



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

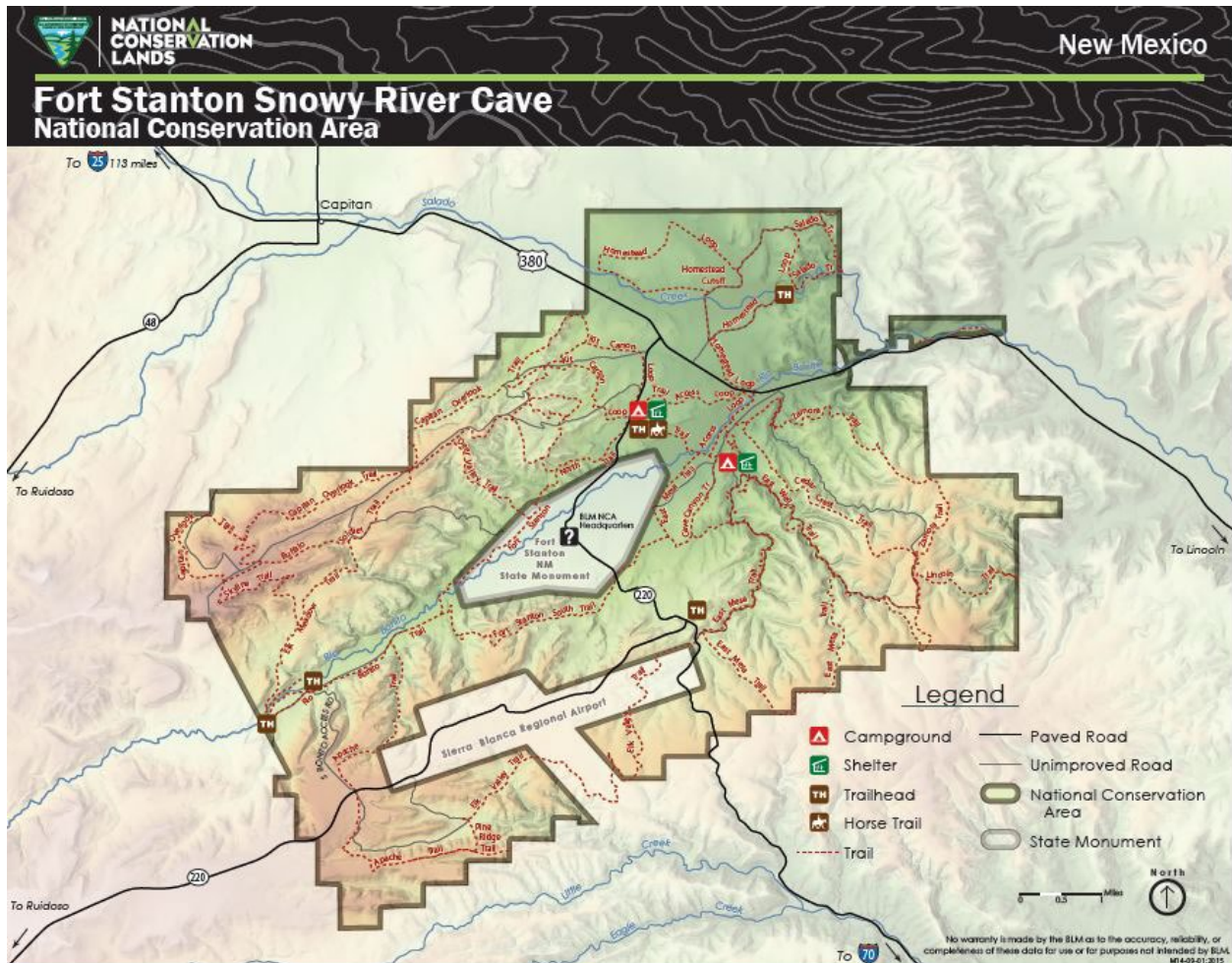
New Mexico
2024: Annual Manager's Report

Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave

National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

In 2024, Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area (Conservation Area) passed a significant milestone in the study and exploration of Fort Stanton Cave. The total known and explored passages in Fort Stanton Cave is now over fifty miles (51.74 miles). Fort Stanton Cave is currently the ninth longest cave in the United States. The total known number of miles comes from years of work of volunteer cave explorers. They are justifiably excited about how far they have come and ready to find out just how much further they can go. The cave was the central focus of an entire issue of the *National Speleological Society News* magazine, which featured stories, maps, and photographs of Fort Stanton Cave, sharing its significance with cave scientists across the United States and around the world.

Cave volunteers also conducted documentation, restoration, and clean-up activities throughout the cave. These volunteers placed new “magic carpets” (plastic tarps spread out to protect Snowy River passage so it does not get mud-stained) in several locations. Cavers closed the Priority 7 passage due to its narrowness and now use a more suitable path to Snowy River. Several expeditions conducted extensive photogrammetry in the cave. These photographs not only document the cave's current conditions to establish baseline imagery but they also enhance the *Caver Quest* application, improving the virtual experience of cave exploration.



"Magic Carpet" Protecting the Cave

The Conservation Area also hosted portions of the Sierra Blanca Wildland Fire Academy. This academy strengthens the connections between local firefighting resources and the BLM, while also providing practical instruction in wildland fire methods and tactics.

The Conservation Area held a National Public Lands Day event this year. Girl Scout volunteers spread native grass seed and made repairs to water management features at Rob Jagers Campground.

Challenges

The bat population in the Fort Stanton Cave remains at risk from White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a fungal infection that has devastated bat populations in other locations. Swabbing of bats and cave surfaces detected no Pd (*Pseudogymnoascus destructans*) spores, even though WNS has been detected in Lincoln County. The threat of introduction of the fungus by people has been addressed by restricting recreational access to the cave. BLM limits cave entries only for scientific and management purposes. In 2024, for the fourth consecutive year, all cave entries required dedicated cave gear to minimize the risk of introducing the virus into the cave system.

Another challenge to cave management is that exploration of Fort Stanton Cave has uncovered passages that now stretch far beyond the surface boundaries of the Conservation Area. Future cave exploration and scientific research now necessitate close collaboration not only with the neighboring Lincoln National Forest but also with numerous private landowners whose properties lie above the cave.



Firefighters doing a preventative treatment.

Wildland fire risk remains a threat to the Conservation Area. Pecos District fire staff conducted preventive treatments in January and September of 2024. During the summer of 2024, fires impacted the Mescalero Apache reservation and the neighboring Lincoln National Forest. The Salt and South Fork Fires trended north and west towards the Conservation Area, but a powerful monsoonal storm stopped their progress. The fires and floods caused by the monsoons directly impacted recreational visitation to the Conservation Area, as visitors were advised, by local officials, to stay away for safety reasons. Summer and early autumn, normally a busy time, experienced very light visitation since local offices of emergency services temporarily discouraged tourists from visiting the region while fire and flood recovery actions were ongoing.

Visitors

Despite visitation challenges, the Conservation Area recorded 41,287 visits in 2024, a slight increase from 40,800 the previous year. Visitors to the Conservation Area came from a variety of places. The Conservation Area is popular with residents from surrounding communities. It also attracts many out-of-state visitors, particularly from Texas, who come to explore other nearby attractions, including the state historical monuments at Fort Stanton and Lincoln, Smokey Bear Historical Park in Capitan, skiing near Ruidoso, and the Valley of Fires near Carrizozo. Visitors come for a variety of recreational opportunities: hiking, mountain biking, horse riding, UTV riding, hunting, wildlife watching, and much more.

The Conservation Area remains a premier destination for equestrian riders, particularly during the summer months. In 2024, it hosted an equestrian-related special recreation permit event, which staged from the Rob Jaggers Campground and made use of the Conservation Area trail system. Additionally, the Conservation Area continues to support everyday camping and trail riding.

The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project (FSCSP) is a volunteer group of cave scientists who have explored, documented, and studied Fort Stanton Cave for over 50 years. They have also conducted public outreach and recently introduced a new way to visit the Conservation Area. The FSCSP, along with Conservation Area staff, collaborated with the Capitan Public Library to provide a virtual reality headset to patrons, allowing them to explore Fort Stanton Cave virtually. Along with the Caver Quest smartphone application—originally designed for local students but available to everyone, it enhance accessibility to Fort Stanton Cave.



Hikers Enjoying the NCA.

Partnerships

Partnerships are essential to carrying out the mission of the Conservation Area. The partnership with Conservation Corps New Mexico has been a huge help with the assistance of interns. Regular collaboration with New Mexico Historic Sites at Fort Stanton and Lincoln helps promote the Conservation Area by them exhibiting information in the Fort's Museum and providing the public with Conservation Area maps. And, the long-standing relationship with the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project continues to provide valuable insights in learning more about the extent and significance of Fort Stanton Cave.

The Upper Hondo Soil & Water Conservation District helped with multiple projects including thinning vegetation, and eradicating non-native, invasive vegetation. Research continued with US Fish and Wildlife Service and Texas Tech University in monitoring the effects of vegetation thinning on migratory birds. American Endurance Riders Conference (AERC) worked with BLM to monitor trail conditions during their ride event and report their findings to the BLM. Eco Servants AmeriCorps trail crew has partnered with BLM for over a decade to enhance trails and recreational opportunities in the Conservation Area.

BLM's assistance agreement with the Public Lands Interpretive Association continues with a 7th grade cave education program for all in Lincoln County and Mescalero middle schools. A total of 120 students and chaperones participated in an educational field trip that included a guided entry into the cave. An outgrowth of this partnership is that high school track team members from Capitan, NM volunteered to haul bottles of water into the cave for use by cave restorers to clean flowstone formations.



Students Caving from Capitan High School.

Science

The Conservation Area hosts scientific research on both the surface and in the cave. On the surface BLM (with partners Texas Tech University, New Mexico State University, and the Fish and Wildlife Service) hosts an 8-year study on the effects piñon and juniper thinning projects has on migratory birds.

A May survey of Kuenzler hedgehog cacti (*Echinocereus fendleri* var. *kuenzleri*) found that the population of this protected species, for which the Conservation Area is one of the few suitable habitats, is increasing. Part of that success is because junipers have been thinned out, as part of a preventive fuel activity, and that has improved the habitat for the cactus.

Below the surface, researchers collected water samples to investigate the source of the cave's water, photogrammetry and surveying expeditions, collected fossil snail sampling, and sediment sampling, restored and cleaned cave formations, and conducted bat counts that included testing for *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, the fungus that causes White Nose Syndrome.



Biologist studying a Kuenzler Hedgehog Cactus.

Outreach and Special Events

Supported by the Roswell Field Office, the Conservation Area team conducted outreach to local organizations and clubs, attending special events in the region to educate visitors about the recreational, scientific, and natural exploration opportunities within the Conservation Area. Staff also participated in Smokey Bear Days in Capitan, NM and the free trick or treat trail at Fort Stanton. Educational visits associated with the Caver Quest Academy let students learn about the cave, and some were able to enter and explore the cave under the leadership of an experienced BLM caver. Our cave specialist and monument manager conducted outreach talks about the cave to civic organizations, and for local lecture series and community events.

Yeti Trail Runners organized a 34-hour endurance run at the Conservation Area to mark the 80th birthday of Smokey Bear. 171 runners from all over the United States ran a route near the Rob Jagers campground to earn recognition belt buckles for 80- and 100-mile runs. One runner ran over 140 miles in the allotted time. The organizers and participants are interested in future race events at the Conservation Area.

The Conservation Area hosted a permitted equestrian event out of the Rob Jagers Campground. A wedding was held at the campground under a Special Recreation Permit. The Conservation Area also hosted three 9-day cave expeditions, along with many shorter weekend expeditions. New Mexico Military Academy conducted a land navigation training exercise on the southern portion of the Conservation Area.



Trail Runners on NCA Trails.

Our Exceptional Volunteers

In June, the South Fork and Salt Fires spread quickly through the Mescalero Apache Reservation and the Lincoln National Forest prompting evacuations from Ruidoso and several rural parts of Lincoln County. Rob Jagers Campground at Fort Stanton – Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area quickly turned into a place of refuge for Lincoln County residents fleeing from the fires. Jim and Cindy Parsons, volunteer hosts at Rob Jagers Campground, were there to welcome these visitors to a safe place. Radio stations and cellular phones went out of service as the fires spread, so the Parsons were a vital source of up-to-date information about the fire progress and the evacuation status. They worked with Jesse Vinson, a recreation planner at the Conservation Area and suspended fee collection at the campground in consideration of the breadth of the emergency. When good Samaritans brought water, snacks and pet food for people who might need it, the Parsons helped distribute it around the campground. The efforts of these volunteers, Jim and Cindy Parsons, during the fire emergency helped make a difficult time a little easier for the evacuees.



Left to right: Jesse Vinson (BLM Recreation Planner), and camp hosts Cindy Parsons and Jim Parsons.



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