



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

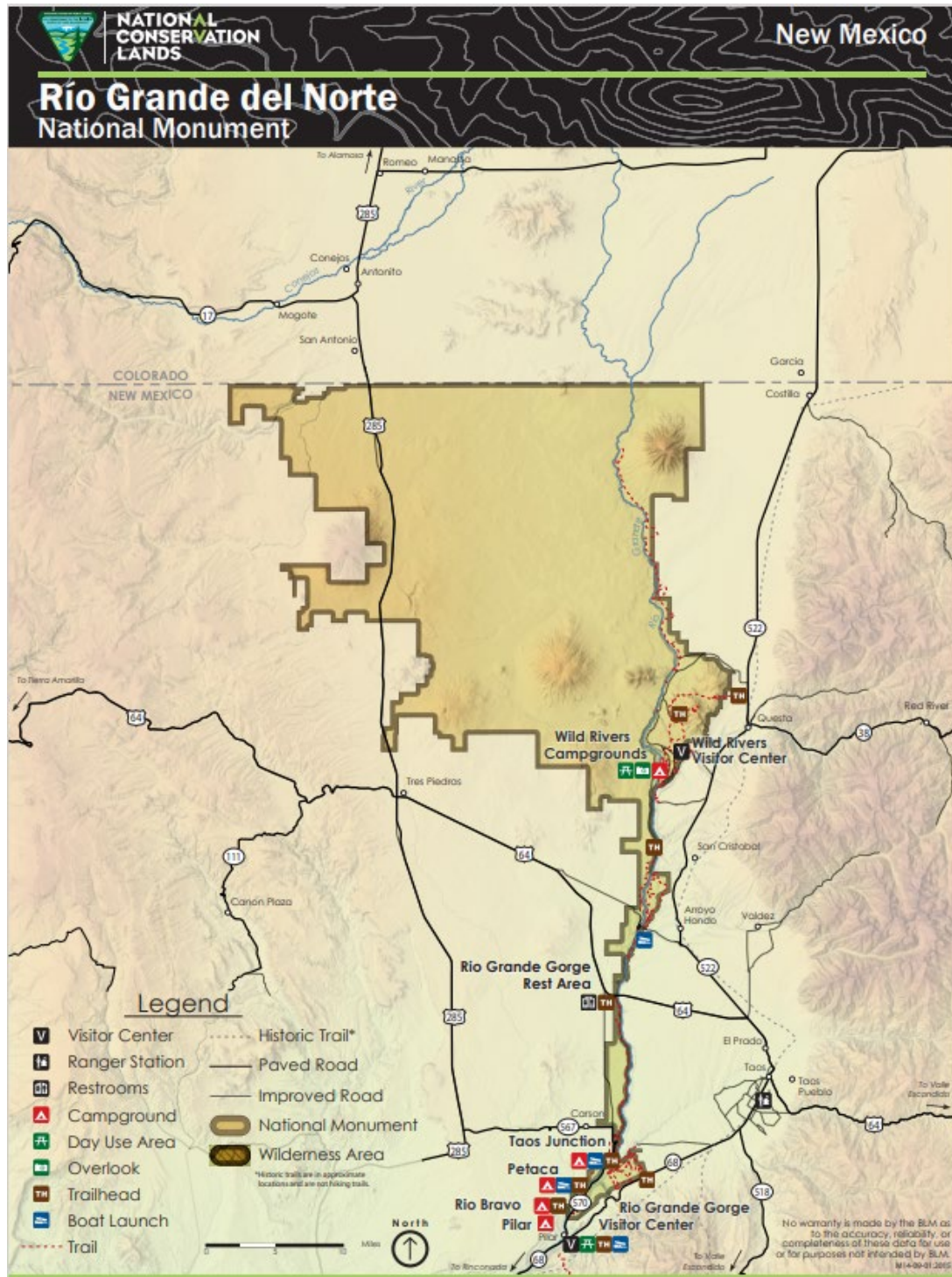
New Mexico
2024: Annual Manager's Report

Rio Grande del Norte

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

The Taos Field Office worked on the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument (Monument) resource management plan throughout the fiscal year (FY) 2024, and management anticipates the plan approval in early FY 2025. This plan has been in development for 12 years, following the Monument's designation on March 25, 2013. The approved plan amends the 2012 Taos Resource Management Plan (RMP) by outlining specific management and protection measures for resources within the monument. It ensures the continuation of traditional uses, such as fuelwood collection, hunting, fishing, and piñon nut gathering, while also supporting recreational opportunities and enhancing visitor services and facilities.

To develop the plan, BLM worked closely with cooperating agencies, Tribal Nations, and a range of public stakeholders to address key issues, mitigate potential impacts, and safeguard the monument's important values.



Rio Grande del Norte National Monument

"We are so grateful to the members of the public who participated in the preparation and completion of this project," said BLM Taos Field Manager Eric Valencia. "This plan is vital to the care and protection of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument, and we look forward to collaborating with our partners and the public to accomplish the goals outlined in the plan."

The plan is also designed to protect and restore diverse terrestrial and aquatic wildlife populations and their habitats, including those of threatened, endangered, and other special status species. It also seeks to minimize habitat fragmentation, maintain connectivity, and prevent wildlife displacement, all while supporting recreational and traditional uses for present and future generations.

Challenges

The Monument faces high levels of vandalism at popular recreation areas due to its proximity to urban centers. Graffiti and tagging are ongoing challenges in the Orilla Verde and Taos Valley Overlook. The defacement can degrade the visitor experience. OHV traffic, particularly the growing use of side-by-side vehicles, poses unique challenges for travel management within the Monument, its Wilderness, and Wilderness Study Areas. The proliferation of routes and increased use of two track roads has contributed to deteriorating road conditions in some areas, with new routes emerging and previously obscure paths becoming more heavily trafficked. As recreational activities and access methods evolve, recreation planners and monument administrators are adopting a proactive approach to managing visitor behavior. Their goal is to mitigate damage to the Monument's outstanding resources and values while ensuring continued access for meaningful and sustainable visitor experiences.



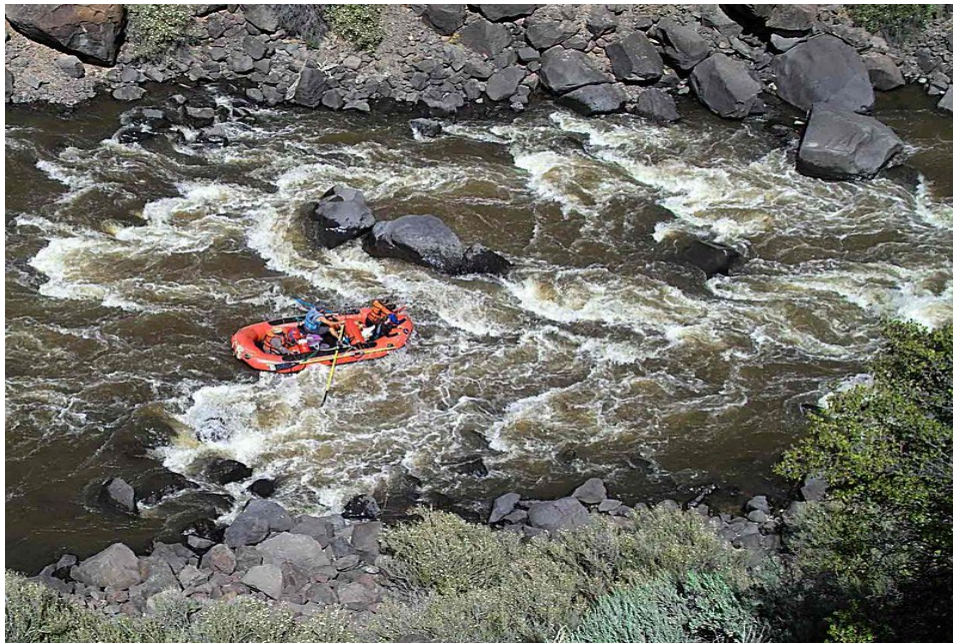
Visitors enjoying views of the Monument.

Visitors

RMIS (Recreation Management Information System) reports recorded 312,683 visits to the Monument in 2024, marking a 16 percent increase compared to the five-year average. The Monument continues to experience year-over-year increases in visitation, driven by growing awareness of its national monument status and enhanced promotion by the State of New Mexico's Outdoor Recreation Division, which highlights national monuments across the state.

The Monument has over 70 active Special Recreation Permits (SRP) authorizing commercial outfitting and recreational activities. From hunting and fishing outfitters to commercial whitewater rafting, mountain biking, and rock climbing, these SRP proponents provide both local and national public land users with unique opportunities to experience the full range of the Monument's diverse landscapes and recreational offerings. Commercial outfitters operating under SRPs reported over 30,000 user days this past year. Commercial SRP use numbers on the Rio Grande were consistent with past averages which can be attributed to the river's fair flowing conditions.

The accuracy of visitor use data collection in the Monument is improving. Recreation planners are adapting and updating data collection sites and formulas to better reflect the changing types of use. More TrafX brand infrared and magnetic vehicle/bike counters were placed in high use areas to improve the accuracy of data collection in the special recreation management areas (SRMAs) and recreation areas/zones.



A raft floating down the Rio Grande.

Partnerships

In its first year, the Friends of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument (Friends) made significant contributions by organizing volunteers and securing funding for essential infrastructure projects. The Friends worked with Trout Unlimited to secure a State of New Mexico Trails Plus grant for \$100K and another one from the Foundation for America's Public Lands for \$35K to help re-engineer the La Junta Trail in the Wild Rivers Recreation Area.

Over Fiscal Year 2024, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, in conjunction with the Friends, contributed a total of 620 volunteer hours towards restoring habitat connectivity. They inventoried over 57 miles of fence, modified 2 miles and removed 6.25 miles of fencing. Pheasants Forever, in collaboration with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and two grazing permittees (contributing \$106K, \$53K, and \$6K, respectively), replaced 4.25 miles of net wire fencing with BLM-specification four-strand wildlife-friendly fencing. Additionally, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish replaced 11 miles of net wire with wildlife-friendly fencing (\$260K), while the BLM replaced 3.75 miles in-house, bringing the total to 19 miles of improved fencing within the Monument. Pheasants Forever also funded a summer internship, where the intern provided valuable support to range, aquatics, wildlife, engineering, recreation, and botany programs within the Monument.



A herd of elk in the Monument.

IAE Rivers for Monarchs Partnership:

The Aquatics Team partnered with the Institute for Applied Ecology (IAE) on their Rivers for Monarchs project to identify sites for habitat improvement within the Monument. IAE's Rivers for Monarchs project aims to restore 16 stepping-stone habitats for monarch butterflies. Due to the rapid decline in monarch migratory and breeding ranges, the project seeks to create a continuous corridor for monarch breeding and migration by enhancing pollinator habitats along the Rio Grande riparian zones.



Student intern removing fence.



BLM staff and volunteers stand next to removed net fence.

Science

Fisheries and Aquatic Habitat Program

Fish Population Surveys:

In Fiscal Year 2024, the BLM Aquatic Habitat and Fisheries staff along with New Mexico Department of Game and Fish conducted fish population surveys on the Ute Mountain Section of the Rio Grande and the Rio San Antonio within the San Antonio Wilderness. The Rio San Antonio survey was conducted by wading 3 passes of a 100-meter blocked reach with an electrofishing unit and collecting fish. At the end of each pass fish are weighed, measured, and released. Species captured include Rio Grande Chub (a BLM special status species), Longnose dace, and White sucker. The Ute Mountain section of the Rio Grande was surveyed using electrofishing equipment mounted on a cataraft, operated by a rower with two netters collecting the sampled fish. Six, approximately 1-mile-long, alternating reaches were sampled. Volunteers and BLM staff from various disciplines within the Taos Field Office supported the survey by transporting camping supplies and necessary equipment by boat and also hiking boats and gear out of the gorge at Lee Trail. Teachers and two students from the Bosque School also participated, collecting fin tissue samples for their own study on the diet of river otters in the Rio Grande. The survey sampled Brown and Rainbow Trout, Rio Grande Chub, and other native species, as well as Northern Pike and White Sucker.



Researchers conducting the fish surveys.

Playa Lakes - Water Level Loggers:

Playas are one of the Monument's objects of value and serve as critical wildlife habitat. They are shallow, closed-basin wetlands characterized by dynamic hydrological cycles. These cycles include periods of inundation caused by excessive snowmelt or heavy monsoonal rains, followed by extended dry spells lasting up to many years. Playas provide essential habitat for birds, amphibians, and macroinvertebrates and serve as critical stopover points for migrating shorebirds, cranes, waterfowl, and pelicans.

Although these ephemeral wetlands are found in many areas of New Mexico, they have received less attention compared to perennial wetlands. Most studies conducted in the state have focused on the Southern High Plains, leaving a gap in data for north-central New Mexico.

Between 2015 and 2017, the BLM Aquatics Team visited 34 playa lakes, stock tanks, and earthen water catchments to install water level loggers and make valuable observations about cattle impact, vegetation, and wildlife presence. Aquatics personnel visit these sites annually to collect logger data and observe impact change, including in FY 2024. These loggers enable the BLM to measure and manage wildlife habitats in the Monument more effectively.

Temperature Loggers:

The BLM Aquatics Team also has 29 water temperature loggers installed in major streams and tributaries within the Taos Field Office, nine of which are located in the Monument. Aquatics personnel have been collecting data from most of these loggers since 2016. In 2024, the team visited all sites within the Monument to collect both logger and water quality data.

Water Quality:

The BLM Aquatic Program staff also collected water quality data at eight sites along the Rio Grande and its tributaries every other month in the monument. The data collected includes water temperature, turbidity, phosphates, percentage of dissolved oxygen, pH, alkalinity, and flow. This data is then submitted to the National Water Quality Monitoring Council run by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).



Scientist checks water quality on a remote section of the river.

Spring Surveys:

Springs are among the most biologically and culturally important ecosystems and are highly threatened, yet they are poorly understood . Although smaller than most other aquatic ecosystems, springs support over 10% of the endangered species in the United States. Since 2018, the Aquatics Team has visited and surveyed 125 springs in the Monument using the Springs Stewardship Institute's Springs Inventory Protocol The team re-surveyed several of these springs in FY 2024. Their goal is to improve the understanding and management of these essential and at-risk ecosystems.

Opportunistic Surveys/Observations:

The team also opportunistically noted evidence of beaver, otter, and amphibians, recording locations and times of observations. This information helps determine survey and management priorities within the Monument.

Botany Program

BLM Sensitive Plant Species Surveys:

The botany program staff-initiated new survey efforts within Rio Grande del Norte National Monument to locate and begin long-term demographic monitoring on BLM Special Status Plant Species. The goal of these surveys is to understand baseline population trends and provide adaptive management for botanical resources within the Monument. Surveys were conducted for two species: *Eriogonum lachnogynum* var. *colombum* (clipped wild buckwheat) and *Astragalus puniceus* var. *gertrudis* (Taos Milkvetch). A total of 5 historical populations (1 clipped wild buckwheat and 4 Taos Milkvetch) were revisited, but only 2 were re-located (1 clipped wild buckwheat and 1 Taos milkvetch). A long-term demographic plot was established for Clipped Wild Buckwheat with hopes to locate more populations next year. A new population of Taos Milkvetch was discovered, and survey efforts will continue in this area next year.



Astragalus puniceus var. *Gertrudis* (Taos Milkvetch) and *Eriogonum lachnogynum* var. *columbum* (clipped wild buckwheat)

Habitat Restoration:

Botany program staff initiated a large-scale habitat restoration project to restore habitat, connectivity, forage, and ecological resilience to areas within the Monument. Selected restoration sites have historically been subject to continuous grazing and numerous vegetation treatments including sage brush removal via prescribed burns and Tebuthiuron applications, and reseeding attempts via disking and broadcasting seeds. However, large bare patches of soil and persistent invasive species are still prevalent over the landscape. The botany program collaborated with the range program to rebuild fencing for a reserved common allotment, allowing for deferment of grazing and helping to minimize grazing pressures on these sites for the duration of the project.

This year, we were able to acquire 1200 lbs. of native seed and a seed cooler to facilitate continued seeding through 2025. Various hand-seeding methods will be implemented and studied to identify the most effective restoration techniques for habitat rehabilitation within the Monument, guiding future restoration projects. Botany program staff and interns have been busily creating thousands of seed balls for deployment in the spring of 2025.



Botany interns making seed balls to use for a vegetation management project this spring.

Pollinator Monitoring:

The Botany Program staff worked with the Aquatics Program staff to initiate and acquire funds for a Pollinator Monitoring Program, which will conduct pilot studies on Monarchs, Silverspot butterflies, and the Anasazi Skipper butterfly.

External Scientific Research Permits:

The Taos Field Office Science Coordinator processed 12 external scientific research permits for work done on public land in 2024, more than half of which were for projects within the Monument.

Outreach and Special Events

In 2024, the Wild Rivers Recreation Area continued its popular Star Party events, hosting two gatherings in May and October. Each event attracted between 30 and 50 visitors, who experienced a guided journey through the galaxies in the Monument's Dark Sky environment. Local astronomy clubs set up an array of portable telescopes, offering participants an immersive stargazing experience in the Monument.



Milkyway galaxy in the summer nights sky over the Rio Grande Gorge.

In 2024, the remarkable abundance of piñon nut propagation within the Monument inspired the Wild Rivers Recreation Area to host the “Piñon Festival” in mid-September. Wild Rivers staff coordinated with native and indigenous historians to present a day of interpretative talks surrounding the historical uses, indigenous knowledge and folklore behind piñon gathering. Monument Manager Eric Valencia gave an outstanding interpretative talk of the social and cultural aspects of this activity. Over 100 participants attended the festival and participated in piñon gathering of their own.

In mid-April as the weather warmed and the spring runoff began the Taos Field Office River program hosted the annual River Rendezvous in the Rio Grande Gorge, Orilla Verde Recreation Area. This BLM-sponsored event introduces and teaches river guides about the natural environment they are working in as well as educating the guides about management policy and stipulations. This year 55 attendees were present for the one-day event that covered geology, botany, aquatics and wildlife topics.

Rio Grande Cutthroat Stocking Event

Volunteers participated in an event to stock approximately 5,000 native Rio Grande Cutthroat into the Rio Grande at Wild Rivers Recreation Area. This event is organized by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the Taos Field Office, with assistance from Trout Unlimited and the town of Questa.



Volunteer stocking fish into the river.

International Migratory Bird Day

The aquatics program at the Taos Field Office hosts an International Migratory Bird Day event at the Pilar Visitors Center every May. This event has environmental education activities, led by BLM biologists, and a presentation, with live raptors, led by the Santa Fe-based Raptor Center.



Migratory Bird Day poster.



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