



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Partnership Peaks

San Juan National Forest Partner Stories, Opportunities, and Updates

Fall 2024



Fall colors on Cascade Creek near Purgatory Flats

By Lorena Williams

We need your feedback!

Three years ago, partners across Southwest Colorado and employees of the San Juan NF twisted my arm into kicking off a quarterly newsletter. They wanted to learn about employees, projects, partners, and shared stewardship work. At the time, I was Partnership Coordinator and Abe Proffitt was the program’s intern. Fast forward three years and now Abe is Partnership Coordinator pulling together this quarterly publication. Newsletters from the San Juan had come and gone in different iterations over the years, but this time we wanted it to be partner and project-focused, bringing you news of the work taking place across the San Juan NF.

After three years, we thought it a good idea to see how this newsletter is landing and what you’d like to see done more, less, or differently. So, we designed **this survey**, which only takes a few minutes to complete. Thanks and happy reading!

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Landscape-Scale Programs: Risk Reduction

San Juan NF Receives \$5 million in Collaborative Wildfire Risk Reduction Funds

By Lorena Williams - Shared Stewardship Communications Specialist



ROCKY MOUNTAIN
RESTORATION INITIATIVE

In September, the USDA awarded \$5 million dollars to the San Juan National Forest's Durango, Colorado Fireshed Wildfire Risk Reduction and Restoration Project. This project will reduce wildfire hazard and risk and restore forest health through 3,000 acres of initial mechanical treatments that will enable 9,000 acres of future prescribed fire follow up treatments in the San Juan NF. These efforts will take place in the Durango High-Risk Fireshed, which is at increased risk due to hazardous fuels buildup. It includes the City of Durango, Southern Ute Tribal Land, and the Florida River municipal watershed. More specifically, the project will implement wildfire risk reduction fuel treatments in two areas: Durango Hills and the Junction-Falls Integrated Resource Management Project landscapes.

The Durango Hills Fuels Reduction Project is designed to reduce community wildfire hazard and risk to residents and along CR 240, which provides critical ingress and egress within the wildland urban interface. A 1500-acre fire break will be located on San Juan National Forest and adjacent private lands. To create a shaded fuel break, trees are thinned and ladder fuels removed, creating openings in the forest canopy that can slow wildfires and keep fire on the forest floor where it is easier to control.

The Junction-Falls Integrated Resource Management (J-FIRM) Project area lies north and northwest of the city of Durango, and includes Junction Creek, Logchutes, and Falls Creek/Hidden Valley. In coming years, the San Juan NF and partners will

implement prescribed fire and pile burning, vegetation thinning, big game habitat improvement, water development and streambank rehabilitation, ditch and wetland maintenance, and road upgrades on Junction Creek Rd #171 (an emergency egress route).

"This funding represents national recognition of the importance of reducing hazardous fuels and improving resilient forests in and around our communities in Southwest Colorado," said Forest Supervisor Dave Neely. "It is a testament to the strong work of Forest employees and our many, many partners. The collaboration behind the J-FIRM and Durango Hills projects is not only instrumental in realizing this funding, but also critical in telling our local story as we address our part of the wildfire crisis in this country."

San Juan NF Receives \$5 million in Collaborative Wildfire Risk Reduction Funds

Wildfire risk reduction fuel treatments within the Durango, Colorado Fireshed will be implemented in collaboration with many partners ranging from non-governmental organizations to government and Tribal entities. Partners involved in project development and implementation including [National Forest Foundation](#), [La Plata County](#), [Four Rivers Resilient Forest Collaborative](#), [Mountain Studies Institute](#), [San Juan Mountains Association](#), [Wildfire Adapted Partnership](#), [Bureau of Land Management Tres Rios Field Office](#), [Falls Creek Ranch Association](#), and [Colorado State Forest Service](#).



*Hand thinning project completed by Southwest Conservation Corps in 2021 at Junction Creek
Photo credit: San Juan National Forest*

This is needed funding for our community. We know mitigation is needed and now can take planning beyond meetings. Our hope is to show what a completed project looks like and gain momentum for more mitigation on public and private lands in La Plata County.

-Alison Layman, La Plata County Wildfire and Watershed Protection Fund Coordinator

From Bogs to Butterflies and the Search for Habitat

By Abe Proffitt



Female Silverspot Butterfly (*Speyeria nokomis*) - Credit: US Fish & Wildlife



Bog Violet (*Viola nephrophylla*)

In July, a large group of people from different federal and state agencies gathered just north of Purgatory Resort in search of a small blueish flower with kidney-shaped leaves. This particular flower is called a Bog Violet (*Viola nephrophylla*) and while it's a widespread native forb to North America, it's generally only found in regularly damp soils like bogs and wetlands. Finding a suitable ecosystem for the Bog Violet within the vast ecosystems of the San Juan National Forest, which spans moist alpine tundra to dry lowland deserts, requires tenacity, patience, and a sharpened eye for small details. Being able to see ultraviolet light would be pretty nifty as well.

Meet the Silverspot Butterfly (*Speyeria nokomis*), a relatively large butterfly with distinctive silvery-white spots on the underside of its wings. Like all butterfly species, it can see in ultraviolet which helps it find nectar - and it's the real reason why over 80 people ventured into a wetland this summer. In February 2024, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the Silverspot as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Threats facing the Silverspot include future effects from climate change in combination with habitat loss and fragmentation, incompatible livestock grazing, human-altered hydrology, and habitat isolation.

In response to the listing, land managers have been surveying bogs and wetlands for the Bog Violet, which has an obligate relationship (must coexist with) with the Silverspot. Along with collecting and distributing pollen, adult butterflies also lay their eggs on bog violet leaves. Eggs hatch approximately two weeks after being laid in September and the larvae immediately absorb water before going dormant until May. When the bog violet blooms in May, larvae feed on them exclusively through July when they form a chrysalis and metamorphize into adult butterflies.

From Bogs to Butterflies and the Search for Habitat



During the tour, members were given the chance to learn how to distinguish the bog violet from other violets as well as collaborative methods for protecting Silverspot habitat. Collaboration is at the heart of this project as demonstrated by the breadth of attendees in July. Participants included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the San Juan National Forest, the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, & Gunnison National Forest, the Rio Grande National Forest, Bureau of Land Management - Tres Rios Office, the Carson National Forest, Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Northern Arizona University, the Colorado Department of Transportation, and Fort Lewis College.

From Bogs to Butterflies and the Search for Habitat

Leading the expedition was Dr. Ross McCauley, a Professor and Chair of Biology at Fort Lewis College. Dr. McCauley has a particular interest in plant taxonomy and is currently studying the Bog Violet Silverspot relationship. Accompanying Dr. McCauley on the field tour were four of his students from his Field Botany and Plant Systematics class to assist in bog violet habitat identification.



“A unique characteristic of the bog violet (and other viola species) is that they have two different flower types,” said Dr. McCauley during the tour. *“Flowers are formed in the spring that have specifically evolved for insect pollination. However, later in the season the plant produces cleistogamous flowers that self-fertilize to ensure pollination year after year. By documenting more of these areas, we hope to discover more populations of this threatened butterfly and learn how to rehabilitate its habitat for the future.”*



Dr. McCauley and his interns

With the listing of the Silverspot as threatened, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service has also developed a ruling that tailors the conservation of this species with balanced land management practices. Land managers on the San Juan National Forest, such as Jennifer Haney (Wildlife Program Manager at the Supervisor’s Office) are working in collaboration with partner agencies to meet this objective.



Jennifer Haney showing samples of the Bog Violet

“Caring for the land and serving people is the motto of the Forest Service and this butterfly’s habitat is a perfect example of how we can do this,” said Haney. *“Through well planned practices such as prescribed fire, thinning and target grazing, we can keep these sensitive bogs from being overgrown with woody vegetation. This benefits the Bog Violet, the Silverspot Butterfly and the local people.”*

Endangered species recovery is complex and challenging work and often requires a substantial commitment of time and resources. For the Silverspot, collaborating with diverse partners who specialize in restoration and conservation is key to improving this unique habitat. Through our partnerships, we are committed to protecting this, and other, endangered species on the San Juan National Forest.

A Bird's Eye View of the Forest

By Abe Proffitt

Birds are like nature's almanac – their melodies and colors tune us into the seasons. The Western Tanager with its flaming yellow-orange plumage, and the Yellow-Breasted Chat glistening with a mango sheen, are reminiscent of mid-summer. When a juniper tree springs to life with the orchestral chirp of the Wilson's Warbler, with its beady black eyes and yellow/olive body, we know that aspens in the San Juan National Forest will soon turn gold.



Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*); Credit: Macaulay Library

Each spring and fall, billions of North American bird species migrate in response to food availability, temperature fluctuations, and nesting opportunities – and many make their home in this region. However, with warm weather arriving earlier each spring on average over the last several decades, many of bird species are having to adjust their migration pattern – and struggling as a result.



Wilson's Warbler (*Cardellina pusilla*); Credit: Macaulay Library

In response to this dilemma, a group of bird experts and enthusiasts ventured into the mountains above Pagosa Springs in June to investigate how forest management influences bird habitat and migration patterns.

Participants included Alex Handloff (Coordinator for the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership), as well as Pagosa Ranger District staff members, including Josh Peck (District Ranger), Anthony Garcia (District Wildlife Biologist), Adam Tlachac (District Timber Administrator), Kelsey Harkness (Wildlife Technician), several interns from the timber program, and members of the public.

An event flyer for "Bird's Eye View". The background is a close-up of two Hammond's flycatchers. The text "BIRD'S EYE VIEW" is prominently displayed in large white letters. Below it, the subtitle "A different perspective of the forest" is written in smaller white text. The date "June 21st, 2024" and time "8:15am-1:00pm" are listed. The location "Meet at CSU Extension 344 US-84, Pagosa Springs, CO 81147" is provided. A circular logo for the "San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership" is in the top right corner. At the bottom, it says "Birding and forest management tour with the Weminuche Audubon Society" and "Event flyer; Credit: Mountain Studies Institute".

BIRD'S EYE VIEW
A different perspective of the forest

June 21st, 2024
8:15am-1:00pm

Meet at CSU Extension
344 US-84, Pagosa Springs, CO 81147

Hammond's flycatcher on Jackson Mountain
photo by Keith Bruno

Birding and forest management tour with
the Weminuche Audubon Society

Event flyer; Credit: Mountain Studies Institute

A Bird's Eye View of the Forest



A Common Nighthawk egg nest on the ground
Credit: Melissa May

The tour was led by the Weminuche Audubon Society, a local chapter of the National Audubon Society based in Pagosa Springs. “The society has many volunteers that have been monitoring bird presence and abundance in this area over the last five years through point counts in treated (mechanical treatments and prescribed burns) and untreated areas,” said Anthony Garcia about the tour. “*The overall objective of the tour was to inform participants about the ongoing monitoring efforts and discuss forest management by completing point counts at two study sites, Jackson Mountain and Fawn Gulch,*” said Garcia. “*Participants also had the opportunity to learn about bird identification by sight, sound, behavior and habitat requirements as well as how forest management affects their habitat.*”



Adam Tlachac (San Juan NF) and another attendee at Fawn Gulch
Credit: Alex Handloff



Bill Trimarco (SJHFHP member) listening for birds
Credit: Alex Handloff

Fawn Gulch, for example, has a lot of open space interspersed with Gambel Oak and Ponderosa Pine, whereas Jackson Mountain is denser with Douglas and White Fir trees. This difference in biome resulted in diverse bird sightings for each group.

In Fawn Gulch (~7800ft), a Common Nighthawk, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, and Dusky Flycatcher were spotted – all of which nest in open forested areas. On Jackson Mountain (~8800ft), participants heard the songs of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Chipping Sparrow – three birds that build nests high in trees. While these sites are relatively close to each other (~ 3.5 miles), the 1000ft difference in elevation changes the habitat type that suits different bird species.

A Bird's Eye View of the Forest



Map of tour locations in Pagosa Springs

“Those differences beg the question that was on everyone’s mind,” said Alex Handloff about the tour. *“We are managing the forest for what, for whom and on what timeline? Whether the San Juan National Forest mitigates fuels, investigates possible management options to address climate change, or fosters habitat for birds and other species – the answers to those questions will require trade-offs, sacrifices, and balance.”*

Like climate change, migrating birds do not recognize borders or boundaries – and neither should our conservation efforts. Cross-boundary management, such as non-native/invasive plant mitigation and prescribed fire, are ways that we can work with partners and other land managers toward improving habitats across the region. Overall, cross-boundary work requires communication networks that incorporate multiple partners, coordinators to keep work objectives on track, the ability to bridge capacity and expertise gaps when they arise, and sufficient, committed funding to both attract partners and maintain project momentum.

The Weminuche Audubon Society holds regular classes and tours on bird identification throughout the year. For more information, visit www.weminucheaudubon.org.

Signs -- and the Stories They Tell

By Abe Proffitt

Across this country, iconic signs mark roads, trails, campgrounds and other features on nearly 200 million acres of land managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Drive into any National Forest in America and you'll see them: wooden trapezoid-shaped signs painted in a distinctive brown and cream lettering. Over the last half-century, portal signs have become not just recognizable, but iconic to the U.S. Forest Service and its motto of 'Caring for the Land and Serving People.'



One way the San Juan National Forest maintains this motto and its signs is through partnerships. This year, volunteers from the [San Juan Outdoor Club](#), [Pagosa Area Trails Council](#), and the [San Juan Backcountry Horsemen](#) collaborated on a restoration project for several signs throughout Archuleta County. On Turkey Springs road, volunteers restored a wooden sign thought to be built and installed in 1939. While the hardware was being repaired, Mike Cianciolo (San Juan Outdoor Club), [known in the area for his unique background as a machinist and cross-cut saw sharpening expertise](#), re-routed and painted the sign back to its original condition.

"We are very fortunate to have such dedicated and skilled volunteers who have taken it upon themselves to conceive of projects, plan accordingly, and follow them through to their completion with such high-quality results," said Paul Blackman, Recreation Program Manager.



Removing sign hardware

Collaboration was key to the success of this project. In a few short months, volunteers were able to rebuild the hardware and restore the sign to its original condition. In August, they re-installed the restored sign back at Turkey Springs. See photos below!

Signs -- and the Stories They Tell



Mike Cianciolo and Bill Milner with the San Juan Outdoor Club installing the newly restored sign



Final restored sign on Turkey Springs Road!

Signs -- and the Stories They Tell

Millions of people take selfies in front of portal signs each year, but many are probably unaware that the designer has connections to Durango. In the early 1960s, Virgil “Bus” Carrell briefly served as the Forest Supervisor for the San Juan National Forest before moving to Washington D.C. and designing the iconic signage we see today. His design standards are present in nearly every aspect of the Forest Service aesthetic – from entrance placards and logos to the badges we wear on our uniform. But the true magic of Carrell’s design is that it complements the Forest Service motto. His essay, entitled ‘Signs to Complement Natural Beauty’, is a befitting thesis describing the relationship our agency has with the land and the communities we serve.

For more information on the interesting history of Virgil Carrell and his Forest Service signs, visit www.thanksbus.com.



Portal signs across the San Juan National Forest



Region 3 Forest Service administrators (including Virgil Carrell) in front of a San Juan National Forest portal sign - August 31, 1961

Partnership Opportunities



This summer, the Dolores Ranger District hosted two bark beetle field tours to help land managers identify and manage bark beetles and other tree-killing insects found in Southwest Colorado. Attendees included the Dolores Watershed Collaborative, Mancos Conservation District, Mountain Studies Institute, and members of the general public as well as Regional Forest Service Staff. Photo credit: Dolores Watershed Collaborative



An important element we want to highlight in this newsletter is our commitment to our partners. The San Juan National Forest works to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of this region's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations - and we're able to achieve that through partner connections. Our partners include land management agencies across all levels of government, nonprofit and for-profit entities, tribes, and community groups. By working with partners with diverse backgrounds and knowledge, we are increasing the resiliency of our natural resources and strengthening the community that enjoys and works in these lands. For information about partnering with the USFS, follow this link: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/working-with-us/partnerships>

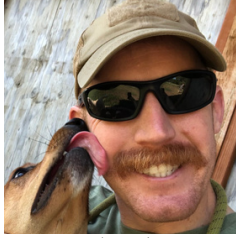
To become a partner with the San Juan NF or for questions, contact Abe Proffitt (SJNF Partnership Coordinator) by email at abraham.proffitt@usda.gov or by phone at (970) 501-0261.

For general questions about the San Juan NF, call (970) 247-4874, visit the forest website, or follow us on social media.

[Click here to get on our newsletter mailing list!](#)



Welcome to the San Juan!



*Michael (Mic) Bugosh
Law Enforcement Officer, Dolores RD*



*Jacob Huston
Forester, Dolores RD*



*Aaron Anderson
Range Technician, Pagosa RD*

*Jacob Lancaster
Fire/Fuels, Pagosa RD*

*Grayson Lecompte
Fire/Fuels, Pagosa RD*

*Mayera Coriz
Fire/Fuels, Pagosa RD*

*Edward Richards
Fire/Fuels, Pagosa RD*

*Isabelle Breman
Recreation Trails, Pagosa RD*

*Anita Goldmann
Recreation Tech, Chimney Rock, Pagosa RD*

*Michael Dobson
Fire/Fuels, Pagosa RD*

*Walker Henry
Recreation Tech, Pagosa RD*

*Michael Rung
Timber Crew Technician, Pagosa RD*

*Kori Mogensen
Recreation Tech, Pagosa RD*

*Brent Interpreter
Wilderness Crew Lead, Columbine RD*

*Sam Barrett
OHV Trail Crew Lead, Columbine RD*

*Trevor Marsh
Developed and Dispersed Recreation, Columbine RD*