



**NATIONAL
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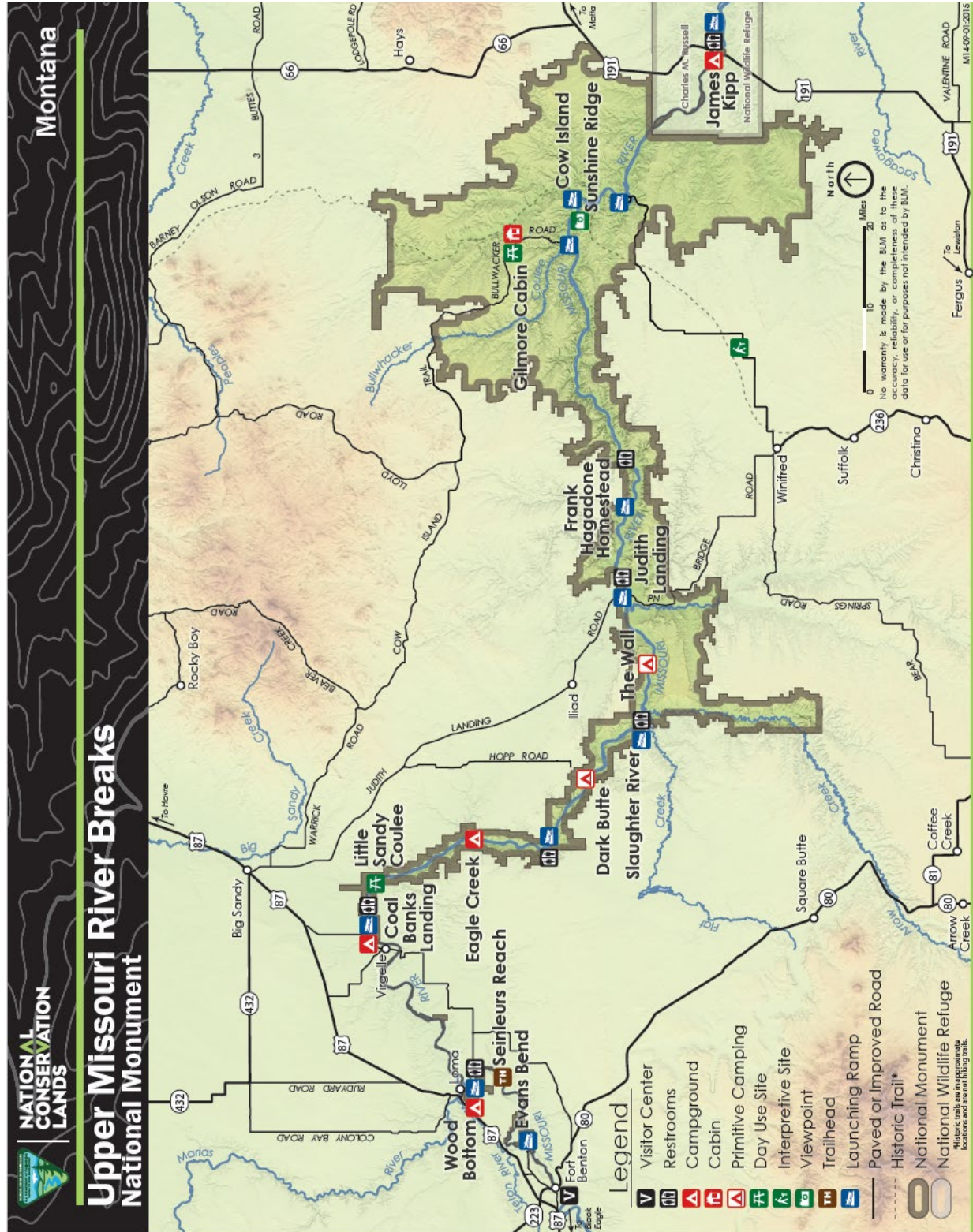
Montana
2025: Annual Manager's Report

Upper Missouri River Breaks

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, in collaboration with a variety of partners, achieved significant milestones across the Monument landscape. The completion of the new boat ramp at Coal Banks Recreation Area stands out as a major accomplishment, providing enhanced access for canoeists and boaters, especially during periods of low water. This improvement supports recreational use and ensures continued enjoyment of the Upper Missouri River throughout the boating season.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) led a cooperative project with NorthWestern Energy and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to conduct a mark/recapture study on spiny softshell turtles. This effort replicated a 2017 population estimate, confirming that the turtle population remains stable.

The North Central Montana District (NCMD) Fire Management Program completed numerous projects that enhanced ecosystem resilience and protected wildlife habitats within the monument. Crews successfully conducted 12 acres of pile burning to reduce fuel loads and mitigate wildfire risks and implemented 503 acres of lop-and-scatter treatments to protect Sage Grouse habitat and maintain the sagebrush steppe ecosystem. Additionally, 4,274 acres of Class III cultural resource inventory were completed and funded by the fuels program, ensuring the protection of archaeological sites before any prescribed fire treatments.

BLM proposed the plugging of six well bores and reclamation of associated well pads and access routes in the Bullwhacker/Ervin Ridge area. The comprehensive Reclamation Plan aims for long-term ecosystem restoration, including the reestablishment of native vegetation, proper hydrology, and wildlife habitats. Specific goals include controlling erosion, restoring landscape drainage, clearing debris, and achieving at least 50% native vegetative cover within five years. Soil stability and erosion control will be monitored and remedied as necessary to ensure restoration success.

Educational and outreach achievements included successfully bringing the Every Kid Outdoors (EKO) initiative to community classrooms, participating as a guest speaker at the Lewis and Clark Festival in Great Falls, and many other events. Public awareness efforts expanded with local community radio interviews and increased social media presence.

Notable improvements within the recreation program included two nonfunctional compost toilet systems were removed from Dark Butte, restoring the area to its natural state. A new recreation business plan was implemented in March 2025, resulting in fee increases at Coal Banks, Judith Landing, and James Kipp campgrounds. Additionally, efforts were made to establish a more accurate method to gauge visitation, and to

repair and replace site amenities, assisting with reducing the backlog of deferred maintenance.

Collectively, these accomplishments reflect the dedication and adaptability of staff and partners, overcoming resource challenges to advance conservation, recreation, and community engagement within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in 2025.



Figure 1: The new boat ramp at Coal Banks recreation area

Challenges

The inability to hire seasonal workers extended across resource programs, including range, hydrology, wildlife, recreation, and the AIM program. This was factored by limited funding, delayed recruitment efforts and reduced hiring certifications, coupled with all offices vying for the same potential seasonals. This caused operational gaps and increased workloads for permanent staff, and in some cases hampered project completion.

Two critical contracts related to recreation were not approved at the Departmental level late in 2025. The non-approval of the Historic Trail contract eliminated funding for Inventory, Assessment, and Monitoring work on both the Lewis & Clark and Nez Perce National Historic Trails. Similarly, the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) agreement's non-approval delayed recreation maintenance and was a primary obstacle to achieving invasive plant management goals, with staff coordinating with county weed professionals and extension agents to compensate for these shortages.

Mechanical failures of boats and very low water levels occurring earlier than usual restricted access to certain sites along the wild and scenic Missouri river halting many projects to a standstill for the season.

Access issues—both legal and physical—remained a core challenge for monitoring and data collection within the monument. Adverse road conditions, late summer rains, and crew injuries further complicated field operations. Despite these difficulties, crews completed all but one assigned Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) points for the 2025 field season.

The monument's remote location and distance from population centers contributed to limited community awareness of its operations. Staff availability was insufficient for larger or more complex events, and a lack of accessible day trip opportunities hindered broader visitor engagement. Establishing recurring educational programs in classrooms and field trips proved challenging, as making meaningful connections with school administrations required additional outreach and coordination.

Collectively, these challenges underscore the monument's ongoing struggle to balance conservation, recreation, and community involvement amid staffing shortages, resource constraints, and logistical hurdles. The adaptability of staff and partners enabled the completion of most operational targets, yet these issues highlight the need for sustained investment in workforce recruitment, infrastructure, and outreach to ensure the monument's continued success and resilience.



Figure 2: BLM employee showing erosion conditions from a failing culvert

Visitors

Visitor activity within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in 2025 reflected diverse interests and evolving patterns of engagement. The majority of visitors utilized key sites primarily as transit points en route to or from other destinations, or specifically sought access to the river corridor for overnight float trips. River-related recreation, including boating, paddling, and fishing, remained the principal draw, with the Coal Banks to Judith Landing “White Cliffs” section standing out as the most popular route for multi-day paddle excursions.

James Kipp Campground continued to serve as the busiest camping area throughout the year, beginning with paddlefish season in the spring and peaking during the hunting season in the fall. Recreational pursuits extended beyond river activities, with visitors engaging in site seeing, camping, hunting, bird watching, following Lewis and Clark paths, exploring Native American history, shed hunting, and seeking solitude and reflection. The monument served both as a planned destination for some and an unexpected attraction for others who discovered its offerings during their travels.

The Upper Missouri River Breaks Interpretive Center operated year-round, attracting most of its guests between June and August. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in school groups visiting the Monument and the Interpretive Center, often participating in Ranger-led programs. With additional BLM positions being filled in late 2024 and early 2025, the Center was staffed 6 days a week during the summer season. 2,769 visitors enjoyed the Interpretive Center and what it offers.

Changes to access routes and property ownership have influenced visitation patterns. The opening of the Left Coulee access route in 2024 led to increased recreational hunting activity within the Bullwhacker area and use of Gilmore Cabin. Additionally, the acquisition of the Anchor Ranch property by American Prairie in September 2025 is expected to further boost visitation to the Bullwhacker area, as streamlined access via Cow Island Trail Road becomes available to the public.

Collectively, these patterns illustrate the monument’s significance as a multifaceted recreational and educational hub, drawing a wide array of user groups and adapting to evolving access and outreach opportunities. Continued efforts to expand public awareness and improve site amenities are expected to further enhance visitor experiences and engagement in the coming years.

Through multiple data collection techniques, the monument averaged around 20,000 visits and 35,00 visitor days.



Figure 3: Recreational canoeists enjoy paddling on the Upper Missouri River

Partnerships

The National Monument partners with numerous entities, which support efforts across the landscape with various projects to preserve and protect natural resources that call the Monument home.

The National Wildlife Federation assisted in completing 1.5 miles of maintenance on a stream restoration project in the Reed Coulee corridor that was initiated in 2021. This project benefits water quality, provides habitat for various wildlife species, reduces wildfire risk and improves overall ecological stream functions. This partnership is 15-years strong.

Collaborative partnerships with Northwestern Energy, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and Montana State University empower the BLM to advance scientific research and conservation efforts focused on the Monument's designated biological resources, as outlined in the Monument Proclamation. This includes plants and animals, such as pallid sturgeon, paddlefish, spiny softshell turtles, cavity nesting birds, and riparian habitats. Furthermore, the University of Montana assists with collecting Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) vegetation data giving college students first-hand, on-the-ground experience working on BLM managed public lands. This partnership has been operating since 2018.

While the Monument's invasive species program does not have formal partnerships, staff join forces with county weed professionals, extension agents, and range permittees to deliver training and coordinate effective invasive plant management, helping to significantly reduce troublesome invasive species.

As the Monument's education, interpretive, and outreach programs grow, partnerships are becoming crucial with providing a variety of venue locations and assisting with advertising the Monument's interpretive services. These include:

- MT FWP – specifically the staff at First People's Buffalo Jump State Park
- Great Falls Public Library
- Chouteau County Public Library
- Missouri Breaks Audubon Society
- Great Falls Museum Consortium
- River and Plains Society
- Lewistown Boys and Girls Club (in development)
- Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center (Great Falls)

Volunteers play a crucial role in supporting recreation operations in the monument and help accomplish numerous projects in other resource programs. These include vehicle shuttling for river patrols, maintaining campgrounds and facilities, monitoring

wilderness study areas and general recreation use, educating and providing information to visitors, implementing beaver dam analogs in stream channels, collecting bugs for biological weed control, and many other tasks.

Campground hosts at Coal Banks and James Kipp campgrounds ensured facilities were clean and welcoming for visitors throughout the busy summer season. Our one general recreation volunteer supported Interpretive Center grounds maintenance, vehicle shuttles, and Judith Landing area maintenance along with other support roles including fee collection.



Figure 4: Volunteer from the National Wildlife Federation constructing a beaver dam analog within Reed Coulee

Science

In 2025, UMRBNM coordinated with partners continuing multiple projects that have spanned years to ensure we're getting the best available data to observe and monitor trends. Through citizen science, the public assists in taking pictures at Decision Point depicting a chronological story of water levels and vegetative conditions at the confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers. Over 40 photos were submitted and uploaded to <https://www.chronolog.io/site/UMR101>

Through the AIM efforts, twelve points were collected by the University of Montana, which were repeat points. Repeat points contribute to trend analyses of the locations showing the viability of ecologically healthy native prairie lands. The 2025 field season wrapped up two rounds of repeat points, allowing the BLM to start collecting third visit points in 2026.

Several riparian exclosure fences had critical maintenance completed. These riparian areas are sites with regenerating cottonwoods, which are one of the objects of the monument, and help improve the recreational experiences for shade along the wild and scenic Missouri River, and wildlife habitat (e.g. bald eagle nesting locations).

The monument continues to be used as a site to establish classical biological weed control areas with the intent that these areas can be used to distribute biological control agents to other infested lands as populations build.

A focus in 2025, through partnership with Northwestern Energy, Montana State University, and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks was trapping of softshell turtles that make their home in the Upper Missouri River. Turtles were aged, sex identified and tagged to continue ongoing efforts to ensure habitat was fruitful for this aquatic reptile. In addition, the research surveyed for snapping turtles, which are considered invasive and poses risks to native turtles.



Figure 5: Fish, Wildlife, and Parks employee holding a soft-shelled turtle

Outreach and Special Events

The Monument hired an education specialist beginning in January 2025. Within a year, BLM monument staff have made great progress with our education, interpretation, and outreach programs and events.

Some highlights include participation in the Wildfire Education Day which brought together approximately 150 students from three local elementary schools to learn about wildfire prevention, mitigation, and the role of fire in land management. These efforts demonstrate the fire program's commitment to proactive land management, habitat conservation, and community engagement. Monument staff participated in Fort Benton's Summer Celebration parade and downtown activities with an educational booth. The monument's parade float one first prize for "best float."

Other noteworthy event participation from Monument staff included the annual county weed district training. This is a training and certification program to assist county crews in getting the required training for pesticide application. BLM staff participated in presenting the pesticide safety program.

Throughout the spring and summer season, the monument's education specialist hosted interpretive booths or conducted presentations at the MT State Fair, Little Shell Pow Wow, Malmstrom Airforce Base Outdoor Expo, National Migratory Bird Day, Lewis and Clark Festival, National Trails Day, Central MT Fair, National Public Lands Day, and provided various interpretive presentations at the Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center and at one of the monument's campgrounds. In conjunction with these efforts, staff conducted monument radio interviews, both in Lewistown and the Hi-Line, sharing a plethora of information with what was occurring in the monument.

The BLM's outreach efforts reached a total of approximately 4,300 people.



Figure 6: Monument Education Specialist presenting to 4th graders on the Every Kid Outdoors program

Staff Topic of Choice

In April 2025, the BLM Montana/Dakotas State Director approved a new recreation business plan for the monument. This plan is designed to guide how the BLM manages recreational activities and facilities within the monument. The main goal is to ensure that visitors have enjoyable experiences while the natural and cultural resources are protected for future generations. The business plan proposed adjustments to the UMRBNM expanded amenity, standard amenity, and individual special recreation permit recreation fees for multiple developed recreation areas.

The plan is based on the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) of 2004. FLREA gives the BLM the authority to set and collect fees for recreation use of federal lands. These fees help support the management of public lands, maintain facilities, and improve visitor services. The BLM aims to balance public access with responsible stewardship, making sure recreation is both affordable and sustainable.

As part of the business plan, there were changes to campground and permit fees. These adjustments reflect the costs of maintaining and improving facilities as well as providing quality services to visitors. The new fee structure was developed to be fair and transparent, helping cover the expenses of upkeep and operations without placing an undue burden on users.

One significant change was the removal of the Visitor Center entry fee. By eliminating this fee, the BLM hopes to encourage more visitors and make the site more accessible. By eliminating the entry fee, Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center staff have seen an increase in donations for the Center.

Sustainable funding is vital for maintaining recreation opportunities and protecting the resources managed by the BLM within the monument. The approval and implementation of the business plan helped secure the necessary support for monument operations, especially as infrastructure expenses increase. By adapting fees and welcoming donations, the BLM aims to provide lasting benefits to visitors and communities within and adjacent to the monument.



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