



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Arizona  
2021: Annual Manager's Report

## Gila Box

Riparian National Conservation Area





## Accomplishments

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The Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area (RNCA) had many accomplishments this year, despite challenges presented by COVID-19. With volunteer assistance, 12 developed recreation sites were maintained, 2 developed campgrounds, 6 picnic areas, 2 boat launch/take out areas, a wildlife viewing area, and 75 recorded cultural sites. Volunteer contributions of time to these sites and others within the Gila Box RNCA totaled over 3,000 hours during fiscal year 2021 (FY21). Visitation increased in 2021 with an estimated 31,433 visits and 66,535 visitor days in FY21. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) staff worked closely with the City of Safford to allow for their operation and maintenance of the city's water supply system located in Bonita Creek within the RNCA. The Gila Box recreation sites are in much need of maintenance. Most of the site structures are 30 years old and need to be replaced due to weathering. The Gila Box RNCA received \$5.1 million through the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) from the Department of the Interior for maintenance for critical facilities and infrastructure. This project ensures that the recreation settings and amenities that the recreation site users have been accustomed to over a long duration will remain in good operating condition with minimal lapse in services.



Photo by Bob Wick, BLM

## Challenges

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The pandemic offered numerous trials for effective on the ground management of the Gila Box RNCA. The staff remained vigilant and found ways to successfully monitor and protect the resources as outlined in the Gila Box Management Plan.

Increased visitation and use results in increased maintenance at existing recreation areas such as campgrounds, day-use areas, and other facilities. Should overcrowding become an issue, more demand for recreational sites and opportunities will arise. With increases in recreational users and types of recreation, conflicts among recreational use will continue to impact recreation management. Continued climate change and drought have the potential to affect flows of the Gila River, which is a recreational attraction for the Gila Box RNCA.



**The Gila River during the Fall Season**

## Visitors

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Recreational use can be very high within the RNCA. Visitation increased in 2021 with an estimated 31,433 visits and 66,535 visitor days.

Recreational opportunities abound in Gila Box ranging from a relaxing family picnic in the shade of a majestic cottonwood to a rugged mountain bike adventure. Some other ways the Gila Box is enjoyed are camping, hiking, birding, kayaking, rafting, hunting, wildlife viewing, Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) driving, and photography. Visitors are known for staying for a few days or up to two weeks.



Kayakers Recreating in the Gila Box RNCA

## Partnerships

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The BLM's Safford Field Office (SFO) continues to work with multiple partners on various projects in the Gila Box RNCA. These partners include.

- **Graham County Chamber of Commerce:** The chamber continues to partner with BLM in helping educate local visitors. A computer with a narrated video helps educate the public on what the Gila Box RNCA has to offer.
- **Grazing Permittees:** Keeping incidental unauthorized cattle out of riparian areas in the Gila Box RNCA is a high priority for the SFO. These efforts are bolstered by coordination with partners and permittees.
- **Gila Watershed Partnership:** Continues to assist the SFO with annual fish monitoring at Bonita Creek and the Gila River.
- **Bureau of Reclamation:** Continues to work with the SFO to maintain a fish barrier to prevent nonnative Green Sunfish from swimming upstream in Bonita Creek.
- **Fish and Wildlife Service:** Partnered with the SFO to monitor threatened and endangered fish in Bonita Creek. Additionally, they assisted with nonnative fish removal from Bonita Creek.
- **City of Safford:** SFO staff worked closely with the City of Safford to allow for their operation and maintenance of the city's water supply system, located in Bonita Creek within the RNCA. This was a major effort to manage issues associated with a growing beaver population that enhances the values of the RNCA but impacts the water supply operation. This relationship is guided by a Memorandum of Understanding between the City of Safford and BLM.



Photo by Bob Wick, BLM

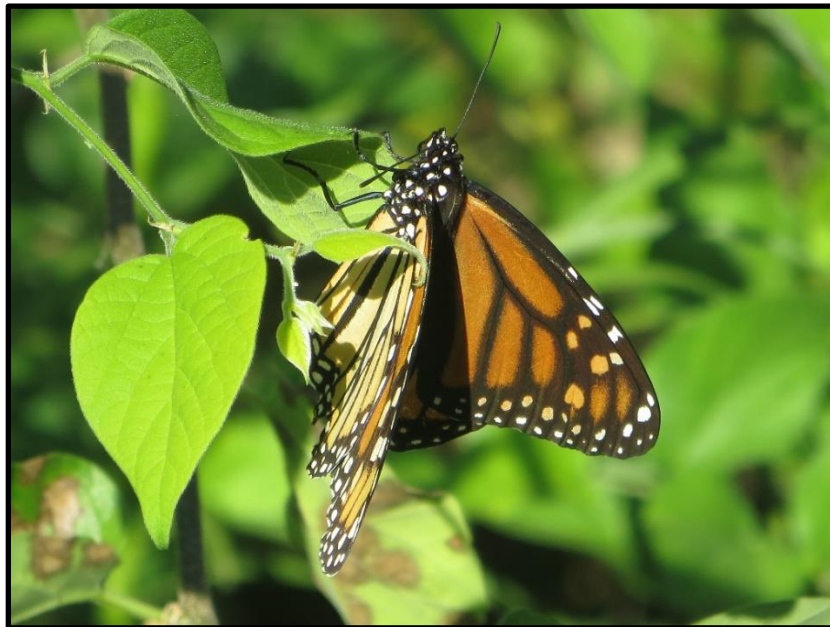
## Science

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To date, the Living Rivers Program has assessed 18 of 23 river miles. No studies were conducted in FY21. The BLM SFO plans to resume studies in FY22. Studies to date document an entrenched river system that is down cutting and will continue to down cut until equilibrium can be attained. Cottonwood and willow plant communities have grown in on the shoreline since grazing was excluded from most of the Gila Box in 1993. However, entrenchment prevents over-bank flooding and reduces the opportunity to develop microhabitats for fish, reptiles, and amphibians. In contrast, bird species are abundant and avian resource goals in the Gila Box Management Plan have been achieved.

The Living Rivers Program has embraced the Rosgen classification as defined by Wildland Hydrology and partners with Natural Heritage for Rapid Assessment Monitoring. In partnership with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the science program incorporates regular monitoring for Yellow-billed cuckoo and habitat for Southwestern willow flycatcher as well as many bird species recognized as species of concern.

In FY20 and FY21, the program also began documenting populations of monarch butterfly. Species of milkweed (*Asclepias spp*) are an essential component in the diet of the Monarch butterfly. However, in the Gila Box RNCA the butterfly is frequently seen feeding on Mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*), a native pioneer riparian shrub. This information has been shared with the BLM SFO's greenhouse partner, the Gila Watershed Partnership, to include Mulefat in the greenhouse production.



Monarch Butterfly Photographed in the Gila Box RNCA

## Climate Impacts

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Climate impacts are not apparent in the Gila Box RNCA. Vegetation changes such as the increasing age of Velvet mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*) without replacement is related to downcutting of the river. Vegetation on benches grows increasingly arid due to a lack of overbank flooding rather than to climate change.

## Climate Resiliency

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Since the 1993 decision that excluded livestock from riparian corridors, the riparian vegetation community has been allowed to reestablish itself along the river shoreline, leading to a more climate resilient riparian area. Additionally, the upland areas of the Gila Box RNCA are managed to meet the Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health, which maintains climate resilient upland plant communities.



Photo by Bob Wick, BLM



## Social and Environmental Justice

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The Gila Box RNCA hosts thousands of visitors each year. Visitors come to the area for the unique recreational activities that the area has to offer. This attraction to the Gila Box adds to the local economy for Graham County. The Gila Box RNCA hosts several Special Recreation Permits (SRPs), and the Gila Box RNCA uplands are used for a number of multiple uses that have an economic impact to the local area, this includes hunting and livestock grazing.



The Old Safford Bridge near the Owl Creek Campground



The Wildlife Viewing Area in the Gila Box RNCA Photo by Bob Wick, BLM

## Words from the staff

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Thanks to all our partners, volunteers and staff. In the arid deserts of southeast Arizona, the Gila Box RNCA is a literal oasis. It is an important hub for wildlife and boasts a truly impressive native fishery. It embodies the BLM mission through its management of multiple use (recreation, habitat, livestock grazing, etc.), all the while maintaining the values for which it was designated. Please visit this special area if you have the opportunity but we request that all visitors recreate responsibly.



Serna Cabin

Photo by Bob Wick, BLM



Pueblo Devol Cliff Dwellings

Photo by Bob Wick, BLM



**NATIONAL  
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LANDS**

## **Gila Box**

### **Riparian National Conservation Area**

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