

Colorado Natural Areas Program

The Field Press

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Gothic Natural Area. ©CPW

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From the Desk of the Manager

by Raquel Wertsbaugh, CNAP Program Manager



CNAP staff and CNAC members at White Rocks Natural Area ©CPW

The phrase “time flies” has taken on new meaning this year as we are already at the end of our field season and normally we send out this newsletter in the spring. CNAP has seen many changes this year that still has me in a bit of a tailspin, but luckily I have all good news to share. This includes new legislation that positively affects CNAP, saying farewell and welcoming both new staff and Colorado Natural Areas Council members, involvement in new conservation initiatives, numerous beneficial projects on State Natural Areas, expanding partnerships, and much more.

Currently, our CNAP field staff and volunteer stewards have been hard at work wrapping up the monitoring of our 96 designated natural areas across the state. Although I don’t get out from behind the laptop screen as much as I’d like, I’ve been fortunate to get out in the field several times this season with CNAP’s awesome field staff, volunteers, partners, and Council members. Every year I’m in awe of the dedication and efforts that are contributed to our state’s natural areas. As the field season winds down, I’m looking forward to some cooler weather and all of the amazing field reports, photos, and stories coming in from our field staff and volunteers, which continue to show just how unique, important, and resilient our state natural areas truly are.

Program Updates

Meet the 2025 CNAP Staff Team

Our small but mighty CNAP staff team includes a full-time permanent program manager, a seasonal field technician, and a contract ecologist.



2025 CNAP staff Brittany Nordentoft (contract ecologist), Raquel Wertsbaugh (program manager), and Grace Chovil (field technician) at Logan Wash Mine Natural Area. ©CPW

Raquel Wertsbaugh, Program Manager

CNAP has one full-time permanent position, the program manager. Raquel Wertsbaugh has filled this role since 2014. Raquel oversees the program and staff, manages contracts, grants, budget, and facilitates the Colorado Natural Areas Council.

Brittany Nordentoft, Contract Ecologist

For almost ten years now, CNAP has contracted with the Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) to conduct and lead natural areas monitoring, provide ecological expertise, and help manage the volunteer steward program. Savanna Smith recently stepped out of this role since she

accepted the position of CPW's Rare Plant Program Manager (big congrats to Savanna!). We're fortunate that last season's field technician, Brittany Nordentoft, has stepped into the role of CNAP contract ecologist and has hit the ground running.

Grace Chovil, Field Technician

CNAP hires a seasonal field technician each spring that assists with statewide natural area monitoring and all the tasks associated with planning, preparation, and wrap-up for site visits. We're delighted to welcome a new field technician this year, Grace Chovil.

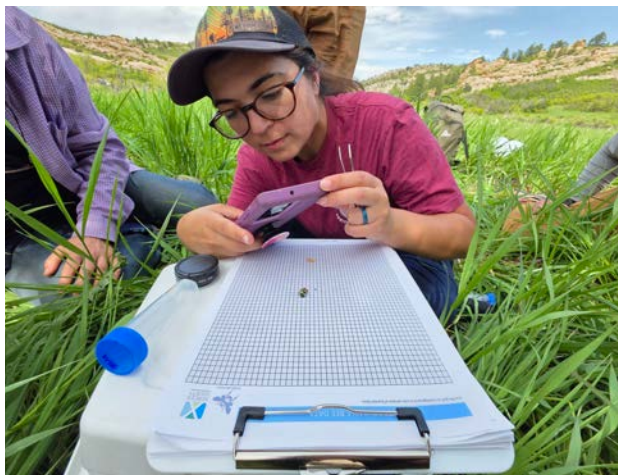
Recent legislation (HB24-1117) results in new invertebrate & rare plant program at CPW and changes for CNAP



Savanna Smith leading Pagosa skyrocket monitoring at Pagosa Skyrocket Natural Area. ©CPW

With the passage of Colorado HB24-1117 last year, CPW has a new Species Conservation Invertebrate and Rare Plant Program (SCIP). CPW recently hired their

first fully dedicated Rare Plant Program Manager. We're thrilled that Savanna Smith, previous CNAP/CNHP staff and botanist extraordinaire, is CPW's new Rare Plant Program Manager. A huge thank you to Savanna for being a CNAP rockstar for the last six years and we are thankful to be working closely with her in this new role. While CNAP staff still helps to monitor, protect, and collaborate on rare plant conservation, SCIP staff now have the lead role for rare plants within CPW, including ESA-related work.



Brittany Nordentoft, CNAP/CNHP contractor, at the Bumble Bee Atlas Train the Trainer workshop at Roxborough State Park/Natural Area. ©CPW

In addition to rare plant changes, we are happy to be helping CPW's new pollinator conservation staff on new projects including surveying for bumble bees on our state naturals through the Bumble Bee Atlas conservation initiative. Gaining more support and leadership roles within CPW for both rare plants and invertebrates is a dream come true and we're so excited to be a part of this amazing conservation work!

Colorado Natural Areas Council Updates

Other positive news from last year's legislative session includes the reauthorization of the Colorado Natural Areas Council (CNAC) with HB24-1257. We've seen many changes on our CNAC this year with both outgoing and new appointees. We've recently welcomed new appointees Jill Handwerk, India Wood, and Parks & Wildlife Commission representative Jay Tutchton. We've said farewell to Phyllis Pineda Bovin, Jessica Pierce, and Commissioner Rich Reading. A huge thank you to Phyllis, Jessica, and Rich for all their time and dedication to our Council. We are currently working with the Council on revising our program's strategic plan which we are planning to finalize by the end of the year.



CNAC chair Lynn Riedel and recently retired CNAC member Phyllis Pineda Bovin at Corral Bluffs Natural Area. ©CPW

Conservation Corner

Brush Creek Fen One Step Closer to Permanent Protection



Brush Creek Fen Natural Area contains a small but ecologically significant wetland nestled on the eastern edge of the Wet Mountains that supports a wide array of wetland dependent rare plants and numerous wildlife species. For over two decades, private landowners Pari Morse and Don Mercill have worked tirelessly to protect and improve the site. This past year, they came one step closer to accomplishing a long-term goal to place the land under conservation easement. By working with Colorado Open Lands, they were able to secure grant funding from Keep it Colorado and GOCO to cover the transaction costs of the conservation easement. CNAP staff provided letters of support that highlighted the significant features of the site that led to a Natural Area designation and underscored the long-standing working relationship between the landowners and our program.

Miramonte Natural Area Rare Plant Habitat Restoration



In 2024, CNAP collaborated with CPW Montrose area staff to implement a habitat restoration project at Miramonte Natural Area (aka Dan Noble State Wildlife Area). This natural area is home to several rare and imperiled species including the cushion bladderpod (*Physaria pulvinata*), a SWAP Tier 1 species and known from only a handful of locations in southwestern Colorado. The Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) helps CNAP monitor the cushion bladderpod at Miramonte and they observed a decline of species in an area used as an informal vehicle parking/turn-around area. With CNAP funding, local CPW staff installed boulders to keep vehicles out of the sensitive area and added new interpretive signs. We're proud of this collaboration with local CPW staff and CNHP to protect one of our rarest plant species.

Fossil Protection at Indian Springs Trace Fossil Natural Area



Indian Springs Trace Fossil Natural Area, a treasure trove of paleontological history and discovery, will continue to be protected thanks to the steadfast stewardship of the generational ranch family that owns the site, CNAP, NPS's National Natural Landmark program, numerous partners, and a new GOCO grant secured by CNAP. With the support of numerous partners, CNAP recently applied for and received a GOCO Director's Innovation Grant to rebuild the structure that protects the globally significant trace fossil bed. We're humbled to be working with the Indian Springs Ranch family and supportive partners on this fascinating site and look forward to the finished project in the coming year.



Updated Natural Area Ranking Criteria

In 2024, CNAP staff finalized the revised ranking criteria used to prioritize new Natural Areas and evaluate the status of existing Natural Areas. The criteria emphasizes the importance of sites having high-quality, significant natural features but also includes considerations of climate resiliency, connectivity, scientific & educational importance, and more. [Please visit this link to learn more.](#)

NEW State Wildlife Action Plan

CNAP has been hard at work this last year helping CPW staff and other partners with revising the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). The newly revised SWAP will now include both plants and invertebrates alongside wildlife and a [digital data hub highlighting all Species of Greatest Conservation Need \(SGCN\) and habitats](#). CNAP has been a partner in the many success stories since the last SWAP, several of which are highlighted in this [2025 Colorado SWAP: What's changed since 2015 story map](#). Once approved, the 2025 Colorado SWAP will be on CPW's website and ready for CPW, CNAP, and all conservation partners to use.



CNAP gets involved with Bumble Bee Atlas Conservation Initiative



Captured bumble bee with Pagosa skyrocket flower.
©CPW

CNAP staff have been “bee-yond” excited to get involved with [Bumble Bee Atlas](#) surveys this season. The Bumble Bee Atlas is a new conservation initiative hosted by the Xerces Society to track and conserve bumble bees. We’ve been surveying for bumble bees at many of our state natural areas this season and have been fortunate to get out in the field with experts including our own CNAC member Steve Armstead. In addition to learning about bumble bees, we can also learn more about plant-pollinator interactions, especially with our rare plants. This year, we combined bumble bee surveys at our annual Pagosa Skyrocket Natural Area monitoring and documented three different species of bumble bees (*B. huntii*, *B. fervidus*, and *B. rufocinctus*) on Pagosa skyrocket. We’ll be collaborating with CPW pollinator staff this winter to discuss ways to get our volunteer stewards involved in future Bumble Bee Atlas surveys, along with other potential pollinator opportunities at CPW. Stay tuned!

Rocky Mountain Monkeyflower Featured in Colorado Outdoors



Rocky Mountain Monkeyflower at Staunton ©CPW

A beloved species by CNAP staff was recently featured in a CPW Colorado Outdoors post, titled: [Cloning It In: The Weird and Wonderful Life of the Rocky Mountain Monkeyflower](#). Written by John Anglin, and featuring CPW’s new Rare Plant Conservation Manager and former CNAP botanist Savanna Smith, we’re thrilled to see the press on this fascinating and previously unknown rare plant found at our very own Staunton State Park and Natural Area. With the help of researcher and monkeyflower expert Mark Beardsley, CNAP and CPW have been taking action through an assisted migration project, monitoring, habitat protection, and more to conserve this declining species. The article delves into the bizarre way this species reproduces (hint: ever heard the term “armpit babies”) and the many mysteries that scientists have been trying to solve on this one-of-a-kind plant. Check out Colorado Outdoors for more conservation stories at: <https://coloradooutdoorsmag.com/conservation/>.

Natural Area Highlight

McElmo Natural Area



Longtime CNAP volunteer stewards Peter and Marian Rohman at McElmo Natural Area. ©CPW

To explore McElmo Natural Area is to traverse through time. A number of significant Pueblo cultural sites serve as a humbling reminder of the vibrant cultures which first walked there, and clustered nearby are the descendants of plants once cultivated by those very same people. In this way, wolfberry and Sacred Datura plants continue to tell the stories of the people and cultures who brought them there. Dotted with these incredible cultural landmarks and towering assemblages of sandstone and rock formations, it's easy to get swept up in looking up - however, to witness the designating feature of this Natural Area one must instead look down to what darts between its dramatic formations: its many reptiles.

Rare species like the desert spiny lizard, longnose leopard lizard, and California kingsnake, call this area home, among numerous other more common species. It was this unique assemblage of herpetofauna which earned McElmo its Natural Area designation in 1986.

The longnose leopard lizard is of particular interest to researchers. This species is one of the largest desert-dwelling lizards in North America, preferring areas of sparsely vegetated shrublands with minimal grass cover. Unfortunately, habitat loss due to the spread of non-native species (especially invasive grasses), development, and changes in climate have led to declines in the longnose leopard lizard's population. To track their movements and numbers, researchers fit these desert-dwellers with specialized radio telemetry devices and in this way have learned more about their territory sizes and habitat needs. One thing is clear about the leopard lizard: these fascinating, elusive creatures are considered an indicator of healthy, undisturbed arid shrublands in Colorado - so what an honor it is that they call McElmo Natural Area their home!



Longnose leopard lizard at McElmo Natural Area.
©Peter Rohman

During CNAP's 2024 visit, we observed a different rare lizard: the desert spiny lizard. These striking reptiles are less shy than the aforementioned longnose leopard lizard and were sunning themselves on the rocks when staff happened upon them - even

posing for some pictures. The lizards aren't the only features of interest at McElmo as this site is also home to several rare plant species such as Eastwood's milkvetch, slenderleaf buckwheat, spiny milkwort, and Utah penstemon. In fact, during CNAP staff's visit in 2024, silkcotton purslane, another rare plant, was found and added to this site's extensive list of tracked species.



Desert spiny lizard at McElmo Natural Area.
©Peter Rohman

Owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), this Natural Area is also a part of [Canyons of the Ancient National Monument \(CANM\)](#). This truly special Natural Area, which serves as a place of deep cultural significance in addition to critical habitat for vulnerable species, is stewarded by truly special volunteers: Marian and Peter Rohman. Since 1988, the Rohman's have provided CNAP with their invaluable expertise and tireless monitoring efforts. Together, the staff at the BLM, CANM, CNAP, and our volunteer stewards make McElmo Natural Area a collaborative success story celebrating Indigenous cultures, wildlife, plants, and the habitats that support them.

Volunteer Corner

The CNAP volunteer steward program has been going strong for 25 years! CNAP's volunteer steward program includes a dedicated cadre of over 50 volunteer stewards that commit to annual monitoring of their assigned Natural Area(s). The monitoring they conduct helps document change over time through long-term photo points, provides status updates on rare plants or other significant features, and alerts CNAP staff and the landowner to important changes happening on the ground. CNAP volunteers are critical partners in our work and hold significant local knowledge that is key to ensuring the long-term stewardship of these important sites.

CNAP would like to thank the following dedicated volunteers who retired between 2023-2024:

- David Beaujon, Shell Duck Creek & Duck Creek, 16 years of service
- Ed Herb, Droney Gulch, 14 years of service
- Travis and LaDonna Ward, Haviland Lake, 11 years of service

Thank you to the volunteers who have joined our team in the past two years! We are grateful for the fresh perspectives and passion for monitoring our state's most important places.

- William Taliaferro, Wheeler Geologic & Duck Creek/Shell Duck Creek Natural Areas
- Molly French, South Cathedral Bluffs Natural Area

- Sara Ozawa, Mexican Cut & Gothic Natural Areas
- Mike Mueller, Jimmy Creek Natural Area
- Ernie Marx & Tom Zeiner, Fourmile Creek Natural Area
- Blanca Hinojosa, San Miguel River at Tabeguache Creek Natural Area
- Evan Francis, Droney Gulch Natural Area
- Margaret Mayer, Haviland Lake Natural Area
- Angela Belic, Aiken Canyon Natural Area



Retired volunteers Travis & LaDonna Ward at Haviland Lake Natural Area. ©CPW



New volunteer Sarah Ozawa and staff at Mexican Cut Natural Area. ©CPW

CNAP Volunteer Accomplishments 2023-2024

Over the past two years, volunteers have made 123 different site visits to designated natural areas across the state, totaling over 2,600 hours of volunteer time. With volunteer help, we are able to incrementally increase our knowledge and understanding of these special sites. Here are some volunteer accomplishments and highlights:

- Gay Austin continued to document the progress of a restoration project that rehabilitated a ditch at Mount Emmons Iron Fen.
- Josette Mastra documented the rare broadfruit bur-reed (*Sparganium eurycarpum*) at Castlewood Canyon and monitored conditions before and after flooding events.
- Margaret Mayer surveyed for rare butterflies at Haviland Lake and documented robust populations of the bog violet that serves as the host plant for the rare silverspot butterfly.
- Erik Facticeau documented new locations of the rare Rocky Mountain columbine (*Aquilegia saximontana*) at East Lost Park and took photos used for the species' online rare plant guide.
- Ken and Mona Charles monitored Ripley's milkvetch (*Astragalus ripleyi*) within long-term monitoring plots at Rajadero Canyon.
- Jannette Wesley and Kelly Ambler documented raptor use at California Park.



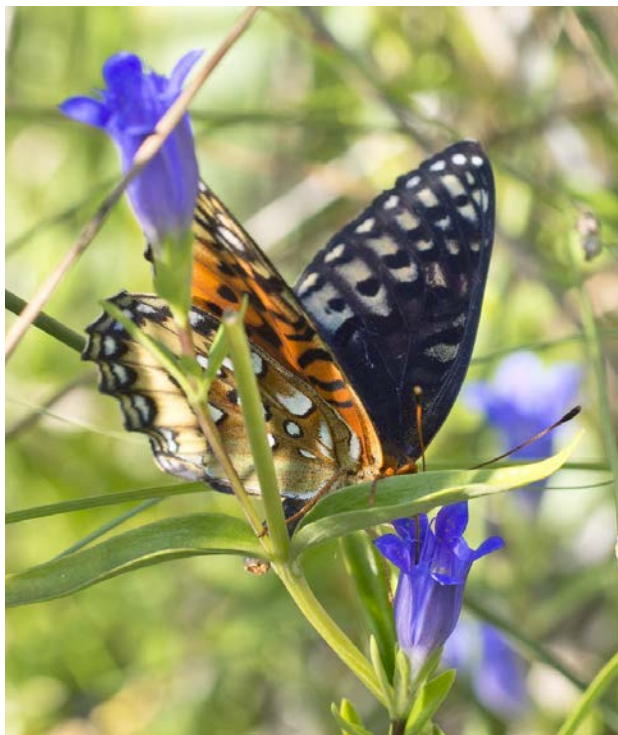
Volunteers Janette Wesley and Kelly Ambler at Park Creek Hogback Natural Area. ©CPW



[CPW Connect](#) is the volunteer management system used by the CPW and is a great way for us to engage and connect with both current and prospective volunteers. Thanks to the incredible dedication of our current volunteers and high interest in the program, we find ourselves at capacity for volunteers at this time. However we are maintaining a waitlist of qualified applicants and encourage prospective volunteers to reach out to us via [CPW Connect](#) or email (dnr_cnap@state.co.us).

SWAP Species Highlight

Silverspot Butterfly



Argynnis nokomis nokomis

©Robb Hannawacker, iNaturalist

Found only in southwestern Colorado, eastern Utah, and northern New Mexico is an imperiled butterfly known by many names: silverspot butterfly, Great Basin silverspot, Nokomis fritillary or more precisely as *Argynnis* (previously *Speyeria*) *nokomis nokomis*. However despite its distribution across multiple states, its numbers are restricted to approximately ten populations. The silverspot is ranked as critically imperiled by NatureServe and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently announced that this charismatic and elusive subspecies is now federally listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

This gorgeous butterfly is known for the silvery spots on the undersides of its wings, earning it the common name of 'silverspot'. The silverspot also sports a 3-inch wingspan, which is considered quite large in the butterfly world. Its appearance isn't the only thing that marks this invertebrate as unique nor is it what piqued the interest of the CNAP staff; no, that would be its habitat. The silverspot is only found in moist, open meadows populated by its only known host plant: the bog violet (*Viola nephrophylla*). Its life cycle depends on the bog violet, upon which it feeds and grows. The larvae typically hatch in September and feed exclusively on the bog violet before entering an overwinter diapause, a type of dormancy, until May. Once awake, they go right back to feasting on the bog violet until pupation, when they form a chrysalis and undergo metamorphosis, transforming into stunning adult butterflies. Around July, adults lay their eggs on or near the bog violet, and come September the entire cycle repeats all over again.

Dedicated CNAP volunteer stewards have performed several surveys for the silverspot and its host plant over recent years on designated natural areas that contain suitable habitat. Although we have yet to find this elusive species, volunteers and staff continue the search. We one day hope to say that it's a common occurrence to silver-spot the silverspot butterfly on Natural Area properties.

Colorado Natural Areas Council News

By Lynn Riedel, CNAC Chair



2024 Corral Bluffs Natural Area field tour with CNAP volunteers, CNAC, and partners. ©Ryan Jones/CPW

As we near the 50-year anniversary of CNAP's establishment in 1977, the Program continues to thrive while also navigating changes and opportunities that have arisen during the last year. Following the passage and approval of HB24-1117 in 2024, which provides for rare plant and invertebrate conservation at the state level, a new CPW program has been established. The Species Conservation Invertebrate and Rare Plant Program (SCIP), led by Hayley Schroeder, has been working with CNAP manager, Raquel Wertsbaugh, other CNAP staff and the Colorado Natural Areas Council

(CNAC) to determine the best ways for the programs to support each other. The focus has been collaboration on rare plant conservation. Many Colorado Natural Areas have been designated to highlight and protect rare plants and their habitats, and CNAP has filled the rare plant expert role within state government for decades. Coordination with the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other partners has been part of CNAP's rare plant work. The new Invertebrate and Rare Plant Program will take on many rare plant conservation tasks,

which will help CNAP focus even more on its core work of designating and monitoring state natural areas.

CNAP staff and CNAC members are working on a strategic plan update for CNAP, and the timing couldn't be better for aligning with program changes related to rare plants and collaborative planning with the Invertebrate and Rare Plant Program. In addition, the in-progress State Wildlife Action Plan update includes an expansion of priority rare plants.



CNAC members at the March 2025 Strategic Planning session. ©CPW

Additional changes for CNAP staff and the Council include Savanna Smith's move from CNAP to a new position as the CPW Rare Plant Conservation Program Manager with SCIP. We are so grateful to Savanna for her years of excellent work with CNAP, and very proud of her in her new position. CNAP is fortunate to have Brittany Nordentoft and Grace Chovil this year to accomplish natural area monitoring, volunteer steward program management and other important programmatic tasks.

The Council has recently said goodbyes to Phyllis Pineda Bovin (former Council Vice

Chair) and Jessica Pierce, both governor appointees who contributed their time and expertise to supporting CNAP and will be missed. Dr. Richard Reading, who was the Council's Parks and Wildlife Commission (PWC) representative, has recently been appointed as Chair of the Commission. With the extra duties, Rich has stepped down from the CNAC, and the Council welcomes Commissioner Jay Tutchton as our new PWC representative. We also welcome our new governor appointed members, India Wood and Jill Handwerk. Both will bring valuable expertise and new dimensions to the Council. And a thank-you to CNAC member, Steve Armstead, for filling the role of vice chair.

With these changes, CNAP remains strong, productive and resilient, and continues to be well supported within the Species Conservation Team. We appreciate Raquel Wertsbaugh and David Klute's leadership very much. And the CNAC plays an ongoing role of assisting, advising and championing CNAP. As I have traveled and hiked in our beautiful state this year, I find myself thinking about the breadth, depth and importance of CNAP's designated natural areas portfolio. In the challenging times that natural area conservation efforts face at national and global levels, it is helpful to recognize Colorado's efforts and successes. For further inspiration and to learn more about the 96 designated state natural areas, I recommend exploring the Significant Features Map on the [Colorado Natural Areas](https://cpw.state.co.us/natural-areas) webpage.