



Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area

National Landscape Conservation System
FY 2011 Annual Manager's Report

NATIONAL LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION SYSTEM



Introduction

- a. Site Name: Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area
Address: Safford Field Office, 711 14th Ave, Safford, AZ 85546
Phone: (928) 348-4417
Email: Tom_Schnell@blm.gov
Website: [Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area website](#)
- b. Manager: Tom Schnell
- c. Safford Field Office, Gila District, Arizona State Office
- d. The Arizona Desert Wilderness Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-628)
- e. Acreage: Approximately 21,767 acres of public land and 1,720 acres of private land within its designated boundaries.
- f. Estimated Annual Visitation: 40,000



Orange Cliffs along the Gila River

1. Natural and Heritage Resources Conditions

- a. Natural Resource Trends
 - o Overall condition of natural resources within the Gila Box is good. Two resource protection issues are directly related to the annual monsoon. Monsoonal flooding produces wash-outs of roads and gap fencing leading to excessive erosion and inadvertent livestock trespass. These two issues are being addressed yearly through scheduled and unscheduled monitoring and maintenance.

- The Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area (Gila Box RNCA) includes four perennial waterways, the Gila and San Francisco rivers and Bonita and Eagle creeks. This region is a very special riparian ecosystem abounding with plant and animal diversity. Impressive Gila Conglomerate cliffs tower more than 1,000 feet above the Gila River, and bighorn sheep are commonly spotted. Numerous prehistoric and historical structures can be viewed. A network of primitive roads provides hours of backcountry adventure for four-wheel-drive enthusiasts and mountain bike trekkers. The Bonita Creek Watchable Wildlife Viewing Area provides a bird's-eye view of the riparian canyon below, with over 100 species of birds recorded here. Two homestead cabins, rock art and cliff dwellings, show evidence of the occupation of this important perennial stream by earlier inhabitants; several have been interpreted to increase public appreciation.



Coatimundi

- Special status species include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lowland leopard frog ● Sonora mud turtle ● Desert ornate box turtle ● Desert pupfish ● Desert sucker ● Longfin dace ● Sonora sucker ● Speckled dace ● Razorback sucker ● Loach minnow ● Spikedace ● Gila chub ● Gila topminnow ● California leaf-nosed bat ● Cave myotis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BLM sensitive BLM sensitive BLM sensitive Endangered BLM sensitive BLM sensitive BLM sensitive BLM sensitive Endangered Endangered Endangered Endangered Endangered BLM sensitive BLM sensitive
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- Greater western mastiff bat BLM sensitive
- Golden eagle BLM sensitive
- Bald eagle BLM sensitive
- American peregrine falcon BLM sensitive
- Yellow-billed cuckoo Candidate
- Southwest willow flycatcher (transient) Endangered
- Clifton rock daisy BLM sensitive
- Spring snails (likely Succinidae and Pyrgulopsis) BLM sensitive

- Illegal use of off-highway vehicles (OHV) within the Gila Box is one of the most controversial issues and resource-damaging uses in the conservation area. Impacts include damage to riparian vegetation, stream bed and banks, and disruption to fish and wildlife. Current OHV management limits vehicle use to designated roads. Prior to designation of the Gila Box in 1990, OHV use was virtually uncontrolled and commonly occurred within both the Gila River and Bonita Creek. This historical use pattern has proven difficult to alter. Development of a Transportation Plan for the Safford Field Office will result in the signing of all designated routes with a result in the reduction of impacts caused by illegal OHV use. The Gila Box is part of the Gila Unit Travel Management Plan (TMP).
- Invasive species: A total of 600 acres of Salt Cedar were treated.

b. Heritage Resource Trends

- Notable Heritage Resources include Old Lady Gay Cabin, Pueblo Devol, and Serna Cabin. Overall condition of cultural resources within the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area (Gila Box) is good; however, several historic sites are in poor and failing condition. These sites are “homesteads” found along the Gila River established in the late 1800s to early 1900s. Most of these sites are lean-to or dug-out cabins with remnant corrals and outbuildings. One stone cabin on the Gila is in poor to failing condition. Flood damage producing cut banks are of notable concern.
- Prehistoric sites within the Gila Box are in fair to good condition. Vandalism and looting in years past have left some prehistoric sites in less than desirable condition.
- Inventory Efforts: This fiscal year, 14 cultural sites were monitored with nine sites receiving light maintenance.

c. Land Health Assessments

- To date, 21,767 acres (100% of the Gila Box) have been assessed using land health standards. One-hundred percent of the assessed acres met land health standards. A 100% assessment occurs every 10 years.



Cliff Dwelling

- 100% of assets were included in the Gila Box RNCA Comprehensive Asset Business Plan.

d. Inventory

- Gila Box and Safford Field Office staff monitored native and nonnative fish assemblages this year in Bonita Creek and the Gila River. Native fish species encountered included the endangered Gila chub, Gila topminnow, and desert pupfish. Wildlife monitoring was conducted on Bonita Creek and Gila Box staff conducted 12 float-boat patrols on the Gila River for fish, wildlife, riparian, and range monitoring.
- The Gila Box gap fence condition inventory for all livestock river access related gap fencing in the conservation area continues. Several portions of these fences were repaired or replaced.
- Gila Box staff conducted 12 float boat patrols to monitor recreation use impacts and provide visitor contact, information and assistance on the Gila River.

e. Restoration

- Overall condition of natural resources within the Gila Box is good. Two resource protection issues are directly related to the annual monsoon. Monsoonal flooding produces wash-outs of roads and gap fencing, leading to excessive erosion and inadvertent livestock trespass. These two issues are being addressed yearly through scheduled and unscheduled monitoring and maintenance.
- Controlling excessive erosion due to monsoonal activity is an ongoing action. The Gila District force account crew reconstructed several miles of flood-damaged access roads and recreation facilities.
- Gila Box Riparian NCA Vegetation Treatments. This ARRA project involved the removal of salt cedar from the Gila River and Bonita Creek. It was completed March 31, 2011 with 600 acres being treated.

- In fall of 2011, 1,972 Gila topminnow and 336 desert pupfish were stocked into Bonita Creek at Red Knolls as part of the Bonita Creek native fish restoration project. The Bonita Creek native fish project is a collaborative partnership with the Bureau of Reclamation, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Arizona State University, University of Arizona, and private entities.
- Water quality testing for E. coli at full-body contact sites on the Gila River and Bonita Creek occurs each year from May through September. These sites are popular swimming holes for Gila Box visitors. E-coli standards were outside acceptable parameters due to sediment and ash from the Wallow Fire which created conditions that caused E-coli growth. These conditions are expected to continue until stability occurs over the fire area and sediment conditions are reduced. Macroinvertebrate sampling was conducted at three sites on Bonita Creek and five sites on the Gila River. Macroinvertebrates found at all sites indicate relatively good health for both watersheds.

2. Recreation Facilities, Roads, and Trail Conditions

a. Overview

- The overall condition of recreation facilities is good. Monsoonal flooding caused light to moderate damage in FY11. Primary damage includes washed out OHV barriers, boat ramps, roads, and parking areas close to the Gila River and Bonita Creek. Gila Box recreation facilities are maintained through a maintenance contract (September-June), by volunteers, and by the Gila Box staff. This fiscal year, Gila Box staff, volunteers, and a recreation maintenance contractor maintained 26 recreation sites within the Box.
- Overall the road system is in fair to good condition. Road maintenance is provided through contract and by the Gila District force account crew. The force account crew maintained approximately 20 miles of road. There is still a backlog of roads within the Gila Box that need maintenance.
- FY11 visitor estimates for onsite interpretive stations total about 8,000 visitors. Total visitation for the Gila Box in FY11 was 33,911 visits equaling 29,578 visitor days. Primary activities include birding, hiking, hunting, camping, recreational driving, float boating, photography, horseback riding, water play, and picnicking.
- Asset Priority Index/Facility Condition Index: 79% of assets are in Quadrant 1 (adequate condition, high priority); 4% are in Quadrant 2 (poor condition, high priority); 3% are in Quadrant 3 (poor condition, low priority), 9% in Quadrant 4 (adequate condition, low priority). 100% of assets were included in the Gila Box RNCA Comprehensive Asset Business Plan.

- b. Construction
 - o No construction projects were completed in the Gila Box in FY11.

- c. Maintenance
 - o The deferred maintenance backlog as reflected in the Five-Year Plan includes the Black Hills Back Country Byway Road Maintenance and Bonita Creek Low Water Crossing.

- d. Signage
 - o Gila Box portal, directional, informational, and regulatory signs are installed and are up to standard. Sign management is currently provided through a sign plan developed in FY03.
 - o Developed campsites – Owl Creek Campground and Riverview Campground.
Day Use Areas – Flying W Group Day Use Area, Lee Trailhead/Picnic Area, Old Safford Bridge Picnic Area, Spring Canyon Picnic Area, Dry Canyon Picnic Area, Serna Cabin Picnic Area, and Bonita Creek Watchable Wildlife Area.



Gila Box River Trail Trailhead

3. Outreach, Environmental Education, Interpretation, and Volunteers

- a. Outreach
 - o This objective is met through websites, onsite interpretive stations, signs, kiosks, an agreement with the Graham County of Commerce, national and local volunteer events, and presentations to local schools, organizations, clubs, and civic groups concerning the Gila Box resources, values, and uses.

- Five new interpretive panels were completed in FY11. They showcase the scenery, wildlife, native fish, heritage resources, and recreation opportunities of the Gila Box and can be taken to conferences and community events.

b. Visitor Centers

- The Gila Box RNCA does not have a visitor center. We have an agreement with the Graham County Chamber of Commerce which operates a tourist center in Safford and provides information on the Gila Box to the public, especially on weekends and evenings.

c. Environmental Education

- Safford Field Office staff participated with local schools and scout troops to disseminate the Gila Box Junior Ranger Handbook. This effort resulted in follow up presentations to these groups.
- Along with the Forest Service and Arizona Game and Fish, the BLM set up a station for the Earth Day Celebration at Discovery Park. Children learned about predators and prey, carnivores and herbivores, and skulls and antlers. In addition, Gila Box Junior Ranger Handbooks were given to each participant. An estimated 150 5th-grade students rotated through a total of eight hands-on stations.
- Safford Field Office staff worked with students from Eastern Arizona College's undergraduate biology research class on a bosque inventory of the Gila Box RNCA. Utilizing Google Earth, they developed information that can be incorporated into the BLM's Geographic Information System.
- Safford Field Office staff worked with students from Eastern Arizona College honors biology class to implement water quality monitoring for the EPA Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program at eight stations in Gila Box RNCA and three stations up river in New Mexico.



Interpretation Panel on the Cottonwood Trail

d. Interpretation

- The primary thrust of interpretation within the Gila Box is to educate the public about the resources and values in the Box, teach resource conservation, and promote pride, ownership and value in the conservation area.
- During FY11, the Gila Box river ranger continued to work on production of a Gila River Floatboat Guide.
- The Safford Field Office hosted a Gila Valley Leadership Program tour to the Gila Box to provide community support and teach these future leaders about the complexities of multiple-use management of working landscapes within this NLCS unit.
- Currently, no Friends group exists for the Gila Box. However, local Boy Scout troops provide a dependable source for volunteer projects.

e. Volunteers

- Gila Box Management Plan Objective – “BLM will provide an administrative site and campground host site on the level terrace southwest of the Kearny Camp monument.” Site hosts stay at the administrative site providing information to visitors, area monitoring, trash pick-up, and many other duties as needed.
- Two site hosts at Riverview Campground provided 1,640 volunteer hours.
- Eighteen other volunteers worked for a total of 1,006 hours on maintenance, Gila River floatboat patrols and assisting the site hosts. Work included trash pick-up, patrol logistics, monitoring, and recreation inventory.
- These volunteer efforts totaled 2,646 hours and \$56,518 in labor dollars.



Riverview Campground Site Hosts

4. Science

a. From May to December, 2011, the Safford Field Office employed two interns through the Conservation and Land Management Internship Program. The interns worked with BLM staff on projects including fish monitoring, nonnative species removal, and seed collection. The interns were also responsible for data entry and the development of species accounts. The species accounts will be used in Environmental Assessments and Standards and Guidelines for rangeland health evaluations. Initial funding was from The BLM Washington Office through their agreement with the Chicago Botanic Garden Intern Program.

b. The BLM, Safford Field Office, and partners continued their monitoring and enhancement efforts, which include Bonita Creek. The partners involved include the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Bureau of Reclamation, and Marsh Associates.

5. Partnerships

a. MOU with the City of Safford

- Continue to manage and monitor the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and 10-year pipeline operation and maintenance plan.
- Implementation of the MOU initiates mutually approved actions within the Bonita Creek watershed to operate and maintain the municipal water system. The actions focus on continuing to provide high quality drinking water while allowing protection and enhancement of Gila Box natural and cultural resources.

b. Graham County Chamber of Commerce

- Agreement with the Graham County Chamber of Commerce to maintain and operate a Tourist Information Center.
- The Center provides outdoor recreation information to visitors to Graham County and educates visitors about the land, its resources and opportunities, proper land use ethics, and the agencies that manage the land.

c. Gila Watershed Partnership of Arizona

- BLM staff has provided the Gila Watershed Partnership (GWP) with technical advice, presentations and field assistance on various projects. Currently we are working on E Coli issues in the San Francisco River which eventually affects the Gila River.
- The Gila Watershed Partnership has assisted the BLM with field work and technical advice monitoring the Gila River.

6. Planning and Business Practices

a. We are currently using the Gila Box Management Plan, Environmental Assessment and Decision Record, January, 1998. This plan will be revised when we begin the Safford RMP. There is no definite date when we will begin the RMP process.

b. Total expenditures for labor for the Gila Box in FY11 came to \$479,382. Labor work months for the Box totaled 52.33. Volunteer contribution of 2,646 hours equaled \$56,518. The Gila Box received \$1,852.95 from recreation fees for developed site camping, reservation type day use and floatboat trips. No contributed funds were spent for the Gila Box in FY11.

Table 2: PARTNERSHIPS (table continues on next page, pleas scroll to the right)								
Location	Project Name	Partners	Project Description	Status	Results	Outreach Options	BLM Contribution	Partner Contribution
						<i>Identify projects or stories that may be of interest to the public</i>	<i>Funding To date by year</i>	<i>To date by year</i>
Gila Box RNCA	MOU with City of Safford	City of Safford	Continue to manage and monitor the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and 10 year pipeline operation and maintenance plan.	Ongoing	Implementation of the MOU initiates mutually approved actions within the Bonita Creek watershed to operate and maintain the municipal water system. The actions focus on continuing to provide high quality drinking water while allowing protection and enhancement of Gila Box natural and cultural resources.		FY11 \$1,600 (GS-11 .25wm) FY10 \$1,600 (GS-11 .25wm), FY09 \$1,600 (GS-11 .25 wm), FY08 \$6,400 (GS-11 .25wm, 3 WG-10 ,25wm), FY07 \$6,000 (GS-11 .25wm, 3 WG-10 ,25wm), FY068 \$6,00 (GS-11 .25wm, 3 WG-10 ,25wm) road maintenance on low water crossing, monitoring	FY11 \$50,000 road maintenance, FY10 \$50,000 road maintenance, FY09 \$50,000 road maintenance, FY08 \$50,000 road maintenance, FY07 \$50,000 road maintenance, FY06 \$50,000 road maintenance
Gila Box RNCA	Agreement with the Graham County Chamber of Commerce	Graham County Chamber of Commerce.	An agreement with the Graham County Chamber of Commerce to maintain and operate a Tourist Information Center continued in FY09. The purpose of the Center is to provide outdoor recreation information to visitors to Graham County and to educate visitors about the land, its resources and opportunities, proper land use ethics, and the agencies that manage the land.	5th year			FY11 \$7,500, FY10 \$7,500, FY09 \$7,500, FY08 \$7,500, FY07 \$7,500.	FY11 \$7,500, FY10 \$7,500, FY09 \$7,500, FY08 \$7,500, FY07 \$7,500.

State Name: Arizona
 Unit: Gila Box Riparian NCA
 Manager: Tom Schnell

Table 5. CONTRIBUTIONS	
Volunteer Site Hosts at Riverview Campground contributed 1,640 hours	\$35,030
Volunteers that assisted with river trips and maintenance within the Gila Box contributed 1,006 hours	\$21,488
<i>TOTAL Contributions</i>	<i>\$56,518</i>