biological science technician to help provide capacity in the field. These additional members helped accomplish many priority tasks such as invasive species management and vegetation treatments, campground maintenance, travel management monitoring, sign installation, and monitoring.

After Labor Day, BLM completed the much-needed and long-awaited Coal Banks Landing replacement boat ramp. For more than two decades, a changing river channel and sediment deposition led to the inability of motorboats to launch from this location. This new ramp provides increased boat launch capabilities for motorboats and canoes alike. Nearly 75% of all Monument river-users launch at Coal Banks Landing, the Monument's most utilized access point to the wild and scenic Missouri River.

Challenges

Although filling permanent positions in 2024 was a great success, recruiting seasonal staff continued to be a significant challenge, particularly for the recreation and invasive species programs. With a target of six field going seasonals for these programs, we were able to bring on just one seasonal park ranger. With numerous developed recreation sites within the Monument and the need for some sites to be visited more than once per week, periods of time between monitoring and maintenance were often longer than desired. And with the lack of seasonal support, efforts within the invasive species program narrowed in focus this past season.



Low water flows by mid-July made river operations challenging this past summer. Many activities such as riparian monitoring, invasive species management, fence maintenance, wildlife surveys and livestock compliance are most efficiently completed with use of jet boats. Low water conditions led to changes in priorities and/or the inability to complete previously planned targets.

Visitors

Recorded visitation in the Monument appeared to be stabilizing slightly below the peak 2020 visitation levels. The Monument's predominant recorded visitation comes from those visiting for river-related recreation (boating, paddling, fishing), but recreationalists of all types explore areas throughout the Monument for hunting, wildlife viewing, hiking and camping. James Kipp Campground remains the busiest recreation area throughout the year starting with paddlefish season in the spring through the busy elk viewing and hunting season in fall. The Coal Banks to Judith Landing "White Cliffs" section remains the most popular for multi-day paddle trips. With all vacant positions filled at the Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center, the doors remained open year-round while receiving most visitor use from June through August.



Staff provided an interactive citizen science opportunity where visitors hiking to Decision Point can help conduct photo point monitoring. This Chronolog site allows visitors to place their phones in the fixed bracket, take a photo, and upload it to our Monument's Chronolog dashboard, allowing us to monitor the location through time. This citizen science effort helps staff document water levels and vegetative conditions at this historically significant location near the confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers.

Partnerships

Multiple partnerships play important roles in the Monument from work with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks restoring native perennial habitat to the University of Montana collecting Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) vegetation data. This year, the MCC was instrumental in helping with maintenance at both the historic Gilmore cabin and riparian exclosure fences on the Missouri River. The rail fence surrounding Gilmore cabin had deteriorated and was no longer protecting the structure from livestock. Additionally, years of graffiti had defaced the historic structure and needed to be carefully sanded from the interior walls of the log structure. On the river, several riparian exclosure fences had critical maintenance completed. These riparian areas are sites with regenerating cottonwoods which are an Object of the Monument both benefitting recreational experiences as well as wildlife habitat.



Volunteers played a crucial role in supporting recreation in the Monument. Our campground volunteers maintained Coal Banks Landing and James Kipp campgrounds, while offering guidance and customer service. Other recreation volunteers supported maintenance, vehicle shuttles and general program coverage for permanent recreation staff. Without these volunteers, staff would be unable to focus on their own work duties, daily operations, and priority projects. For fiscal year 2024, eleven different individuals volunteered a total of 2216 hours.

Science

Paleontological research and youth engagement continued this past year in the Monument as Dr. Ray Rogers of Macalester College hosted a Stratigraphic Paleobiology field course for university students from across the country. Additionally, Dr. Rogers was able to confirm the species of dinosaur, a plesiosaur, previously discovered that spring during prescribed fire activities. Many site visits were provided giving non-field going staff the opportunity to join in the dinosaur discovery. More than two hundred fossils, including vertebrae, limb elements and neural arch fragments, were recovered with excavations proposed in 2025.



A multi day field trip including tours of the Monument's uplands, breaks and river corridor was held providing staff and University researchers the opportunity to engage in science-based discussions. This effort proved vital in producing meaningful input for the Science Plan while identifying goals and desired research needs.

Outreach and Special Events

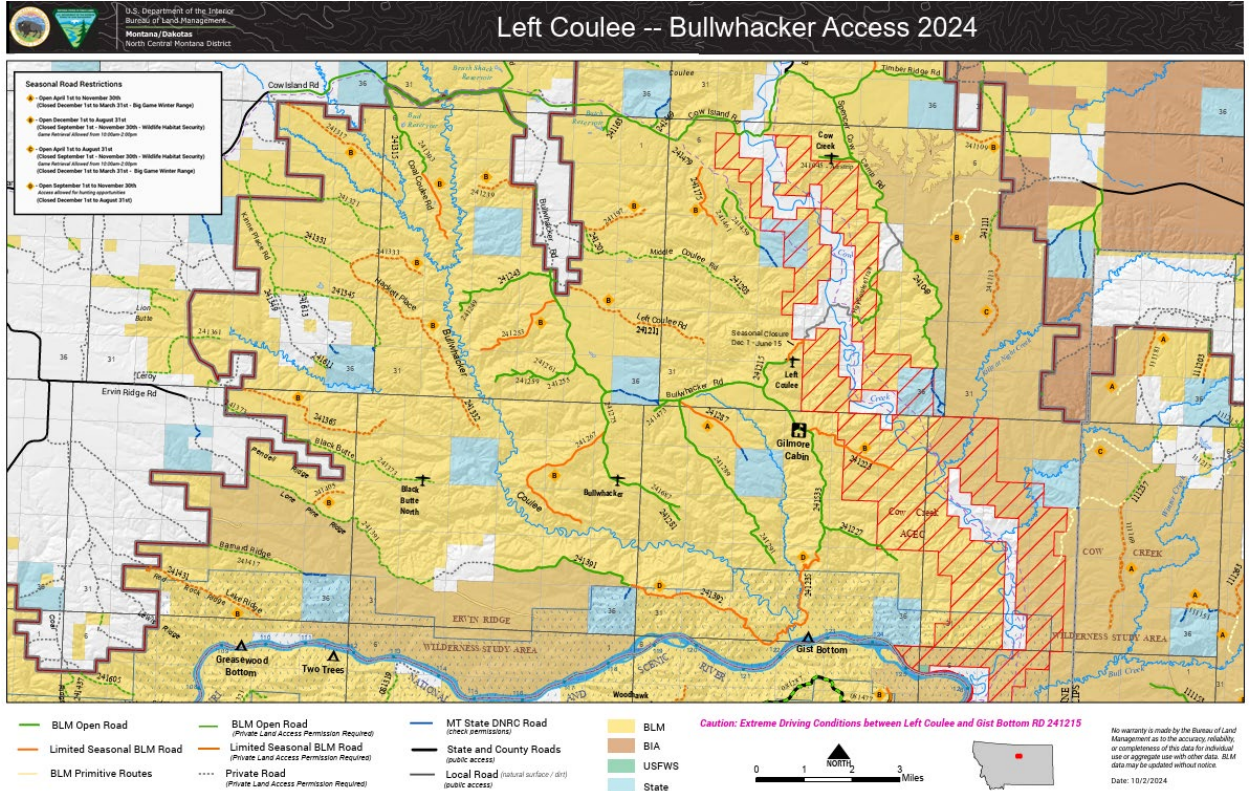
Roughly 100 miles up the Missouri River from the Interpretive Center in Fort Benton, Monument staff participated in the Great Falls, Montana-based Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center's annual festival to celebrate the journey of Lewis & Clark. This event, held by the Forest Service, featured multiple reenactors and themed interpretation programming. Monument staff were able to host an outreach booth focusing on Lewis & Clark's journey and stops through the Upper Missouri River Breaks.



Closer to home, Monument staff hosted an outreach booth focusing on recreation opportunities in the Monument while providing resources and information to the public during Fort Benton's annual "Summer Celebration" event. Between the two events, staff engaged with thousands of folks interested in knowing more about our rich history and resources.

Big Win for Access

In 2009 the only existing road providing legal motorized access into the Bullwhacker area of the Monument was closed to the public through a court decision which determined that road to be private. Since that decision, access to this highly sought after region had remained controversial and unresolved. In 2023, a private landowner entered into a Public Access Land Agreement (PALA) with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, providing legal road access to the boundary of BLM. While there was an existing linear feature connecting the new PALA road to an existing open BLM road within the Bullwhacker area, that linear feature was not designated “open” during travel management planning. In late 2023, with a purpose to restore legal motorized and mechanized public access to the Bullwhacker area, BLM began public scoping. Several issues were identified with three alternatives considered for analysis. After robust public engagement and a focused timeline, a decision record was signed in April 2024 restoring motorized and mechanized access back to the Bullwhacker area. The decision was made to “open” the primitive road seasonally with design features to manage erosion, protect wildlife, and minimize visual impacts. The action restored access to more than 51 miles of “open” BLM road network and nearly 50,000 acres of BLM-managed lands. This success story of restored access is the culmination of efforts among private landowners, agency partners, interested publics, and public engagement.





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Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument

920 NE Main Street
Lewistown, MT 59457
406-538-1900

Report compiled by: Jesse Hankins, Acting Monument Manager

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument contains a spectacular array of biological, geological, and historical objects of interest. Located in central Montana between Fort Benton, the nation's inmost port, east to the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, the Monument spans 149 miles of the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River, over 377,000 acres of the adjacent Breaks country, and portions of Arrow Creek, Cow Creek, and the Judith River. The landscape has remained largely unchanged since Meriwether Lewis and William Clark traveled through it on their epic journey with the Corps of Discovery over 200 years ago.

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