

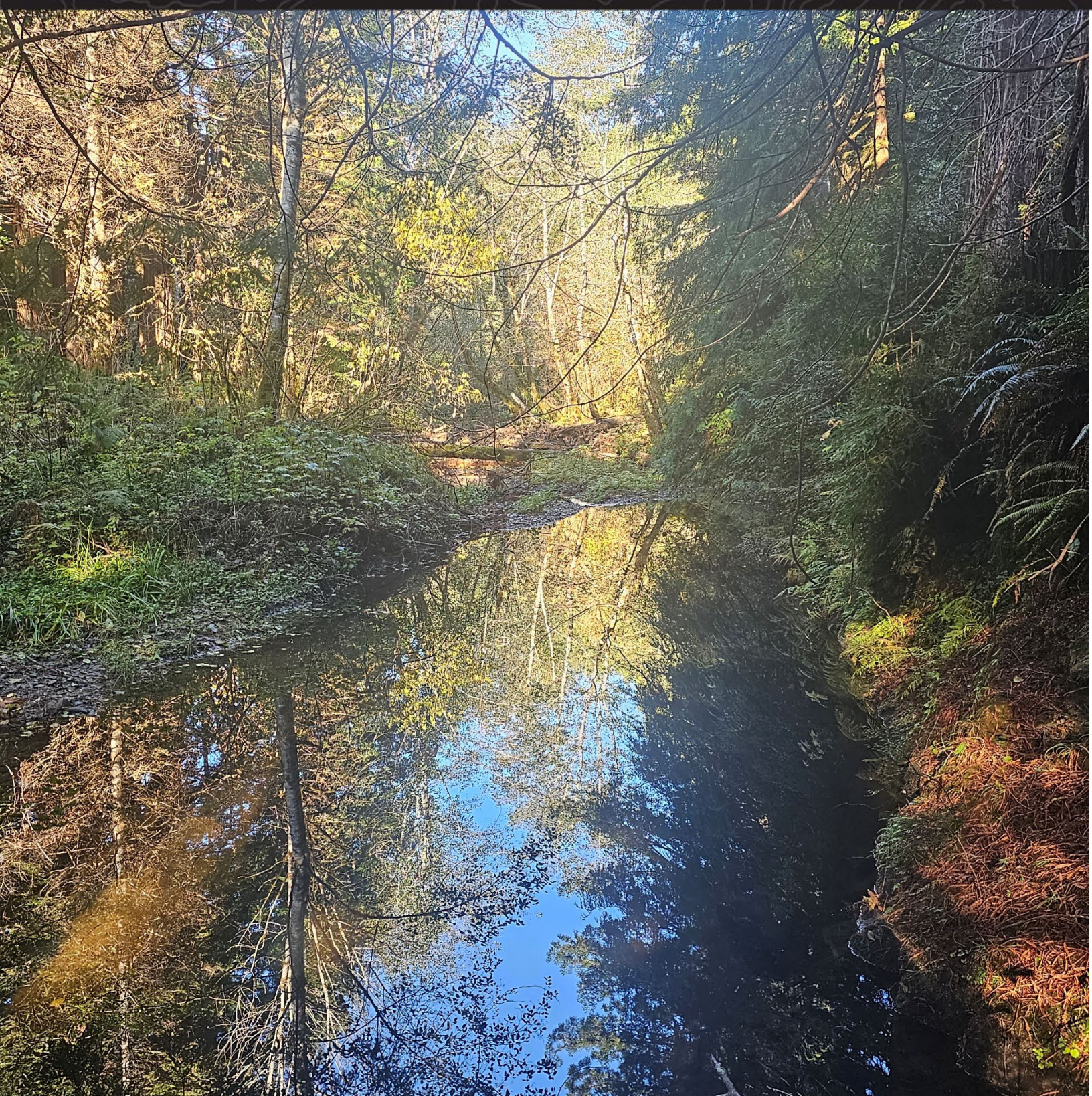


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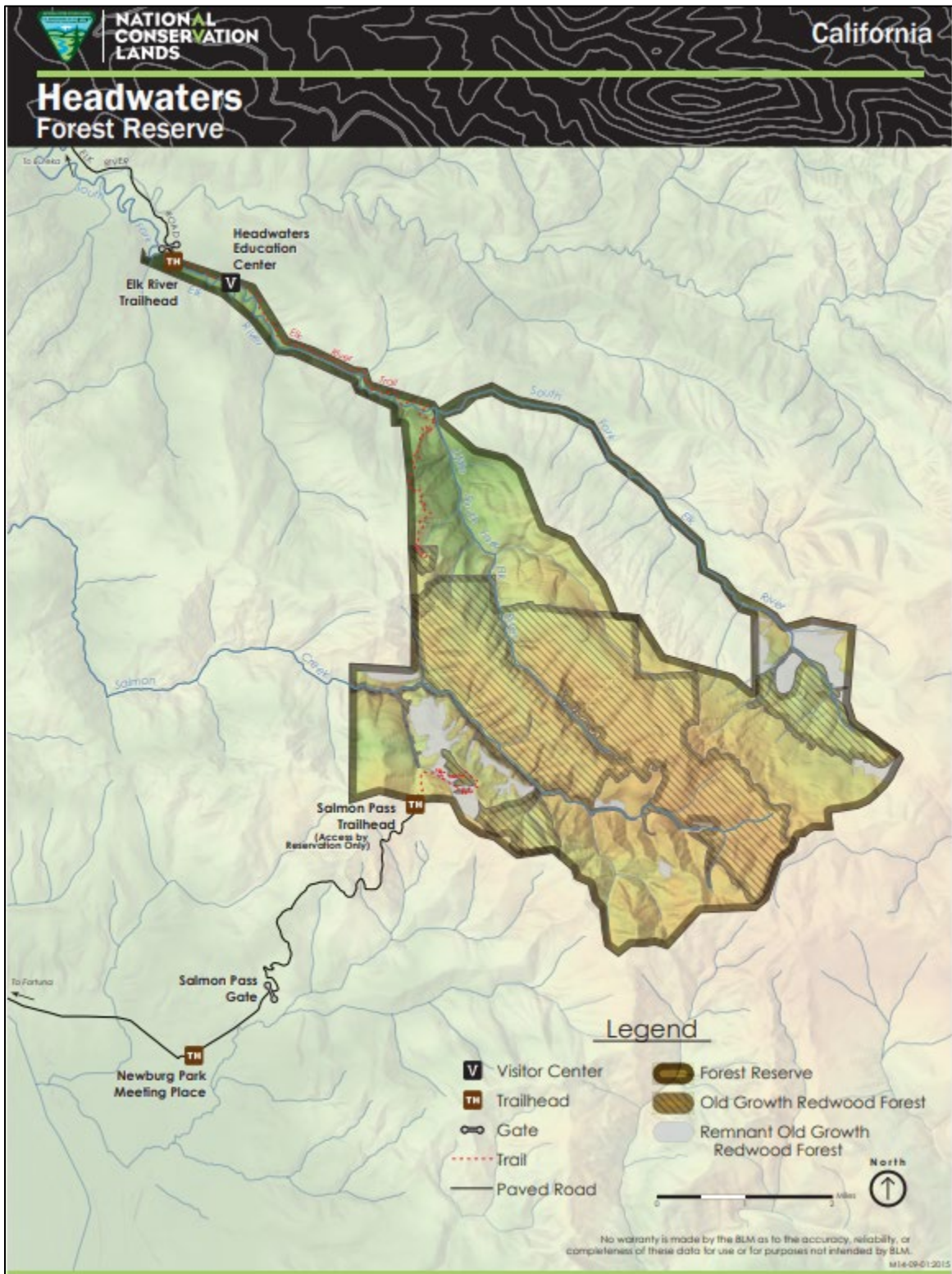
California
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Headwaters

Forest Reserve



Map



Accomplishments

2023 was a busy year for the Headwaters Forest Reserve. Visitation to the reserve remains high, and visitors continue to take advantage of the recently expanded South Side trail system and Elk River parking lot. Docents with Bureau of Land Management (BLM) partner organization Friends of Headwaters (FOH), and BLM recreation and interpretive staff have continued regular guided field trips and special events in the Reserve. Forest restoration and fuels reduction projects are ongoing both the north and south ends of Headwaters. Thinning residues from on-going forest health projects are being used to create and expand fish habitat, an innovative project with multiple resource benefits that also creates an interesting interpretive opportunity for visitors learning about ecological restoration. Researchers also initiated a Barred Owl removal project in to help protect the Northern Spotted Owl.

Heavy rains in 2023 caused some short-term trail damage, but BLM staff and our partners quickly rallied to implement fixes and maintain public access. Funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) was awarded to the reserve to conduct additional forest restoration and habitat development treatments working with the Wiyot Tribe.



Challenges

Headwaters continues to see significant year-over-year cuts to the National Monuments and Conservation Areas program funding used for the management of the Reserve. In 2023, funding decreased to \$569,000, which was down from \$607,00 in FY22. Additionally, increased costs for staffing, general operations and maintenance are making it increasingly difficult to effectively manage the day-to-day functioning of the reserve and implement important restoration activities.

Wildlife monitoring has continued to find a declining population of Northern Spotted Owls (NSO) as the Barred Owl population continues to expand and encroach on NSO habitat. A Barred Owl removal research project was implemented in 2023 to address this challenge.

In the picture below, a Watershed Stewards Intern surveys a wood jam created by winter flood events. Heavy winter rains have caused road and trail damage and altered the locations where the public can easily observe spawning fish.



Visitors

In 2023 there were an estimated 105,000 visitors to the Headwaters Forest Reserve. This data is an estimation based on data collected with a vehicle counter at the Elk River Trailhead along with estimates of visitation to other parts of the reserve.

The Elk River Trailhead, located near the town of Eureka, CA, continues to be the primary trailhead for Headwaters Forest Reserve visitors. Many of the daily visitors are from the surrounding population of 25,000 people. Visitation increases during the summer months. Most of these additional visitors are from the greater San Francisco Bay Area.



Partnerships

The Arcata Field Office (AFO) continues to successfully work with partners in managing the Headwaters Forest Reserve.

Friends of Headwaters (FOH) is a very important partner to the BLM and Headwaters Forest Reserve. FOH currently operates within the reserve under a volunteer agreement with the BLM. FOH is hoping to one day obtain 501(c)(3) non-profit status and establish a formal partnership with Headwaters. FOH is critical in providing docents for a reservation-only hiking tour that runs May 15 through November 15 on the south side of the Reserve. These volunteers also maintain weekly openings of the Headwaters Education Center through the summer months and help BLM host or facilitate special events such as community outreach hikes, workshops, classes, and thematic performances. In December of 2023, Linda West, FOH lead, attended the Conservation Lands Foundation Workshop in Sacramento. She was able to network with other Friends groups to explore the capacity, process, and requirements of becoming a 501(c)(3) organization and maintaining that status.

Headwaters docent Susan Halpin was recognized with a 2023 BLM National Making a Difference Lifetime Achievement Award. Susan has been a Friends of Headwaters docent for a decade leading Salmon Pass tours every year.



Science

Wildlife

In 2023 a research team from the University of Wisconsin-Madison started the experimental removal of Barred Owls from within the Reserve. Eleven Barred Owls were removed from Headwaters and three additional owls were removed from the nearby Lacks Creek Management Area. To the best of our knowledge, all the Barred Owls were removed from Headwaters. The researchers will continue their work in 2024 to maintain the removal effort. Barred Owls are known to displace and out-compete Northern spotted owls, the protection of which was a key factor in the establishment of the Headwaters Forest Reserve.

Fish

In the summer of 2023 BLM continued the implementation of the 'accelerated recruitment' stream restoration project in South Fork Elk River. The project used the densely stocked riparian forests as a source of large wood to promote complex habitat forming processes for threatened coho salmon and steelhead. Approximately 300 trees were added to the stream which quadrupled the amount of large wood in the 1.5-mile project reach. This year, BLM employees working with the Watershed Stewards Program interns as well as the California Conservation Corps, utilized a grip hoist and winch to drag previously felled trees into the river for habitat creation. The new fish structures were tested with extreme rainfall and high river flows late in the year; while some of the wood moved around in the river it continues to provide habitat as intended. A cutthroat trout genetic research project funded by the BLM's National Conservation Lands Management Studies Support Program is underway in Headwaters, and final results are expected in FY24. Preliminary results indicate the Salmon Creek population, which occurs upstream of a long-standing total barrier, is genetically unique from other populations in the region.

Cultural Heritage

In 2023, the Falk Archaeological District was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This listing is possible because of nearly two decades of cultural resource investigations at the Headwaters Forest Reserve conducted by Humboldt State University (now Cal Poly Humboldt). As part of that study, former Elk River Mill & Lumber Company employees, and descendants of employees, were interviewed. This robust set of studies provided the necessary information to nominate the property to the National Register. Falk is significant because it represents an economic enterprise that was important to the region during the period of 1884 to 1937. The lumber company operated during a period when redwood logging technology shifted from water-powered sawmills and oxen log transport to steam-driven sawmills and steam-powered railroad log transport.

Since time immemorial and certainly prior to the existence of the Elk River Mill & Lumber Company and the town of Falk, the Wiyot people have used the resources at the Headwaters Forest Reserve that were necessary for life in the Humboldt Bay region. Today, Wiyot people are represented by three Tribes: the Wiyot Tribe, the Blue Lake Rancheria, and the Bear River Band of the Rohnerville Rancheria. In 2023, BLM facilitated removal of downed redwood log segments that were given to Bear River Band to provide material for planks, posts, and roofing to construct traditional dance and living houses.



BLM is committed to protecting cultural heritage sites under its management. At Headwaters Forest Reserve, BLM is greatly assisted by a heritage site steward, Rusty Goodlive, who routinely visits the area to monitor for any impacts to the cultural resources. BLM CA is actively involved in supporting and promoting the California Archaeological Site Stewardship Program (or CASSP). For more information about this program, visit the website at <https://www.cassp.org/>.

Climate Impacts

2023 was marked by some remarkable flooding that inundated parts of the Elk River Trail. Some weather models project an increase in extreme weather events in coming years because of climate change. The potential for droughts punctuated by heavy rain events creates numerous challenges for managers of the Headwaters Reserve. Late season spring rains in 2023 led to a relatively low level of fire activity and offered relief to firefighters after record levels of acres were burned in recent years. Heavy winter rains, however, have led to access issues and road damage, highlighting the importance of road and trail maintenance which can be very expensive and for which there is limited funding.

Foresters and Fire Management Specialists continue to implement forest health and fuels reduction treatments in the Reserve. Treatments that accelerate the development of late-seral stage “old growth” forest characteristics also accelerate the development of habitat for listed species. The Headwaters Reserve continues to function as a refugia for numerous plants and animals, as well as human visitors from other inland areas who are escaping the heat. The picture below shows some of the flooding caused by recent heavy rains.



Climate Resiliency

Headwaters resource managers have continued to build on restoration projects completed in recent years, expanding forest thinning to accelerate the development of late-seral stage forests. Forest health thinning and habitat development protect the reserve from catastrophic fires and protect this important refugia for threatened and endangered species like the Northern Spotted Owl.

The addition of course woody debris to the Elk River provides habitat for threatened coho salmon and steelhead. The logs in the picture below were a product of a thinning project designed to improve forest health and will provide refugia and improve the spawning opportunities for fish.



Social and Environmental Justice

The Headwaters Forest Reserve continues to be a location that promotes social and environmental justice and recreation equity by providing environmental education opportunities that span a wide range of social classes, mobility levels, and languages. Even through the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Headwaters Forest Reserve remained open and free to access for local visitors as well as tourists from across the country. Enhancements to recreation facilities in recent years have increased access and recreation capacity in the Reserve while continuing to provide free access for the public. Events coordinated by recreation and interpretation staff have resumed and include environmental education field trips to students across a wide range of socio-economic classes. In the picture below, Forestry students from the College of the Redwoods stop for a break at the Headwaters Education Center.



Events

FOH scheduled events throughout the summer of 2023 including a spring bird walk with a local wildlife biologist, a native plant walk with a BLM botanist, a nature writing workshop with a local environmental writer, and a guided cultural/natural history walk on the South Side Trail. Throughout the year, the BLM Headwaters Park Rangers and Interpretive Specialists led nine formalized environmental education hikes on the Elk River Trail with over 440 participants. Participation in the hikes ranged from elementary school-age field trips to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, a partnership for aging adults through Cal Poly Humboldt. Interpretation and educational topics in the hikes included cultural heritage, salmon ecology, watershed restoration and forest health information. In addition, partners and BLM staff also began planning for special events, social media campaigns, and educational products to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Headwaters Forest Reserve throughout 2024.





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Headwaters Forest Reserve

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