



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

**Idaho**  
2024: Annual Manager's Report

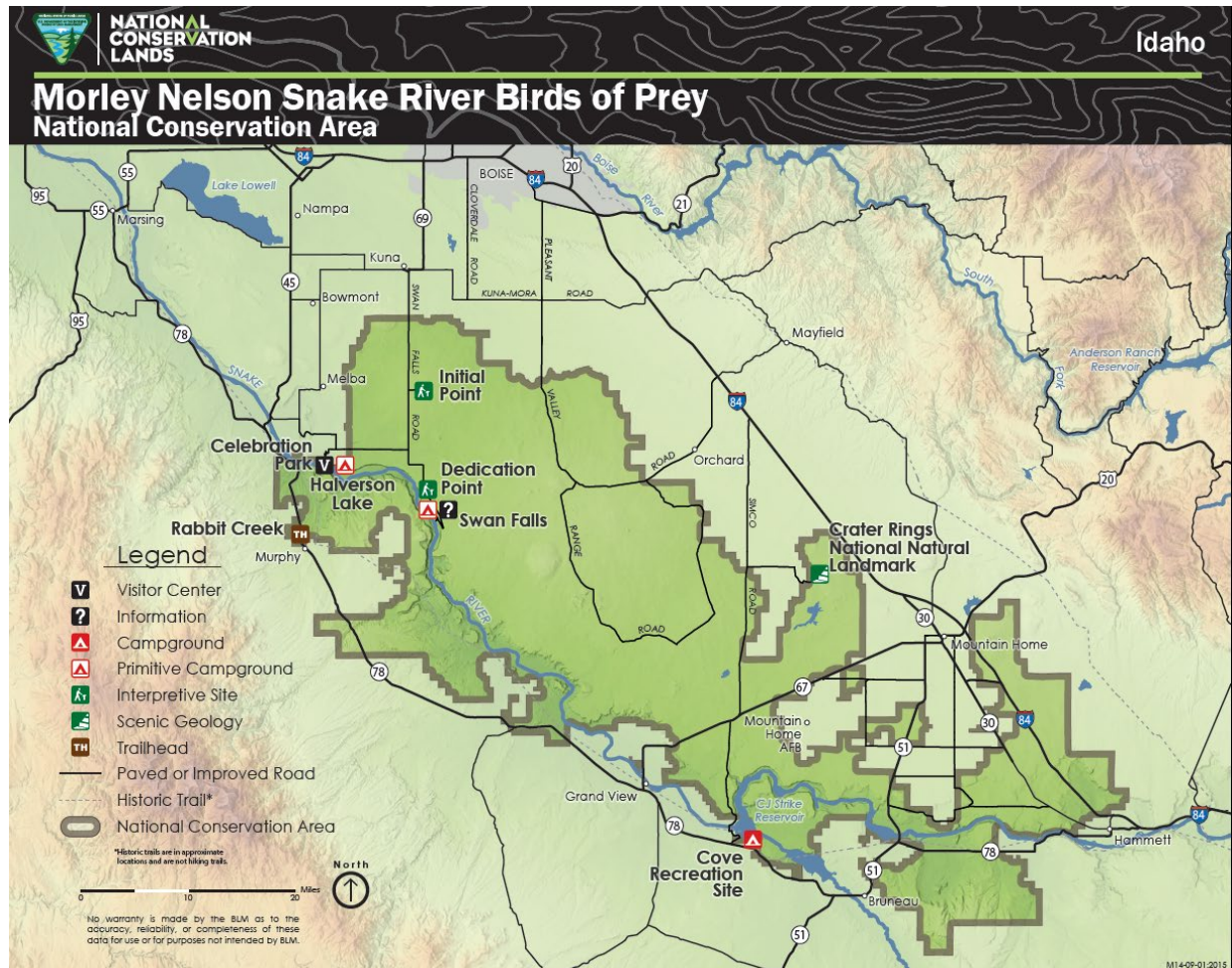
# **Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey**

## **National Conservation Area**





# Map



# Accomplishments

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In supporting the goals for the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (NCA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) staff regularly accomplish a broad range of tasks. In 2024, BLM staff facilitated and conducted surveys and research to evaluate authorizations and activities in the NCA including: golden eagle research, monitoring migratory bird populations, and identifying habitat restoration needs for small mammal populations such as Piute ground squirrels. Staff also conducted public outreach and education efforts through classroom presentations, on-site educational events, and virtual web-based videos. Recreation visitation was managed and monitored to provide recreational facilities and opportunities that showcase the natural resource values and unique experience the NCA offers, which is a rural landscape providing open space, raptor prey species habitat intermixed with private agricultural developments. There are deep incised river canyons providing raptor nesting habitat, viewing opportunities, and recreational opportunities along the river corridors such as rafting, fishing, and hiking. Staff also worked closely with the Idaho Army National Guard (IDARNG) to facilitate military training and infrastructure improvements in support of a well-trained and capable military within a unit situated on BLM-managed land and providing unique and important military training opportunities.



**Figure 1. Great horned owls**

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Additional accomplishments include:

- Implemented recreational site improvements at Cove Recreation Site and Dedication Point.
- Continued outreach programs about birds of prey within the NCA through direct BLM staff support and critical partnerships, such as with the Birds of Prey Partnership, Boise State University, and the Raptor Research Center.
- Continued collaborating with Boise State University's Raptor Research Center and the IDARNG on wildlife conservation projects.
- Continued habitat restoration work focused on restoring vegetation conditions post-wildfire in some areas and restoring habitat for the declining Piute ground squirrel, the primary food source for raptors in the area.



# Challenges

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The NCA is adjacent to Boise, Idaho and is within the greater Treasure Valley, one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the western United States. This growth has placed greater demands on BLM-managed public land and presents challenges in balancing diverse recreational demands including providing and maintaining access, managing recreational shooting, and preventing illegal trash dumping. These challenges and the recreational uses of the NCA are expected to continue to increase along with the growth in Idaho's Treasure Valley.

Wildfire continues to be one of the largest challenges for the NCA in achieving desirable vegetation conditions and protecting valuable wildlife habitat. The NCA had 24 fires in fiscal year 2024 (FY24) totaling 8,520 acres burned. Noxious weeds and invasive annual grasses can easily become the dominate vegetation after a disturbance such as a wildfire. These altered habitats impact the health of small mammals and other wildlife populations. Additionally, drought conditions and variability in the timing of precipitation impact habitat restoration efforts and the overall resiliency to habitat disturbances. The pictures below demonstrate the drastic vegetation changes that can occur after a wildfire on the NCA.



**Figure 2. Picture of established native vegetation in the NCA Figure**



**Figure 3. Picture of Castle Butte showing noxious weeds after a wildfire.**

# Visitors

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An estimated 157,500 people visited the NCA in FY24 to enjoy the many recreational opportunities such as camping, boating, fishing, hunting, shooting, hiking, biking, and horseback riding. A significant number of these people visited the Dedication Point Overlook and Cove Recreation Site, which are located along the Western Heritage Byway.



**Figure 4. View from Dedication Point**

## **Dedication Point**

The deep canyon of the Snake River and adjacent upland plateau provide habitat for one of the greatest concentrations of nesting raptors in the United States. The Dedication Point overlook is 400 feet above the Snake River and provides a great location to view the area's famous birds of prey. This is also a popular area for school field trips and educational events. Facilities at Dedication Point include a graveled vehicle parking lot, a restroom, interpretive signs, a covered cabana for education programs, and a short walking trail leading to the overlook. Approximately 16,250 visitors enjoyed this location in the NCA in FY24.

### **Cove Recreation Site**

The Cove Recreation Site is a popular campground within the NCA that received 5,700 visitors in FY24. The primary recreational uses of this site are camping, fishing, boating, and wildlife viewing. A camp host is seasonally available and provides information to visitors. The Boise District completed a Great American Outdoors Act project at this site in FY24, improving and upgrading water lines and area landscaping (see “Staff Topic of Choice” page 9).

### **Snake River Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA)**

The Snake River SRMA consists of 22,300 acres in the Snake River Canyon downstream from Grandview, Idaho, that is managed for the protection of cultural and scenic values. This area has many opportunities including hunting, fishing, boating, camping, birdwatching, and hiking. Highlighted destinations include Dedication Point, Celebration Park, Halverson Bar/Lake, and Swan Falls Dam. It received approximately 124,000 visitors in FY24.



**Figure 5. Information kiosk at Halverson Bar**

### **C.J. Strike SRMA**

The C.J. Strike SRMA consists of 20,000 acres surrounding C.J. Strike Reservoir along the Snake River. The Cove Recreation Site is within this SRMA boundary. The purpose of the SRMA is to provide enhanced recreation management associated with the reservoir and protection of the Oregon National Historic Trail adjacent to the reservoir. It received approximately 12,250 visitors in FY24.

### **Owyhee Front SRMA**

Owyhee Front SRMA consists of 6,300 acres and its purpose is to provide enhanced management of recreational uses, focusing on trailheads tailored for off-highway vehicle use. It received approximately 1,400 visitors in FY24.

### **Oregon National Historic Trail SRMA**

Oregon Trail SRMA consists of 7,900 acres, and its purpose is to protect the visual and historical values of the trail. It received approximately 100 visitors in FY24.

# Partnerships

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## **Celebration Park**

The BLM and the Canyon County Parks, Cultural & Natural Resources (CCPCNR) have a long-standing partnership in the management of Celebration Park. Celebration Park and the NCA share a border where several historic cultural resources are located. The BLM and CCPCNR share common interests, goals, and objectives in providing and enhancing interpretive and educational programs, while conserving cultural and natural resources on public lands managed by the BLM. The BLM and Celebration Park staff partnered in FY24 to host Winter Desert field trip programs for schools to visit the area and learn about the natural and cultural history.



**Figure 6. Guffey Bridge**

## **Idaho Army National Guard**

The NCA has established a strong working relationship with the Idaho Army National Guard (IDARNG) in supporting the Orchard Combat Training Center (OCTC), which is a combat and tank training facility within the NCA that encompasses 142,800 acres. This is a unique land use relationship that was specifically identified in the enacting legislation when the NCA was originally established in 1993. The partnership between the BLM and IDARNG includes land management efforts that allow for military training operations while protecting and restoring wildlife habitat, as well as collaborating on outdoor education and outreach efforts. The BLM and IDARNG coordinate regularly to ensure



consistency with the annual training plan while at the same time meeting requirements of the enabling legislation for the NCA.

### **Birds of Prey NCA Partnership (BOPP)**

In FY24, a new Memorandum of Understanding was signed with the NCA's partner organization, the Birds of Prey NCA Partnership (BOPP). Through this partnership, the NCA and BOPP have worked to expand habitat restoration initiatives to address sagebrush-steppe habitat loss, mainly due to wildfire. Additionally, BOPP has worked with IDARNG and Idaho Department of Fish and Game, as they continue to be effective partners in seed collection and native planting efforts. Through these partnership efforts, BOPP and the NCA engaged the local community with volunteer seedling plantings, seed collections, and educational events.



**Figure 7. Students studying the NCA's sagebrush steppe habitat**

# Science

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The NCA serves as a living laboratory for the American public where the area hosts the densest population of nesting birds of prey in North America. Within the NCA, the wildlife and ecology programs engage partners in support of scientific research to inform land management decisions and increase our understanding of the NCA ecosystem. This information assists managers in addressing ongoing and emerging conservation threats.

Current priority wildlife studies are focused on golden eagle nesting habitat suitability and nestling survival; ferruginous hawk breeding productivity monitoring; raptor prey species abundance and distribution; shooting (both legal and illegal) impacts to raptors in the NCA; and reproductive productivity declines of burrowing owls. BLM staff is also currently developing the NCA's Strategic Science Plan which will help inform future research needs, focuses, and efforts.



**Figure 8. Ferruginous hawk nestlings**



Results from scientific studies in the NCA are often published for broader circulation and applicability. For example, the results from a National Conservation Lands Management Support Studies Program project were published in the scientific journal *Ornithological Applications*, titled *Illegal Shooting of Protected Nongame Birds Along Power Lines Coincides with Places and Times of Peak Legal Recreational Shooting*. Results from another National Conservation Lands Management Support Studies Program project were presented as part of a Boise State University graduate thesis titled *Associations between Landscape Changes and Declines in Golden Eagle Territory Occupancy in the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area*. Results from these projects improve natural resource management of the NCA and the surrounding BLM lands while applying the most recent and best available science. They also provide critical research information for raptor and resource management to areas far beyond the NCA.



**Figure 9. Ferruginous hawk perched on powerline structure**

# Outreach and Special Events

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The NCA continued to serve the American family by offering its highly popular education activities and participating in community events. BLM staff and volunteers led the annual on-site Desert Discovery Days school field trip programs at Dedication Point during the month of May 2024. Over two weeks, nearly 500 third grade students spent the day outdoors on public land learning about the desert ecosystem, wildlife, and the resources of the NCA.

The NCA's educational raptors continued to be an effective and highly sought-after teaching resource. Throughout FY24, the NCA staff and volunteers gave 119 presentations, reaching over 10,000 students and adults. NCA staff and educational raptors participated in local community events such as the seventh annual Snake River Raptor Fest, as well as presentations at local schools and community events.



Figure 10. Swainson's hawk introduced at educational event



# Staff Topic of Choice

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Cove Recreation Site, on C.J. Strike Reservoir, is the only improved public camping facility within the NCA. Fishing is the main attraction at the Cove Recreation Site where people can fish the CJ Strike Reservoir from shore or boat. Several fish species are available to catch including trout, bass, bluegill, crappie, yellow perch, channel catfish, bullhead, and sturgeon.

BLM staff have been working on improving the Cove Recreation Site to provide for increased recreational demands and to enhance the camping experience for visitors to the NCA. Since July 2023, the BLM has improved the roads and parking lot spaces throughout the recreation site, replaced the irrigation system, and repaired hydrant and sewer lines. Additionally, fire rings and picnic tables have recently been installed to upgrade the camp sites.

Currently, the BLM is preparing to replace the boat ramp and docks to improve accessibility and function for use of hand boats and small watercraft that are popular in the NCA during the summer months. Along with the updated boat ramp, the BLM will also stabilize the shoreline to reduce the amount of erosion in and around the banks of the Cove Recreation Site. Visitors are encouraged to come and utilize the upgraded recreation site.



**Figure 11. Cove Recreation Site infrastructure**



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## **Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area**

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