

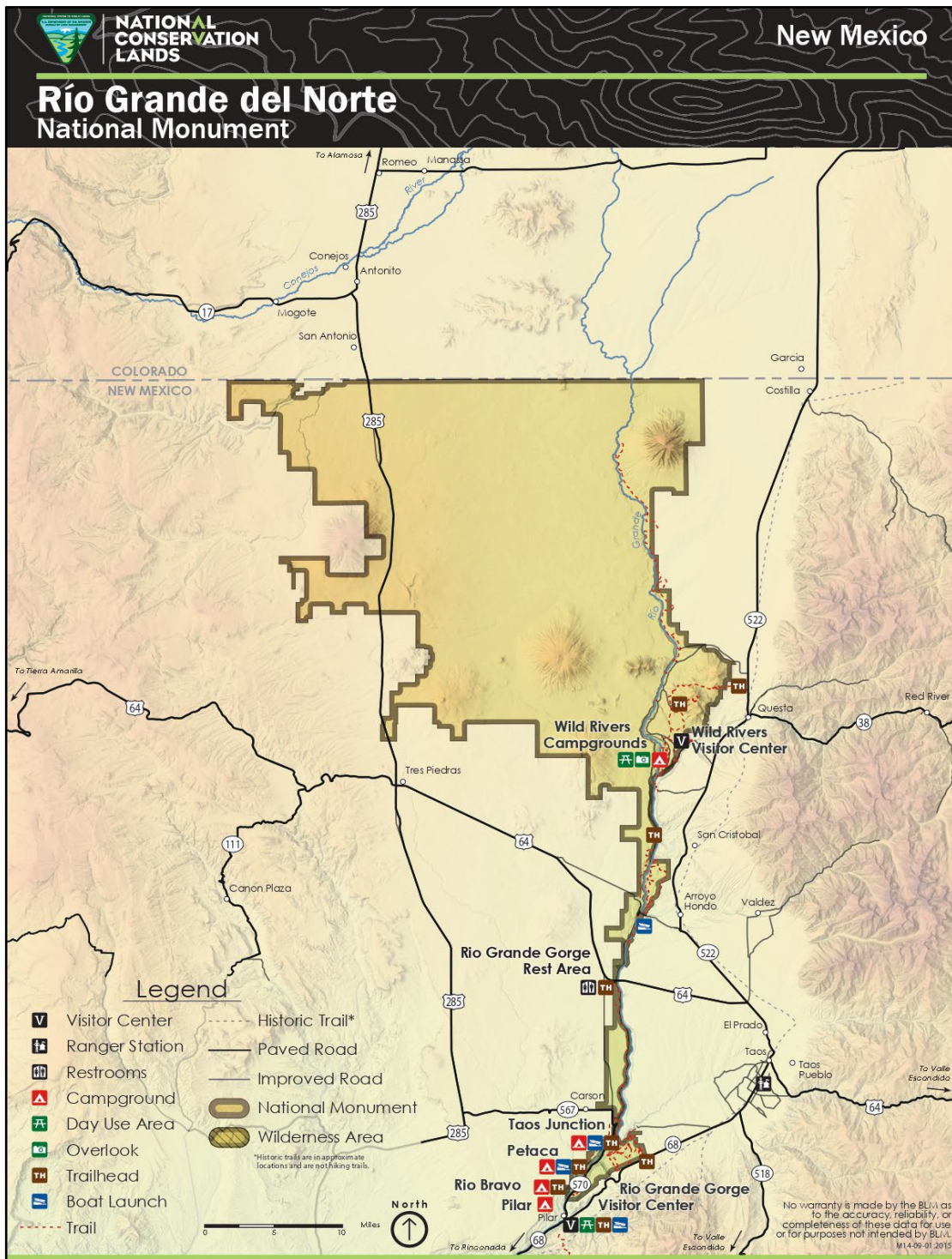
# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

New Mexico  
FY2023 Annual Manager's Report

## Rio Grande del Norte National Monument



# Map



# Accomplishments

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The Taos Field Office is happy to announce the formation of Friends of the Rio Grande del Norte (Friends) for the Monument in 2023. One of the projects initiated by the Friends includes an Outdoor Academy which fosters love of outdoor recreation for youth by introducing them to rafting and fishing. The program serves as a gateway to outdoor recreation and encourages youth to pursue additional education about outdoor guide services. As their mission states, “Friends of the RGDN works to connect the local community with the monument through kids’ outings, outdoor adventures, public meetings, river cleanups and more.” We are excited about current collaboration with the Friends and the possibilities for the future.

The Federal Highway Administration, Central Federal Lands Highway Division, in cooperation with the Taos Field Office and Taos County, completed improvements to the John Dunn Bridge, which is located within the Wild and Scenic River corridor in the Monument. The completed phase included the replacement of the bridge over the Rio Hondo, which provides improved road access to the Rio Grande. These improvements opened the area to greater recreational use for visitors, including for boating, fishing, rock climbing, and sightseeing.

Improvements to facilities in the Orilla Verde Recreation Area were completed in 2023 and include the rehabilitation of the Petaca campground providing for greater accessibility to the visiting public (see photos below). Also, a new vault toilet installed at the Quartzite pullout for rafters and anglers, provides for greater convenience, and resolved a long-standing issue in the lack of facilities at the site.

The Field Office continues to work on the Resource Management Plan Amendment for the Monument and anticipates its completion by the end of 2024.



# Challenges

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The Monument continues to deal with vandalism and extensive graffiti on facilities, specifically in the Orilla Verde Recreation Area. Staff have increased patrols during the summer months to monitor these sites. Continuous instances of vandalism have created a strain on staffing resources and time. Vandalism is a continual disruption to the visitor experience in these areas.



Graffiti recently removed from Cascabel Trailhead



Graffiti recently removed from Quartzite pullout

# Visitors

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Traditionally, non-local visits to the Monument mostly occur between April and September. Outside the busy season, most visitation is local. However, the Monument continues to see a significant increase in visitation, new recreational activities, and changing visitor trends. Increases in recreation, year-round, has caused user conflicts between different user groups. Locations which used to be found empty during the winter months are now consistently full by a variety of recreational users.

River-based special recreation permit holders are having difficulty accessing boat ramps because of crowded parking areas. This has led to traditional use patterns shifting to undeveloped areas within the Monument, expanding the overall impacts to Monument resources. Wildlife and big game migration corridors are also impacted by these trends. Visitation capacity and use regulations will be analyzed and be a priority for the Monument's Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA).



John Dunn Bridge



John Dunn Beach

## Partnerships

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The Field Office is happy to announce the formation of a Friends of the Rio Grande del Norte (Friends) for the Monument in 2023.

The Monument received over 15,000 volunteer hours this year. In 2023, volunteers helped with environmental education, staffing visitor centers, completing biological surveys, cleaning up trash dump sites, maintaining trail systems, and overseeing campground operations. The Monument has 21 camp hosts who provide customer services, monitor resource and recreation compliance, and maintain campgrounds.



Monument volunteers participated again in 2023 in a program to stock native Rio Grande cutthroat trout in the Rio Grande Gorge, which will continue in 2024.

Volunteers also provide curriculum-based activities and field trips for local schools. Partnerships with a local environmental education organization, whose mission is to advocate for conservation of public lands, continues within the field office. This project included volunteers doing trail work, planting willows, and providing essential visitor services.

# Science

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## Identification and Characterization of Habitat Conditions of Mule Deer, Elk and Pronghorn Migration Routes and Stopover Locations in Northern New Mexico

Migratory ungulates, such as mule deer, elk, and pronghorn, exhibit remarkable behavior that enables them to maximize survival by locating and tracking high quality food sources at essential sites such as stopovers and corridors.

The BLM is working with New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to better understand these patterns of movement across the Monument. Through this partnership, the agencies are working to: (1) identify and map migration routes, stopover sites, and seasonal ranges for migratory mule deer, (2) compare spatially explicit vegetation phenology metrics using Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) at multiple scales, (3) describe habitat conditions along the migration routes and stopovers, and (4) identify priority areas along migration routes and seasonal ranges that could be targeted for conservation and other management actions.

Monument staff visited over 326 transects and collected vegetation and composition data for the Northcentral elk and pronghorn herds. Data analysis was completed in 2023 and is being used to inform the Resource Management Plan Amendment for the Monument.



Cerro de la Olla viewed from Wild Rivers Recreation Area

## **Pinyon Jay Habitat Use and Movement in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument**

The Pinyon Jay is a native passerine species in New Mexico that has experienced population declines and is currently under review for Endangered Species Act listing. This project within the Monument seeks to provide greater understanding of the habitat needs and movement of Pinyon Jays.

Using data collected during the Pinyon Jay Occupancy Study conducted in 2022, the Taos Field Office, together with University of Georgia, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, proposed to collect and quantify Pinyon Jay habitat use and movement throughout the Colorado Plateau in 2023. The project, if funded, will pay special focus to pinyon-juniper woodland management history by the BLM in the Monument as part of a larger study.

## **Lotic Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) Project**

The BLM Aquatic Habitat Management staff has surveyed seven Lotic Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) reaches on the Rio Grande and two reaches on the tributaries flowing into the Rio Grande in 2023 for the purpose of assessing health of these riparian systems. The Lotic AIM protocol includes photos of the reach, bank full height, bench height, erosional and depositional banks, pool and large wood presence and dimensions, water quality, macroinvertebrate biodiversity, native woody species, noxious weed presence, thalweg depth, flood prone width, bank angle, slope, pollinator diversity, and wetted width to evaluate habitat health and prioritize restoration actions.





The BLM Aquatic program staff also collected water quality data at eight sites along the Rio Grande and its tributaries every other month.



Pictured above: Orilla Verde Recreation Area in the Monument

### **Playa Lakes Project**

Playas, one of the Monument's objects of value, are shallow, closed-basin wetlands which have dynamic hydrological cycles consisting of periods of inundation from excessive snowmelt or heavy monsoonal rains and periods of dryness, sometimes remaining dry for many years. Playas provide habitat for birds, amphibians, and macroinvertebrates, and are used as important stopover points for migrating shorebirds, cranes, waterfowl, and pelicans. Playa wetlands occur in many areas of New Mexico but have received less attention than perennial wetlands. Many studies in New Mexico have focused on the Southern High Plains leaving a gap in the data for north central New Mexico. In FY 2023, BLM personnel visited 34 playa lakes and stock tanks or earthen water catches. The tanks play a major role in wildlife and grazing. The tanks had water level loggers installed. The installation of loggers allows BLM to better measure and manage habitat for wildlife on the Monument.

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## Climate Impacts

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The Taos Field Office has been working on a programmatic hazardous fuels reduction environmental analysis (EA) for a project to reduce unwanted fire and reducing invasive vegetation. It is anticipated that the project work will begin in FY 2024.

## Climate Resiliency

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### **Northern New Mexico Climate Change Corps Intern:**

The Taos Aquatic Habitat Management Program supported an intern from the University of New Mexico-Taos, Northern New Mexico Climate Change Corporation. The goal of the program is to increase the availability of skilled graduates from Hispanic-serving institutions with a deep understanding of climate change challenges to northern New Mexico and increase minority representation in natural resources management agencies. Collaborative experiential education opportunities are provided and are mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Activities include riparian restoration, surveys of fisheries, water resources (past/present land/water uses), aquatic invasive species, wildfire, drought, floods, resistance studies and adaptability to climate change.

## Social and Environmental Justice

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In 2023, the Taos Field Office continued to utilize internships from universities, the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Taos Pueblo, youth organizations, and traditional local historical communities. In addition, the Field Office continues to utilize paid STEM internship opportunities through the University of New Mexico, which engages young people through paid service in the outdoors.

Directional and regulatory signs when replaced, now include Spanish translations to reach Spanish speakers. Pueblos have been asked to provide input and review of the Monument safety videos through our partnership with Public Lands Interpretive Association which should be completed in 2024.

## Events

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2023 saw the continuation of the Rio Grande del Norte NM Guided Hikes programming that included Night Sky Parties. Astronomers from El Valle Astronomers Club in Taos County led a sky viewing program at the Wild Rivers Visitor Center Amphitheater. Five astronomers with their telescopes (with mirrors ranging from 10 inches to 30 inches in diameter) and 50 people attended the event. New Mexico Tourism and the communities of Taos and Questa promote and protect the dark skies. Night sky view sheds are valued by the community as an ancient and natural experience. Recreation staff have begun to research the process to potentially nominate all or a portion of the Monument as an International Dark Sky Park.



Pictured above: El Valle Astronomers setting up the 30-inch telescope for the Star Party

An International Migratory Bird Day event is hosted by aquatic program staff at the Pilar Visitors Center every year in May. A live raptor presentation by The Raptor Center and environmental education activities are offered.

## Land Acquisitions

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The BLM is working with a key partner, Trust for Public Land, to acquire approximately 3,700 acres of lands adjacent to the Monument in 2024. This tract, along with an additional tract of 1,200 acres proposed to be acquired in a subsequent phase, could be added to the Monument through a legislative proposal recently introduced in Congress. These acquisitions, collectively known as the Klauer Acquisition, would preserve key big game migration routes and increase public access to over 8,000 acres of BLM and US Forest Service lands in Game Unit 49.



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Rio Grande del Norte

National Monument

**U.S. Department of the Interior**

Bureau of Land Management

Farmington District Office

Taos Field Office

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