



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Montana
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Upper Missouri River Breaks

National Monument





Accomplishments

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (UMRBNM) staff continue to learn more about the array of biological, geological, and historical objects of interest that exist within the Monument. We completed cultural resource inventory of almost 4,000 acres in the Bullwhacker area, documented fifteen cultural properties, and monitored historic homesteads. We also completed over 5,000 acres of inventory for a proposed fuels treatment, resulting in another sixteen sites being documented and nine sites being monitored. We continue to partner with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks with our restoration efforts at Wood Bottom as well as with our passive telemetry tracking efforts monitoring movements of wild and hatchery-origin pallid sturgeon and other species.

Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center staff hosted BLM Director Tracy Stone-Manning and State Director Sonya Germann as part of their tour of the North Central Montana District. Highlighting the tour of the facility, we displayed the Chief Joseph surrender rifle associated with the 1877 Nez Perce War. The Monument commemorates the tragic events associated with that flight, recognizing where those events occurred within the Monument's landscape. This display is possible through our partnership with the River & Plains Society.



Challenges

Staffing the Monument continues to pose a challenge, with a 60% vacancy rate in our permanent positions and 75% vacant in our seasonal positions for much of the year. During the course of the year we lost one career seasonal position to a full time job elsewhere, and were able to fill our Interpretive Center Manager, Administrative Support Assistant, and Range Technician positions. At the end of the fiscal year we remain 67% staffed.

Staffing seasonal employees who do most of the treatment and monitoring work in the invasive species program continues to be the most significant challenge. Work has been accomplished via other means, such as the Montana Conservation Corps, in the past, but logistics for using outside crews and volunteers are limited due to training requirements for using herbicides, field housing, access, and time lost in training new crews as they are cycled in.



Visitors

The Monument's visitor numbers continue to trend back toward pre-pandemic levels. The most visible and popular activity in the Monument continues to be visiting the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River. Popular activities in the Monument include day-use river floating, fishing from shore, hunting the uplands for bighorn sheep, visits to the Interpretive Center, and enjoying scenic drives through the Missouri Breaks Backcountry Byway. Total visitation to the Monument was 23,355 people, including outfitter and guide visitors and campground users. This is about a 20% decrease from 2022. The Interpretive Center received 1,426 visitors, which is also down from previous years. Our launch numbers at Coal Banks, our most popular campground and river launch site are consistent with previous years, in part because it is staffed with volunteers. Other recording sites may be low due to the lack of BLM presence. Our Interpretive Center numbers are lower than previous years due to a lack of staffing causing an inability to schedule and host school groups.



Partnerships

The invasive species program assists and participates in cooperative efforts with local county weed districts, conservation districts and permittees. Monument staff are often consulted on projects planned by weed districts and the expertise of county staff is often solicited by BLM to identify and address invasive species issues. In addition, our invasive species crew participates in annual invasive species crew training offered by the local weed districts. These trainings are attended by county, federal, state, and private entities.

With the abundant amount of spring runoff, slopes adjacent to the re-routed Middle Two Calf Road in the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument needed some help with soil stabilization. Action was taken by BLM-North Central Montana District employees from Malta and Lewistown. Erosion control blankets and 77 straw wattles were installed to provide protective cover for soils, reduce runoff, erosion and retain sediment. BLM employees will monitor effectiveness of installed products and implement additional measures, if necessary.



Science

In 2023, the University of Montana's Ecological, Monitoring, Mapping, and Analysis (EMMA) group revisited 14 AIM points within the monument spread across Blaine, Fergus, and Phillips counties. All 14 points were established in 2019. Considering the differences in precipitation/drought conditions between 2019 and 2023, there was very little change between vegetation conditions across these points. There was no noticeable difference in percent bare ground, shrub cover, tree cover, or perennial forb and grass cover. Annual grass cover had a slight (not significant) decrease in 2023 and a slight increase in total litter cover. Overall, vegetation characteristics seemed to remain steady despite multiple years of drought conditions.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Services (ARS) regionwide assessment of biological control release sites for leafy spurge finished data collection at two monument sites in 2022. BLM continued to monitor these sites in 2023 as the data will help BLM assess efficacy and inform future management decisions.

"The riparian habitat is where it's at for birds," pointed out Anna Noson, research director with the University of Montana's Bird Ecology Lab. Noson continues to conduct migratory bird research along the Missouri river corridor. Some of her students have been performing audio surveys in the Monument for two rare species of cuckoos.



Climate Impacts

After a few years of drought conditions, the Monument experienced a year of more normal precipitation. With that said we still had three lightning-caused wildfires in the Monument. Black Butte, the largest of the three, burned 460 acres over thirteen days, and 85 BLM, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), county, and volunteer personnel responded.



Climate Resiliency

The Aquatics Program for UMRBNM utilized the youth agreement with the Montana Conservation Corps for multiple projects during the summer. The UMRBNM employed a 14-week Conservation Intern, Katie Boyd, who helped build ecosystem resilience to counteract the impacts of climate change on aquatic and riparian ecosystems by assisting with riparian monitoring, riparian exclosure maintenance, cottonwood restoration, and stream restoration.

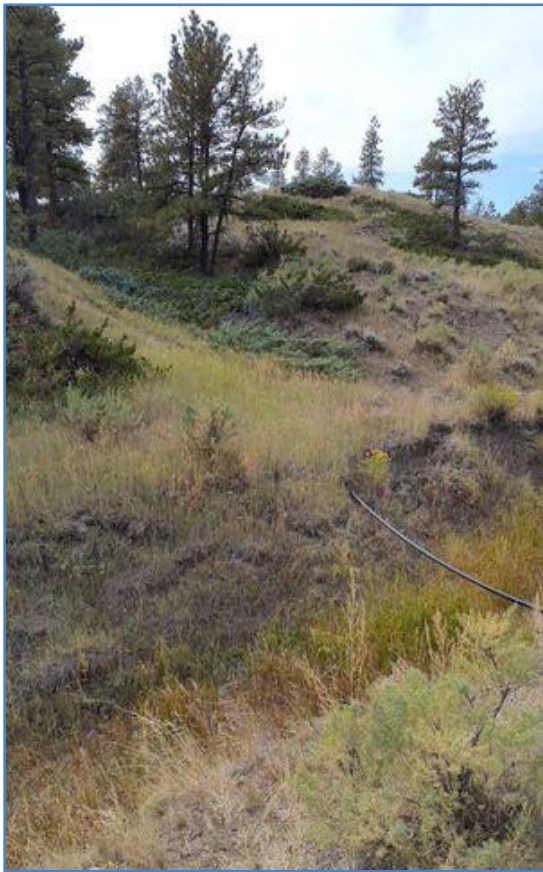
Shown below Katie is assisting to create a Low-Tech Structure known as a Beaver Dam Analogue (BDA), a hand-built structure designed to mimic and promote the processes of beaver dam activity. BDAs are permeable, channel-spanning structures constructed with a mixture of woody debris and fill material to promote temporary ponding of water.



Social and Environmental Justice

Eight abandoned, shut-in gas wells in the UMRBNM need to be plugged and reclaimed. The BLM estimates it would cost about \$476,000 to reclaim all eight wells due to difficulties with roads, terrain, and highly erosive soils.

The reclamation work to remove potential environmental hazards is located within Blaine County, identified as disadvantaged in the Justice40 Initiative. This area is in proximity to the Rocky Boy and Fort Belknap tribal communities.



Events

The UMRBNM boasts 149 miles of wild and scenic river in central Montana, creating a place rich in biodiversity. These and many other qualities made the breaks – broken landscapes that reach from the river bottom to the high plains above – a prime setting for the BLM Montana-Dakotas' biology tour, held July 18-20. This year, the “bio tour” welcomed an interagency group of scientists from field offices across the BLM Montana-Dakotas, the U.S. Geological Survey, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, University of Montana and the Montana Natural Heritage Program. The three-day bio tour began at the Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center in historic Fort Benton where the group shared formal presentations and discussed topics germane to each of the attendees. The tour then headed to the river to examine habitat restoration projects and riparian exclosures and discuss wildlife and management challenges and opportunities shared across the region.

After two years of drought, many Montana landowners are seeking solutions that can keep water on the land longer to help improve conditions for livestock forage and wildlife. The BLM, National Wildlife Federation, and Montana Wildlife Federation teamed up to offer a Prairie Stream Restoration Workshop in Winifred, Montana in May 2023. This workshop provided resources and tools to landowners and other agency staff to improve drought resiliency through low-tech, process-based stream restoration methods. This workshop brought together more than 30 people interested in water/land issues; and included a tour of recent restoration sites led by Monument Hydrologist, Bonny Richard.



Words from the staff

For most of FY2023, the UMRBNM operated with a 60% vacancy rate. We lost all of our recreation staff in 2022, making it extremely difficult to operate one of BLM's five Interpretive Centers. With more than 20 river-focused special recreation permits, an active summer recreation program focused on the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River, a popular paddlefishing site, and five fee sites, the potential for increased challenges ran high.

We maintained all of our campgrounds and recreation sites, not as often as we would have liked, but in a manner that made them safe, open, and available to the general public. We treated weeds, managed grazing, monitored riparian areas, completed resource inventories, monitored wilderness study areas, replaced signs, surveyed sage grouse leks, and responded to public queries. We also completed a Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) project, addressing hazardous trees in our popular and heavily-used James Kipp Recreation Area.

The monument staff not only completed their program work, but they also went beyond to make certain we took care of the resources while serving the general public who came to experience the Monument.

As a rule, I do not expect my staff to operate at 100%, 100% of the time. But this year, the Monument staff came close to doing that. In this high-stress situation, my staff continued to treat each other and the general public with respect; we continued to process administrative actions that allowed us to be responsible up the chain and to our visitors; we mentored and trained our detailers, interns, and seasonal staff to a point where they have been able to advance in their careers and also desire to return.

For facing a challenging year of high vacancies and high expectations; for mentoring our detailers, interns, and seasonal employees so that they are prepared to assume new positions and leadership roles in public land management; for serving the public and caring for the resources in a manner that reflects well on the BLM; and for treating each other and all of our customers with dignity and respect; the staff of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument received the State Director's Team Accomplishment Award for 2023.

Zane Fulbright
Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument Manager



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920 NE Main Street
Lewistown, MT 59457
Phone: 406-538-1900

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Report compiled by: Zane Fulbright, Monument Manager

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument contains a spectacular array of biological, geological, and historical objects of interest. Located in central Montana between Fort Benton, the nation's inmost port, east to the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, the Monument spans 149 miles of the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River, over 377,000 acres of the adjacent Breaks country, and portions of Arrow Creek, Cow Creek, and the Judith River. The landscape has remained largely unchanged since Meriwether Lewis and William Clark traveled through it on their epic journey with the Corps of Discovery over 200 years ago.

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