



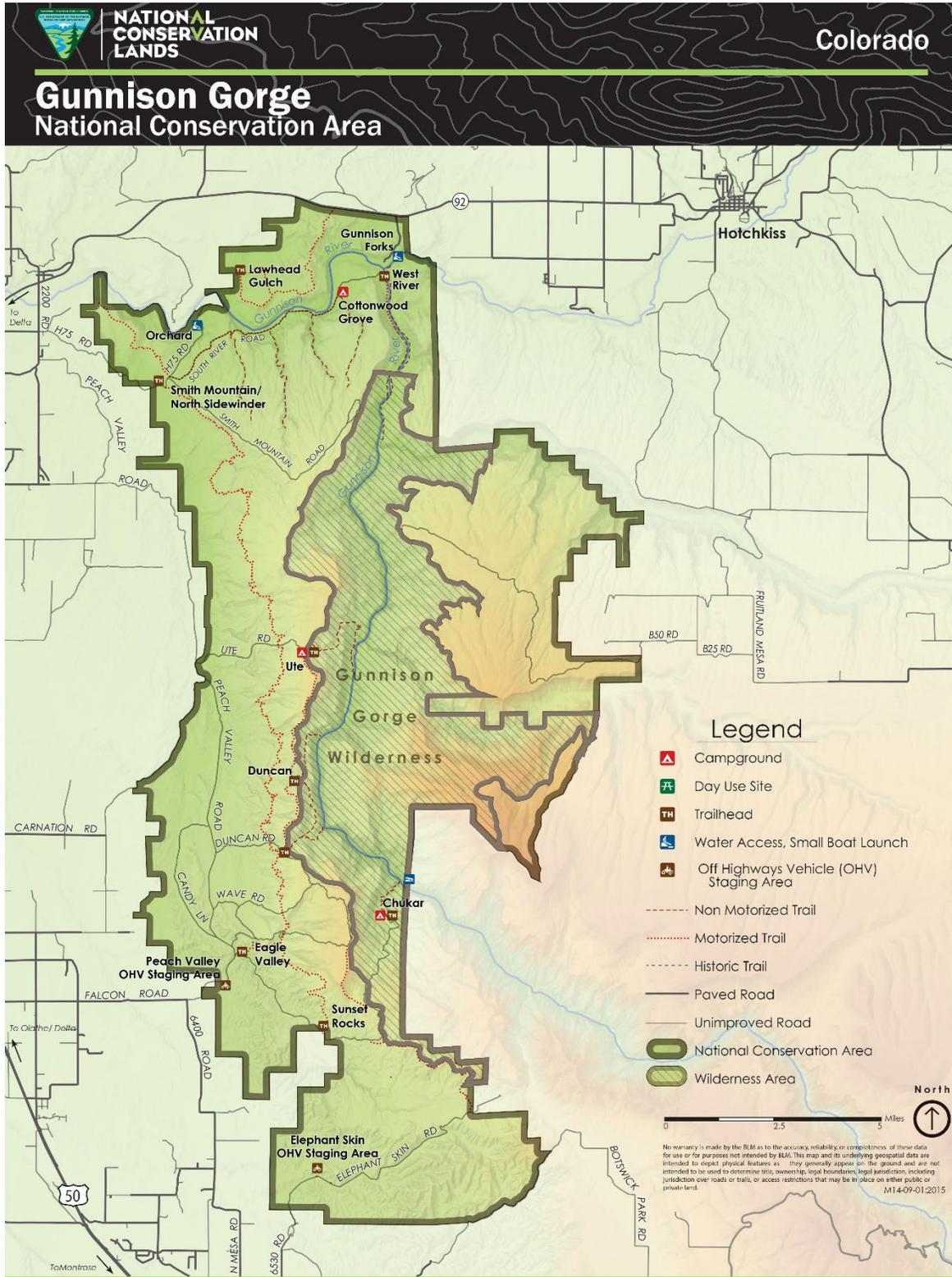
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Colorado
2024: Annual Manager's Report

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

Colorado Canyons Association's Impact

In 2024, our amazing Friends Group, Colorado Canyons Association, helped the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) make a huge impact in our communities:

- 2,359 learners engaged through outdoor field trips and educational offerings
- 587 participants experienced rafting on local rivers
- Nearly 15,000 contact hours with students
- 500+ community members attended hikes, lectures, and educational outings
- 193 volunteers contributed over 2,500 hours of work (and counting!)
- 25 volunteers monitored and cleaned our trail systems monthly
- 10 stewardship events ranging from habitat restoration to educational outings
- 150+ recreationalists received Leave No Trace education at trailheads
- 36,157 views on CCA's Youtube channel, which helps foster community stewardship, education, and awareness of our National Conservation Areas.

Dark Skies Certification

In 2024, BLM and our partner groups were successful in obtaining an official certification as an International Dark Sky Park. We are excited to offer dark sky outreach events, update our interpretive and informational signage, and most importantly motivate the public to check out our (very) dark skies!



Challenges

One of the challenges emerging in 2024 is the development of new recreational equipment changing visitor opportunities in the GGNCA. Increased demand and use of both e-bikes and pack-rafts led to some great discussions about the future of recreational uses and how the office can best adapt and manage for those new activities. Staff have been monitoring and are looking to new ideas for future year implementation to keep up with changing recreational demands.



Another challenge was protecting Clay-loving buckwheat immediately adjacent to a main access road. Clay-loving wild buckwheat is a low growing, rounded, densely branched subshrub in the buckwheat family (Polygonaceae). Though it only grows 6 to 8 inches tall, it is known to live for more than 18 years. Clay-loving wild buckwheat is endemic to the rolling clay (adobe) hills and flats immediately adjacent to the communities of Delta and Montrose, Colorado and is considered an endangered species. Staff from recreation, ecology, maintenance, and cultural programs worked together to install a post and cable barrier to prevent the public from driving over this sensitive resource.



Visitors

Visitors come to GGNCA for a diverse and growing array of activities, including but not limited to, whitewater rafting, wilderness exploration, fishing, camping, horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking, hunting, wildlife viewing, and OHV riding (on trails or within our designated Open Areas). Most recently, pack-rafting has become a popular activity in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness due to its practicality of packing, gear minimalism, and ability to navigate the rapids. We also expect astro-tourism to increase in the Gorge, as the Dark Sky Park certification enhances the public's awareness of the NCA's naturally dark skies.

Visitor Use

In 2024, an estimated 195,500 visitors recreated in the NCA, a 6% increase from 2023. It is expected that visitation will continue to increase as outdoor recreation is becoming more prominent within the surrounding communities. To better understand the impact visitation has on experiences and benefits in the NCA, BLM is continuing to implement an enhanced visitor-use monitoring program, with traffic counters, staff observations, and Special Recreation Permit post-use reports. Rolling over into the 2025 season, BLM is continuing to partner with University of Alaska and Colorado Mesa University to conduct on-the-ground and online surveys of visitors across various recreation sites within the NCA. The results will help influence potential future allocation models for the river stretches, as well as help BLM understand the general satisfaction of current visitors to our NCA.



Partnerships

Colorado Canyons Association

Colorado Canyons Association continues, year after year, to play a huge role in all three NCA's on the western slope of Colorado – McInnis, Dominguez-Escalante, and of course Gunnison Gorge NCA. Our partnership with CCA supports and enhances education and interpretation programs, and stewardship of Gunnison Gorge NCA. CCA co-hosts a variety of educational field trips with BLM for local K-12 school groups. Students float the Gunnison River and learn about the riparian ecosystem, while others hike on trails and learn about the inter-connected web of life. Most trips involve a BLM representative, who helps students understand the concepts of public lands management and who hopefully, may instill a desire to become a future park ranger or a scientist.



Westcore (Western Colorado Riders and Enthusiasts) partnered with BLM to conduct a cleanup in the “adobes” of the GGNCA (Adobe is a clay-based soil that forms much of the landscape in and around GGNCA). Westcore has worked with GGNCA on countless trail projects as well to ensure quality motorized recreation opportunities continue in the NCA.



GGNCA works closely with and appreciates support from the following organizations:

- The Gunnison Gorge Anglers chapter of Trout Unlimited
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- The Nature Connection
- Friends of Youth and Nature
- Ute Indian Museum
- Montrose County
- Delta County
- The US Forest Service
- Western Colorado Conservation Center
- Western Slope Conservation Center
- Permitted commercial outfitters and guides

Science

Bighorn Sheep Study

In 2024, the BLM wildlife staff, in conjunction with Western Colorado University, the U.S. National Park Service, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife, continued bighorn sheep monitoring in the Gunnison Gorge and surrounding areas. This year, the project started using temporary installations of remote triggered game cameras at 71 sites throughout the National Conservation Area and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. The goal is to determine the population size and demographics of the Black Canyon bighorn sheep herd (S80 herd) with supplemental data informing seasonal occupation models.

Disease events, along with other stressors including reductions in habitat quality, habitat loss or fragmentation, increased human disturbance, competition with livestock, and predation on small, isolated herds have resulted in recent periodic die-offs and/or increased risk to local population persistence. The BLM has designated Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep as a sensitive species due to population declines and continued risk of disease transmission from domestic livestock throughout the West.



Outreach and Special Events

Education, Outreach, & Interpretation

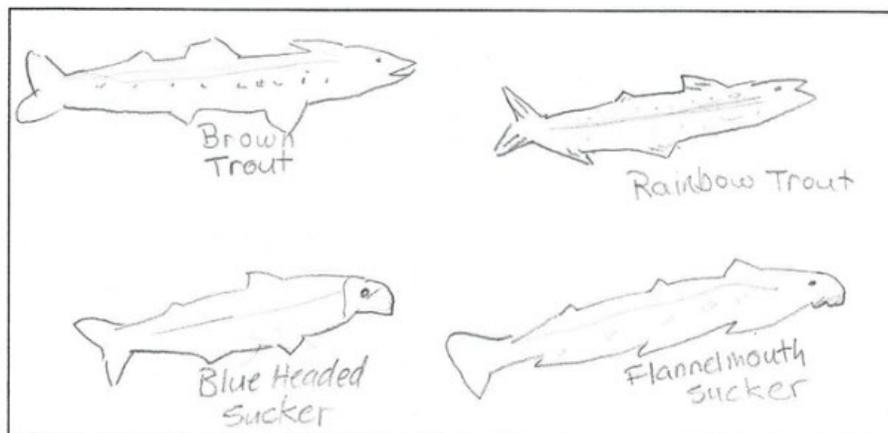
The BLM has partnered with CCA for over a decade to turn our NCAs into outdoor classrooms for thousands of students. These opportunities foster a deeper connection between visitors and the land through education, outreach, volunteer, and stewardship programs. In 2024, our annual Cottonwood Days event featured a special guest presenter, a technician with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (*right*) who herself participated in Cottonwood Days when she was in 6th grade. One might say she got inspired by the field trip and decided to pursue the aquatic science field as a career!

In total, the event reached almost 300 students and involved learning about native and non-native fish (*student's drawing below*), macroinvertebrates, the connection of past and present Ute peoples to the land, the riparian ecosystem, and the art of flyfishing and fly tying.



What was your favorite memory of this field trip? Write a sentence and draw a picture below.

I loved seeing all the fish. I learned about the sucker fish.



Staff Updates

GGNCA finally had a full Off-Highway Vehicle crew for the first time in many seasons. This brought some much-needed maintenance to the popular Peach Valley Staging Area skills course, which is a highlight for many of our NCA visitors.





**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

**Gunnison Gorge
National Conservation Area**

2465 South Townsend Ave
Montrose, CO 81401
Phone: 970-240-5300

[Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area | Bureau of Land Management \(blm.gov\)](https://www.blm.gov/gunnison-gorge-national-conservation-area)

Report compiled by: Tatyana Sukharnikova, Outdoor Recreation Planner; Caroline Kilbane, Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area Manager (acting)

Contributions by:

Ken Holsinger
Gwen Harris

The mention of company names, trade names, or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use by the federal government.