



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

**Utah**

2024: Annual Manager's Report

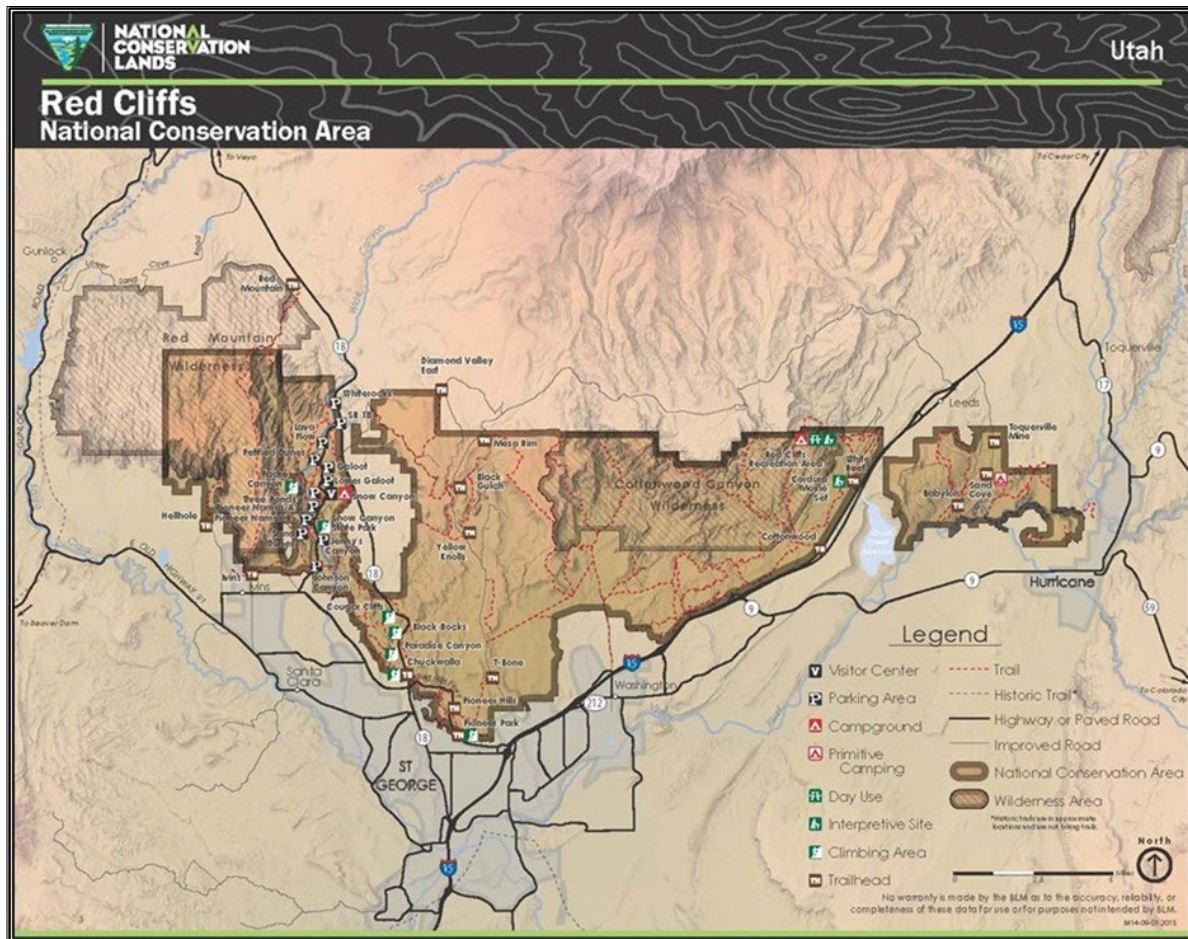
# Red Cliffs

## National Conservation Area





# Map



# Accomplishments

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Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA) park ranger staff started a new environmental outreach program that involves ranger-led night hikes in the Red Cliffs Recreation Area. The hikes begin at dusk near the campground, where participants learn about bat-related myths and urban legends, common bat species found in the NCA, the importance of bats as a “keystone” species, and their adaptations and foraging strategies. Later, participants are able to observe bats flying and foraging above pools of water in the canyons adjacent to the Red Reef Trail. This new, well-attended program has been a great success!

The NCA biologist continued large-scale habitat rehabilitation projects in fire damaged Mojave desert tortoise critical habitat that involved American Conservation Experience (ACE) youth crewmembers planting native shrubs and forbs to benefit tortoises and other at-risk wildlife species in the NCA.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) staff, assisted by an ACE youth crew, completed a trail rehabilitation project that involved rehabbing .75 miles of social trails through vertical mulching, installation of a 24-inch culvert in a problematic wash, and new signage where appropriate to make the popular Chuckwalla Trail more sustainable.

The Back Country Horsemen of Utah, Outback Hiking Club of Southern Utah, and Conserve Southwest Utah assisted BLM staff on volunteer projects to remove Russian thistle, Malta star thistle, and other nonnative/invasive plants near trailheads and within Mojave desert tortoise and Shivwits milkvetch critical habitats in the NCA.





# Challenges

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The greatest challenge for this NCA continues to be protecting and restoring critical habitat for at-risk wildlife species, including the Mojave desert tortoise, in the face of more destructive wildfires. Lower elevations of the NCA are primarily within the Mojave Desert ecoregion, where wildfires were formerly a rare occurrence. Some desert shrubs, like creosote bush, are naturally widely spaced apart and impede fire spread. Today, invasive nonnative annual brome grasses fill in the gaps between individual plants, creating a highly flammable fine fuel source that is increasing the size, intensity, and frequency of wildfires. Critical habitat loss is complicating recovery efforts for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise. Therefore, NCA staff continue to implement large-scale annual projects to reduce or eliminate invasive grasses and other wildfire fuels, while also planting native shrubs and forbs to protect and improve habitat quality for desert tortoise and other wildlife species in the NCA.

Additional challenges included the limited number of NCA park rangers to patrol and monitor heavily visited areas as a result of the expanding urban population adjacent to the NCA and throughout Washington County, Utah.



# Visitors

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This year, digital traffic/visitor counters recorded 583,416 visits and 211,288 visitor days in the NCA, a decrease from the approximately 607,000 visits tallied in FY23. The decline was, in part, attributable to inflation and higher costs associated with travel and tourism. At the Red Cliffs Recreation Area, \$99,674.87 in visitor use fees were collected for both camping and day use, while the popular Red Reef Trail (that originates near the campground) had 127,265 recreationist users.

Local residents and visitors to the area enjoyed the outdoor recreation opportunities in the NCA that include hiking, mountain biking, and equestrian trail riding on over 130 miles of designated non-motorized trails; camping in developed and primitive campgrounds; backpacking in the Cottonwood Canyon and Red Mountain Wilderness areas; and rock climbing at multiple designated climbing sites—all just a few minutes' drive from downtown St. George. Many of the 45 Special Recreation Permit (SRP) holders who operate in the NCA offer commercial guiding services for rock climbing, mountain biking, equestrian trail riding, and shuttles to trailheads.





# Partnerships

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The following partners assisted NCA staff with resource conservation, monitoring, and restoration projects: National Park Service-Lake Mead National Recreation Area's Song Dog Native Plant Nursery, Conserve Southwest Utah, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), Back Country Horsemen of Utah, Outback Hiking Club of Southern Utah, Washington County HCP, and American Conservation Experience.

A new cooperative assistance agreement was signed with Utah State University's Utah Conservation Corps (UCC) to assist habitat rehabilitation projects, conduct weed surveys, map and control infestations, repair damaged fencing that protects native habitats, and monitor federally listed and BLM sensitive species within the NCA.

In partnership with NCA staff, biologists from UDWR completed annual population and habitat monitoring for mule deer, Gambel's quail, mourning dove, Virgin spinedace, Mojave desert tortoise, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Virgin River chub, and Woundfin.





# Science

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During 2024, the NCA biologist, assisted by ACE biological resource associates and volunteers, continued a long-term monitoring program to determine the current distribution, abundance, and habitat use of the threatened Mojave desert tortoise, BLM sensitive species (e.g., Gila monster, kit fox), and other wildlife in the NCA. This research helps prioritize annual habitat protection and rehabilitation projects, while improving habitat conditions and connectivity, thereby preserving the potential for natural repopulation of an area impacted by disruptive events such as wildfire.

The NCA Habitat Rehabilitation Program was designed to reestablish native shrubs, forbs, and grasses, and to increase plant survivorship through research, to mitigate the devastating impacts wildfires have on Mojave desert tortoise and other wildlife species.

Implementation of adaptive management actions to protect and conserve the suite of species within the NCA will not only benefit native species and their habitat but the recreational experience for thousands of visitors.





# Events

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This year, the Back Country Horsemen of Utah and Outback Hiking Club of Southern Utah coordinated volunteer events to remove Russian thistle and other nonnative/invasive plants at the Cottonwood Trailhead, White Reef Trailhead, and adjacent habitats in the NCA. Conserve Southwest Utah also coordinated a volunteer event to pull noxious, invasive Malta star thistle weeds that were encroaching on a population of the endangered Shivwits milkvetch within the NCA. The crew of volunteers filled 40-gallon trash bags with star thistle weeds which reclaimed a significant area of critical habitat.

The Outback Hiking Club of Southern Utah coordinated a “BioBlitz” event by having students, scientists, and the public find and identify as many plants, animals, and other organisms as possible in order to study biodiversity in the Babylon region of the NCA.

May is Archeology and Historic Preservation Month in Utah, and in 2024, the NCA archeologist provided an open house at the Historic Orson Adams House for the public, to promote the study of archeology and historic preservation (see events figure below).







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### **National Conservation Area**

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