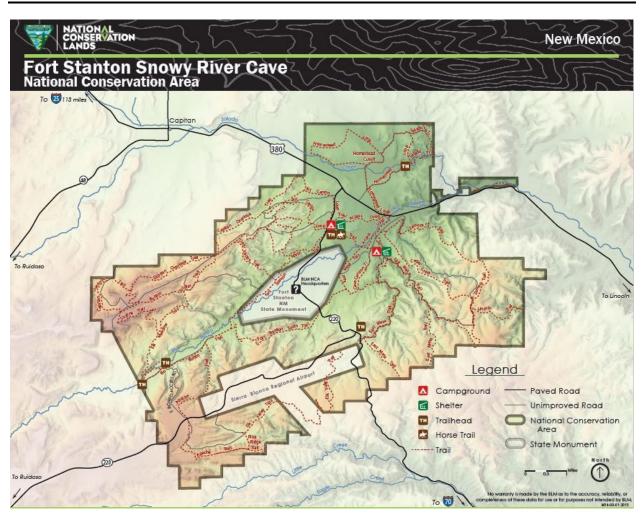


New Mexico 2022: Annual Manager's Report

Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave

National Conservation Area

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Accomplishments

In 2022 Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area (Conservation Area) completed the installation of a changing shed for cave researchers with volunteer work provided by the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project (see photo below). The shed provides a safe and out-of-the-way location for cave researchers to change into their Fort Stanton Cave (Cave)-specific gear and equipment and a place to stow their surface clothes immediately adjacent to the cave entrance. These measures are to prevent diseases and outside contaminants from entering the Cave, including White Nose Syndrome (WNS). Prior to this shed cavers got ready to go into the Cave in the open at picnic tables and did not have a secure area for personal gear.



Because of safety protocols administered, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was able to increase yearly entries into the Cave to 275 in 2022.

The BLM was given the approval to explore the caves beyond the Conservation Area boundary. This added 2.1 miles of new passage to the known cave extent and provided BLM and cave scientists a better understanding of the cave system.

The Conservation Area hosted two National Public Lands Day events this year. For one event, BLM staff worked with Girl Scout volunteers to clean up over 400 pounds of litter and trash from heavily used recreation access areas. The second event involved a team of cavers who made a trip into Fort Stanton Cave and worked on a formation restoration project.

Staff completed an evaluation of the Conservation Area's entire 72-mile trail system and completed reroutes of 2.5 miles that will help make the trail system more sustainable.

Currently about 20 miles of trail work, mostly reclamation, have all had preliminary work completed and await funding to completely implement the repairs.

The Field Office fire program conducted prescribed burn operations on 2328 acres, mechanically thinned 90 acres, and applied chemical treatments to 160 acres. The intent is to make the Conservation Area more resilient to wildfire.

Challenges

The bat populations in the Fort Stanton Cave are potentially at risk from White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a fungal infection that has devastated bat populations in other locations throughout the country. Restricting recreational access to the cave helps to limit the potential introduction of the fungus. Minimal cave entries were allowed for scientific and management purposes. 2022 was the second year that all entries into the Cave required dedicated cave gear to reduce potential introduction of the fungus to the cave system. Swabbing of bats and cave surfaces was done in March of 2022 and the results detected no Pd (Pseudogymnoascus destructans) spores, the fungus that causes WNS. Conservation Area management has taken measures to prevent cave break-ins and vandalism which could harm biological values and cave formations. However, with portions of the cave system from both WNS and other stressors to the cave's biological and physical features. The photo below shows researchers collecting samples in Snowy River Passage for microbial study.



Stressors on non-cave natural resources result mostly from increased recreation use. Changes in New Mexico's regulations for the hunting unit that includes the Conservation Area may mean there is more use in the future as several hunt periods that were once just for youth hunters no longer have that restriction. Increased UTV use has resulted in unauthorized driving off-road and damage to designated trails during precipitation events. Limited law enforcement presence has resulted in sustained trespass and resource damage.

Other challenges come from outside the boundaries of the NCA. Increased fire activity in the surrounding areas resulted in a closure in 2022. The fire risk remains both on the Conservation Area and in surrounding areas. Boundary fence breaks threaten the NCA by providing access to areas that restrict grazing for cattle from surrounding ranches.

Visitors

The Conservation Area is popular with residents from surrounding communities, but also sees heavy visitation from out-of-state visitors who come to visit other attractions in the area, such as the state historical monuments at Fort Stanton proper and at Lincoln, Smokey Bear Historical Park in Capitan, skiing near Ruidoso, and Valley of Fires near Carrizozo. Visitors come for a variety of recreational opportunities: hiking, mountain biking, horse riding, UTV riding, hunting, wildlife watching, and much more.

During the pandemic, the Conservation Area saw a substantial increase in dispersed camping and recreation. That initial bump in visitation has continued. The visitation increases litter, illegal dumping, user-created routes, and new campsites. Staff have worked to mitigate the impacts of increased use. In late June, after fire closures were lifted, the reopening of Rob Jaggers Campground alleviated some of the pressure from increased use. To quantify visitor use, the Conservation Area staff have installed counters at several key points to identify which portions of the Conservation Area are most heavily used and at what times of year. Based on these counters a conservative estimate of visitation in 2022 was 47,500 individuals.



Partnerships

Partnerships are essential to carrying out the mission of the Conservation Area. The partnership with Conservation Corps New Mexico has been a huge help with the assistance of interns. Regular communication with the New Mexico Historic Sites at Fort Stanton and Lincoln helps spread the word about the NCA by having an exhibit in the Fort's Museum and having NCA maps available to the public. Volunteer camp hosts are crucial to providing visitor services in the campgrounds.

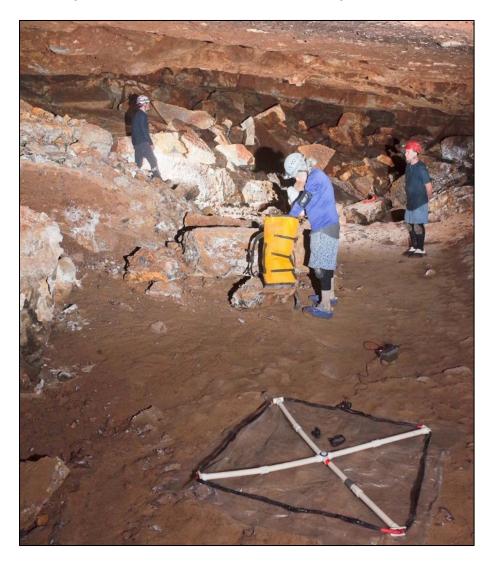
The Upper Hondo Soil & Water Conservation District helped with multiple projects including thinning vegetation, and eradicating non-native, invasive vegetation. BLM's new assistance agreement with PLIA (Public Lands Interpretive Association) developed a cave educational program for 7th graders in Lincoln County and Mescalero Middle schools. The program visited 13 classrooms, exposing 250 students to in-person cave education and the Caver Quest Academy video game. 94 students and chaperones went on a guided educational experience into Fort Stanton Cave.



American Endurance Riders Conference (AERC) worked with BLM to design and reroute trails to meet BLM sustainability standards. Eco Servants AmeriCorps Trail Crew has partnered with BLM for over a decade to enhance trails and recreational opportunities on the NCA. 2.5 miles of trail reroutes were constructed and 1.2 miles of trail reclamation was completed over the 2022 field season. Healing America's Heroes has secured grant funding to build 12 miles of trails on state land that will connect to BLM trails on the NCA to increase user access across jurisdictional lines and enhance the trails available to the public. Healing America's Heroes is an organization that conducts retreats for retired and

discharged service members who have experienced PTSD because of service. They also facilitate recreational workshops and work on maintenance projects.

Finally, the assistance agreement with the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project has been a very successful partnership. They created cave displays, developed virtual cave tours, and advanced new research in 2022. The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project and other cave survey teams mapped 2.5 miles of new passage in the Snowy River Cave Complex in 2022. This brought the Cave's total mapped passage to 44.57 miles in length. This makes the Cave the 9th longest cave in the USA, and the 42nd longest in the world.



Science

The Conservation Area hosts scientific research on both the surface and in the Cave. On the surface BLM (including partners Texas Tech University, New Mexico State University, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) is in the 5th year of an 8-year study on the effects piñon and juniper thinning projects have on migratory birds. Below the surface, there are many on-going research projects. Research includes studying the geochemistry of the hydrologic system to investigate the source water for the cave, clastic sediment study, and White Nose Syndrome testing. Research in the cave is conducted by a variety of researchers associated with many different institutions including the National Cave and Karst Research Institute, University of New Mexico, National Speleological Society, the Fort Stanton Cave Study project, and many others.

Climate Impacts

In 2022 the NCA received 16 inches of precipitation which is an average rain fall for the region. This is the second year of reprieve from extended drought. Piñon and juniper trees are still stressed from drought and bark beetle but showed some vigor in the fall of 2022. Hopefully this trend continues. There are signs of El Niño returning in the summer to fall of 2023. Increased fire activity resulted in a short-term closure of the Conservation Area in June of 2022. Fire risk remains and may in fact be increasing as heavy summer and autumnal rains increase the surface vegetation, which will dry out and become a fire fuels load in drier times.



Climate Resiliency

Preventative fuels treatments, stream restoration projects and prescribed fire are helping maintain a healthy ecosystem and to reduce the possibility of catastrophic fire or flood events. To facilitate preventive fuel treatments in the future the Roswell Field Office's Fire Management Program conducted archeological surveys for 709 acres and threatened and endangered species surveys for 305 acres in 2022. Developed campgrounds are being planted with native plant species (see photo below), and surveys of vegetative and wildlife species within the Conservation Area indicate they are in a healthy condition.



Social and Environmental Justice

The Conservation Area team conducts outreach to local organizations and clubs and visited special events in the region to inform visitors of the recreational, scientific, and natural exploration values at the Conservation Area. NCA staff partnered with the Village of Ruidoso's Department of Parks and Recreation to staff an information station at the annual Ruidoso's Recreation Expo. The Conservation Area staff also participated in a children's archery clinic hosted by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Educational visits associated with the Caver Quest Academy let students from small and underserved communities—including the Mescalero Apache Reservation—learn about the cave. Some students were able to enter and explore the cave under the leadership of an experienced BLM caver (see photo below).

A new partnership with Healing America's Heroes provided opportunities for veterans who had experienced in-service traumas to fish and ride horses on the Conservation Area.

The Conservation Area strives to be a destination for visitors to experience nature, explore science, and recreate in a one-of-a-kind place.



Events

Numerous events were hosted throughout the Conservation Area during the year. The Conservation Area continues to be a premier destination for equestrian riders. In 2022, the Conservation Area permitted an endurance ride with over 50 participants. Other events include several 3D archery shoots.

Words from the Staff

It is an honor and a joy to work at Fort Stanton–Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area. With amazing resources both above and below the ground the Conservation Area provides a new experience and new perspective with every visit. BLM strives to maintain and improve the Conservation Area's natural, scientific, and recreational features to provide for the protection of these resources and the public's enjoyment.





Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave

National Conservation Area

Roswell Field Office Bureau of Land Management 2909 West Second Street Roswell, NM 88201 Phone: 575-627-0272

Report compiled by: Warren Kasper, NCA Manager

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