



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Montana-Dakotas
2024: Annual Manager's Report

Pompeys Pillar

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

Key accomplishments at Pompeys Pillar National Monument (PPNM) in 2024 included completion of the multi-year rock stabilization project, increased interpretive programming and special events including, our first Native Heritage Day event, the return of monthly star parties, a fully operational fee program, and National Public Lands Day trail work.

We also had murals painted in two of our vault toilets to improve visitor experience and discourage vandalism and added two new trailhead kiosks and new trail markers to help visitors navigate the site.



Annual prescribed burning, part of efforts to improve wildlife habitat for pheasants, occurred on approximately 48 of the 432-acre Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). The acreage is divided into units that are burned on a three- to four-year rotation.

The rock stabilization project aimed to ensure public safety and enjoyment at the monument. This site contains the only remaining visible evidence along the Corps of Discovery's trail, as well as many other historically significant markings and inscriptions, making it even more important to be preserved for future generations. Key areas of the sandstone formation were stabilized to protect historical signatures from the effects of erosion. Geotextile, gravel, curbing, drains, and a drainpipe were installed at the top of the Pillar to divert water from flowing into large cracks, preventing the freeze-thaw cycle from degrading the sandstone.



Challenges

The monument manager was on detail the bulk of the season and despite finding a replacement detail, they had to leave within a week of arrival due to injury. This left staff with no onsite upper management. There were problems with the water system that provides water to the visitor center. The higher content of iron from the well water was clogging filters and making it difficult for water to be pumped to the visitor center. There were also problems with the sprinkler lines which froze and broke during the winter because they had not been fully cleared of water. Both the site manager and visitor use lead accepted new positions at the end of the season, leaving the Pillar with one out of four permanent positions filled.

Although we were fortunate this year to have a full staff, recruiting and retaining staff at PPNM continues to be challenging due to the site's remoteness, increasing cost of living, and limited affordable housing. The geographical isolation necessitates long commutes for potential employees, deterring stable employment. Rising living costs in nearby areas make finding affordable housing increasingly difficult. None of our four seasonal park rangers said they would be coming back.

Seasonal staff at the monument face challenges finding affordable housing, as current salaries for GS-05 seasonals are not sufficient for the area. This ongoing issue hampers the monument's ability to maintain a dedicated workforce essential for visitor services and resource management. A solution would be to have the ability to offer recruitment strategies, such as competitive salary packages and remote living incentives, while collaborating with local entities to develop affordable housing solutions. These initiatives are crucial for establishing a stable workforce dedicated to preserving this important national resource.

Visitors

In 2024, PPNM experienced a remarkably busy year. Our visitation, comprised of people from around the world, totaled 30,664 visitors, our highest visitation since 2018. 27,538 visitors came between May and September and engaged in a variety of interpretive programs and special events. There was a full staff this year which allowed the fee station to be regularly open, likely contributing to a more accurate visitor count. TRAFx counters were also used to collect and record visitor use at unstaffed trailheads and during the offseason. This success was aided by an exceptional seasonal staff and dedicated volunteers who contributed to a fantastic season.



Partnerships

Monument staff worked closely with our partners throughout the year to provide visitors with the best experience possible, to foster fun events for the public and meet resource restoration goals in the Monument and ACEC. These partners include the Audubon Conservation Education Center, Friends of Pompeys Pillar, Montana Conservation Corps, National Park Service - Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, Montana State University – Billings, American Hiking Society and National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF).

The Friends of Pompeys Pillar, along with operating our gift shop, assisted us with organizing events such as Signature Day and Native Heritage Day, scheduling guest speakers and volunteer recruitment. Two trail cleanup events were held: one for National Trails Day, in collaboration with the American Hiking Society, which included free bug spray, stickers, and pins for volunteers, and another for National Public Lands Day, promoted through NEEF, which provided free t-shirts for participants.



Science

Billings Field Office (BIFO) biologists, along with Pillar staff and interns, performed several scientific projects throughout the year. We conducted in-house bumble bee surveys, facilitated Xerces Society holding a Bumble Bee Atlas citizen science training event, and had a Pheasants Forever partner conduct a second year of general pollinator monitoring in restoration treatment areas.



Additionally, we facilitated Montana Moth Project doing a citizen science moth inventory event.



Outreach and Special Events

PPNM hosted several notable events. The annual Signature Day Event on July 25, celebrating the anniversary of Clark's visit and inscription, featured booths displaying the Pillars history, geology, frontier lifestyles, and Native American influences. A "frontier camp" allowed visitors to explore life in the early 1800s, with staff and volunteers in buckskin garments using tools and preparing recipes used by the Corps of Discovery.

This year we held our first Native Heritage Day, which celebrated local native communities and their cultural connection with Pompeys Pillar. We had representation from Crow, Sioux, and Salish tribes, who spoke about their traditions, provided cultural demonstrations, and helped us erect two Crow style tipis. Thanks to our Friends group, we were able to book a local native run food truck that served Indian tacos.



PPNM facilitated "Rock the Run," a 5K race, which drew over 40 competitors and was coordinated by volunteers from the Friends of Pompeys Pillar and the Daughters of the American Revolution. We also facilitated a cross-country meet for local high school students.

Throughout the season, PPNM partnered with the Audubon Conservation Education Center and regional schools to provide educational programs at no cost to students, teachers, or chaperones. The Monument also offered fee-free days as designated by the Bureau of Land Management.

Venomous Snake Training

Pompeys Pillar is an ideal snake habitat and as a result we often encounter snakes, both venomous and non-venomous. While we were in the process of finding a venomous snake training, there was a rattlesnake bite on site, which made the need for training even more urgent. We were able to do a full day training, learning about the habits and biology of snakes, focusing on our resident venomous snake, the prairie rattlesnake. In the afternoon we practiced handling live snakes, starting with a gopher snake then with wild prairie rattlesnakes (no snakes were injured, and wild snakes were caught and released in the same place by the training company). Practicing with live snakes and supervision gave our team the confidence to face that situation if needed in the field. We ended up moving two snakes later in the season, one of which had coiled up in a planter in the middle of a walkway and the other that was by a building.





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[To view photos of PPNM visit Flickr](#)

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Cover photo courtesy of: Jeff Horn

Pompeys Pillar National Monument (PPNM) encompasses 51 acres on the banks of the Yellowstone River with a massive sandstone outcrop covering about 2 acres at its base and rising 120 feet high toward Montana's Big Sky. The area's premier location at a natural ford in the Yellowstone River, and the Pillar's geologic distinction as the only major sandstone formation in the area, have made the site a celebrated landmark and outstanding observation point for more than eleven thousand years of human occupation. Hundreds of markings, petroglyphs, and inscriptions left by visitors have transformed this geologic phenomenon into a living journal of the American West. A National Historic Landmark since 1965, the land was acquired by the Bureau of Land Management in 1991 and was designated as a National Monument in January 2001. There are over 432 acres of public land associated with the monument, located about 25 miles east of Billings, Montana.

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