NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

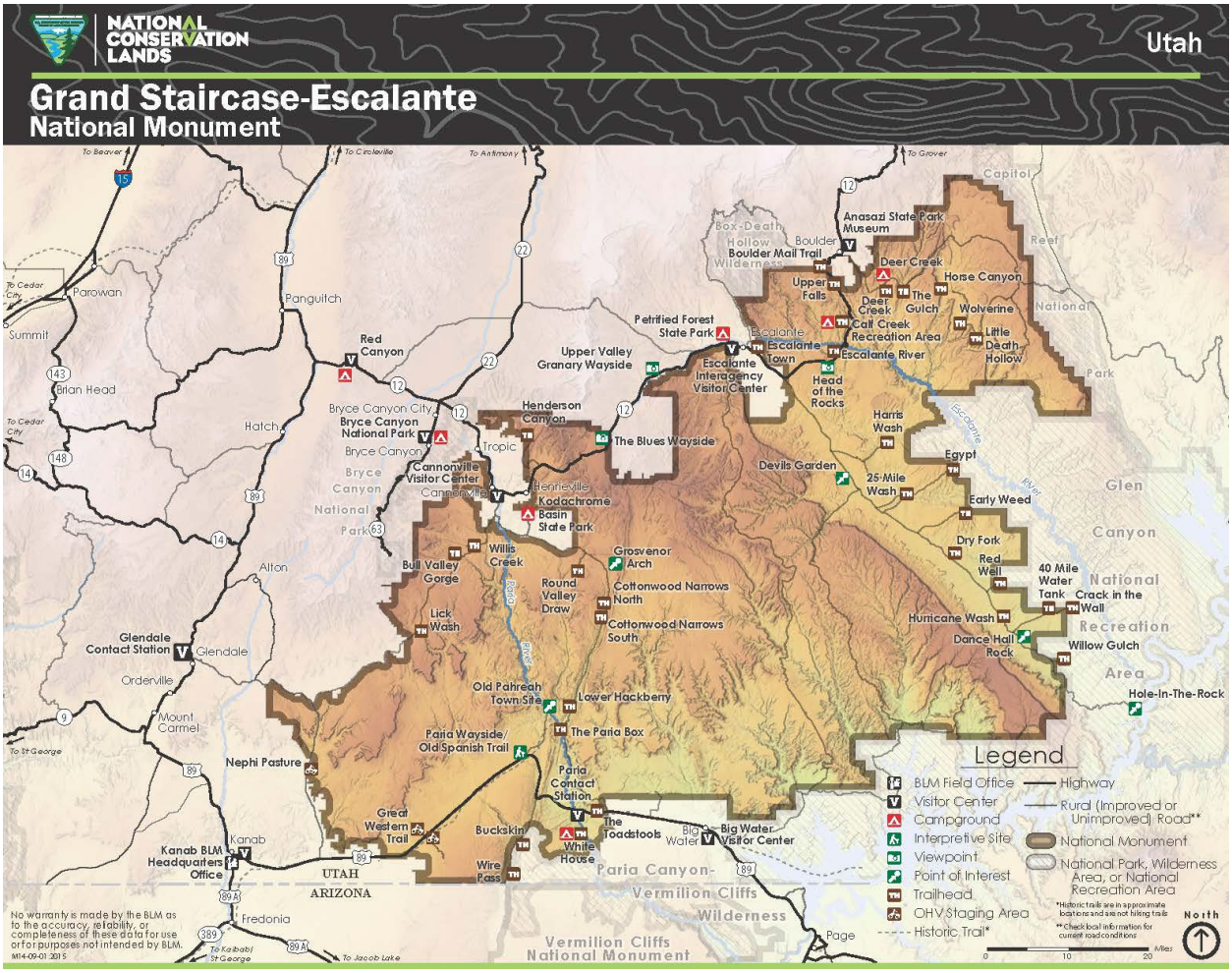
Utah

2024: Annual Manager's Report

Grand Staircase-Escalante

National Monument

Map


NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS
Utah
Grand Staircase-Escalante
National Monument
Legend
BLM Field Office
Visitor Center
Campground
Interpretive Site
Viewpoint
Point of Interest
Trailhead
OHV Staging Area
Historic Trail*
Highway
Rural (Improved or Unimproved) Road**
National Monument
National Park, Wilderness Area, or National Recreation Area
*Historic trails are in approximate locations and are not hiking trails
**Check local information for current road conditions
North
Miles
0
10
20
No warranty is made by the BLM as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for use or for purposes not intended by BLM.
M14-09-01 2015
Anasazi State Park Museum
Boulder Mail Trail
Deer Creek
Upper Falls
Horse Canyon
The Gutch
Wolverine
Deer Creek
Calf Creek Recreation Area
Little Death Hollow
Escalante River
Escalante Town
Escalante Interagency Visitor Center
Petrified Forest State Park
Upper Valley Granary Wayside
Head of the Rocks
Harris Wash
Egypt
Devils Garden
25-Mile Wash
Early Weed
Dry Fork
Red Well
40 Mile Water Tank
Crack in the Wall
Hurricane Wash
Dance Hall Rock
Willow Gulch
Hole-In-The-Rock
Henderson Canyon
The Blues Wayside
Red Canyon
Bryce Canyon City
Bryce Canyon National Park
Bryce Canyon
Cannonville Visitor Center
Cannonville
Tropic
Henrieville
Kodachrome Basin State Park
Willis Creek
Bull Valley Gorge
Grosvenor Arch
Round Valley Draw
Cottonwood Narrows North
Cottonwood Narrows South
Lick Wash
Old Pahreah Town Site
Lower Hackberry
The Paria Box
Paria Wayside/ Old Spanish Trail
Paria Contact Station
The Toadstools
Big Water
Big Water Visitor Center
White House
Buckskin
Wire Pass
Great Western Trail
Nephi Pasture
Kanab BLM Headquarters Office
Kanab
UTAH
ARIZONA
Fredonia
Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness
Vermilion Cliffs National Monument
Page
Glendale Contact Station
Glendale
Orderville
Mount Carmel
Alton
Hatch
Panguitch
Parowan
Summit
Brian Head
To Beaver
To Circleville
To Antimony
To Grover
To Cedar City
To St George
To Kaibab/ St George
To Jacob Lake
Capitol
Reef
National
Park
Glen
Canyon
National
Recreation
Area
Escalante
Paria
Box-Death Hollow Wilderness
Boulder

Accomplishments

In FY2024, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) staff continued their work on the Resource Management Plan (RMP). The Proposed RMP/Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was published on August 30, 2024. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) specialists, managers, and leadership reviewed and edited this document and addressed over 1,600 unique submissions from the public comment period. The final RMP will be completed in FY2025.

The first phase of construction at Calf Creek Recreation Area was implemented in FY2024 which included an overflow parking area (photo below on left), and campsite reconstruction (including four additional sites) with tent pads, new tables, and fire rings. In addition, the pedestrian swinging bridge walkway was improved, six small shade shelters and one large group shelter were built (photo below on right), and new stacked stone and masonry retaining walls were constructed along the edges of the creek at the water play area. This phase of construction cost almost $750,000 with funding coming from Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), a Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation grant, base funding, and recreation fees. At least two more phases of construction are slated for FY2025 and FY2026 to complete all approved improvements and deferred maintenance.

GSENM, with Garfield County, Kane County, and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, has continued efforts to remove feral livestock from the Escalante River corridor. In FY2024, approximately 25 of those feral animals were successfully removed, with additional efforts expected in FY2025.

Fig. 1. Calf Creek Recreation Area with overflow parking area (left photo, left of highway) and newly constructed shade shelters (right photo).

Challenges

The Deer Springs Fire started on July 7, 2024, on Timber Mountain and burned 11,766 acres of pinyon-juniper woodland and sagebrush/grassland. Significant resources from BLM were used to control the spread of the fire, including a Type-3 incident management team consisting of numerous other agencies. The fire was fully contained by July 30. While this fire was human-caused, fire is an important natural part of this ecosystem and recovery processes have begun (photo below on left). An Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (ES&R) plan was developed by the Color Country and Paria River District fire program with input from cooperators and interested public. Implementation of the emergency stabilization actions will begin in FY2025. The actions include aerial seeding (native species), mechanical treatment, erosion control structures, and hand-planting to enhance natural recovery.

Visitor impacts are a constant challenge, with particular concern for vandalism to cultural sites, specifically archaeological rock writing. Remediation of vandalism was done to preserve these Ancestral Puebloan cultural sites.

Ongoing noxious weeds control continues through mechanical removal and chemical controls. To mitigate and prevent damage caused by vehicles driving off authorized routes, staff and volunteers actively engaged in remediation and educational initiatives. Efforts have also been made to eradicate trail braiding and to concentrate foot traffic on a single path.

Fig. 2. Vegetation re-sprouting after the Deer Springs Fire (left) and volunteers who removed Russian thistle (stacked behind the group) at Whitehouse Campground (right).

Visitors

GSENM continues to be a popular place to hike, backpack, drive, and observe the spectacular geology, canyons, streams, forests, archaeology, and more (photos below). There were an estimated 936,000 visitors to GSENM in FY24, which is slightly higher than the 890,000 visitors in FY23. In FY21 and FY22, there were over 1 million visitors, likely due to the pandemic causing people to do more outdoor travel in areas where there would be minimal contact with others. The most visited sites in GSENM are the Toadstools (geologic formation), Dry Fork (slot canyons), and Lower Calf Creek Falls (stream and waterfall) which had 20,000 to 40,000 visitors.

The Escalante Interagency Visitor Center welcomed 43,605 visitors, facilitated 628 Junior Ranger Programs, and conducted 914 adult and 158 youth interpretation programs. Meanwhile, the Cannonville Visitor Center served 15,000 visitors, dedicating considerable effort to maintaining an outdoor interpretive walking area that features a living garden showcasing the agriculture practices of both settler and indigenous communities in the region. The Kanab Visitor Center attended to 21,965 visitors while also engaging with the local community through multiple visits to schools and community centers. Additionally, the Big Water Visitor Center accommodated 18,000 visitors and supported five school group visits from the local area, thereby increasing and enhancing the paleontological knowledge among local youth.

In FY24, a total of 29 new or renewed special recreation permits (SRP) were issued, contributing to an overall count of approximately 150 SRP permits held by commercial businesses that attract thousands of visitors to GSENM.

Fig. 3. Visitors to a waterfall (left), a natural arch (center) and a sandstone slot canyon (right) in GSENM.

Partnerships

Volunteer trips to promote stewardship, education, citizen science, and resource protection were organized and conducted by the BLM with various groups. Volunteers engaged in activities such as removing invasive weeds (photo below on left) at trailheads and restoring areas where off-highway vehicle use was not authorized (photo below on right). In FY24, these efforts accumulated more than 1,140 hours of volunteer service. Additionally, a Dedicated Hunters group contributed over 60 hours of volunteer work, which included planting bitterbrush in areas affected by wildfires and constructing fences for riparian protection.

In the summer of 2024, GSENM welcomed five interns from the Intergovernmental Internship Cooperative, organized by Southern Utah University (SUU). These interns engaged in various activities including data collection on vegetation and soils, as well as performing maintenance at trailheads.

GSENM is part of a collaborative effort involving the BLM and the counties of Garfield and Kane to enhance law enforcement on and near public lands. This partnership focuses on patrolling both front and back country roads and executing search and rescue operations for visitors who may become stranded, lost, or injured.

Other partnerships are described in the “Outreach and Special Events” section.

Fig. 4. Volunteers conducting trailhead maintenance at Nephi Pasture Trailhead (left) and volunteers naturalizing unauthorized vehicle use along Skutumpah Road (right).

Science

BLM staff worked on a science plan for GSENM in FY24 (which will be completed in FY25). This plan provides scientific background, describe the science permit application process, and include ideas for research opportunities and data needs in GSENM.

GSENM processed 17 scientific research applications in FY24, which is the highest number of any BLM unit that uses the BLM online science permit application (named RAPTOR). Research included data collection on tree abundance and ages, invasive plant monitoring, stream ecology, geology of sandstone formations, repeat photography of stream/riparian sites, wildlife habitat, erosion and infiltration in vegetation treatments, mountain lion population dynamics, and post-fire recovery of vegetation (photos below).

Rangeland trend data collection is ongoing, with visits to dozens of sites in FY24. This information has been integrated into a dataset with existing Assessment Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) data to facilitate land health assessments.

Fig. 5. Researchers studying riparian conditions (left) and infiltration and biocrust in pinyon-juniper woodlands (right).

Outreach and Special Events

GSENM co-hosted, with the Grand Staircase Regional Guide Association, a workshop on science and recreation information for outfitters and guides in Kanab, Utah, in March 2024. There were nine expert speakers and over 100 attendees (photo below on left).

GSENM collaborated with the Escalante River Watershed Partnership to plan and implement the annual symposium about the Grand Staircase-Escalante region in March of 2024 where over 200 people participated either virtually or in-person at the Escalante Interagency Visitor Center. Speakers included researchers, land managers, conservation groups, Indigenous knowledge-holders, artists, and others. Field trips and workshops with over 40 attendees were conducted on ethnobotany, ecology, paleontology, basket-making, and other Indigenous knowledge.

The GSENM Science Program conducted a series of public outreach presentations at the Kanab Library, focusing on topics such as wildlife (bighorn sheep), wildflowers, grasses, and shrubs, with attendance ranging from 37 to 55 community members. More science talks have been planned for FY25.

GSENM staff participated in the Amazing Earthfest and other events in the Kanab and Escalante areas which included nature walks and stewardship opportunities.

The Big Water Visitor Center provided multiple educational events on paleontology and ecology for local area elementary school students, which involved over 400 children (photo below on right). The GSENM paleontology program also visited schools and other groups to share information about fossils and dinosaurs.

Fig. 6. Presentation on wildlife at the outfitter and guide workshop (left), and paleontology education to elementary school children at Big Water Visitor Center (right).

Paleontology Research

In FY24, approximately 1,500 acres were surveyed for significant fossils, mostly in Cretaceous outcrops, with 79 new fossil sites documented. Five fossil sites with highly significant specimens were excavated including a tyrannosaur and a small, probably new species of ornithomimid (photo below). An additional six fossil sites were tested or collected less intensively. In-house research focused on stratigraphy of the Kaiparowits Formation, taxonomy of the giant protostegid turtles from the Rainbows and Unicorns Quarry, and getting the new Rainbows and Hollywood tyrannosaur species published. Scientific papers were published on Utah dinosaur diversity and Cretaceous age fossil frog tracks:

Kirkland, J.I., Sertich, J.J.W., and Titus, A.L. 2024. Dinosaur biostratigraphy of the non-marine Cretaceous of Utah. In M.B. Hart, S.J. Batenburg, T. Huber, G.D. Price, N. Thibault, M. Wagreich, I. Walaszczyk (eds.), Cretaceous Project 200, Vol. 2: Regional Studies, Geological Society of London Special Publication 545.

Hagadorn, J.W., Petermann, H., Hups, K.M., and Miller, I.M. 2024. Probable frog tracks from the Cretaceous Kaiparowits Formation of Utah, U.S.A. In L.H. Taylor, R.G. Raynolds, and S.G. Lucas (eds.), Vertebrate Paleoichnology: A Tribute to Martin Lockley. New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science Bulletin 95, p. 149-155.

Fig. 7. Overburden removal at the very significant Blue Wash ornithomimid dinosaur site.

Grand Staircase-Escalante
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Paria River District: Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument | Flickr

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