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Bandit trail near Signal Peak keeping BLM on its toes

Plans for recreation area in the works

[BY ALISSA JOHNSON]

Bandit trail makers near Signal Peak are giving the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) a run for its money. A trail started popping up this summer as a reroute to a steep, erosive road that goes straight up the hill to the peak, and several efforts to close the trail have been thwarted.

The BLM could agree with the concept of the trail, according to BLM Gunnison field officer Brian St. George, but by circumventing the agency's process, the trail is a distraction from efforts to establish a larger recreation area in that part of Gunnison County.

"[The road] is nasty and rutted, and if it gets wet it gets muddy and it's really a pain," St. George said. "It makes sense to get rid of the rutted road and have a sustainable trail. We just weren't there yet," he said.

St. George noted that unsanctioned trails can also fragment wildlife habitat and the time and energy the BLM has to spend closing them takes away from the process of creating new recreation opportunities.

The BLM has been working with local partners like the Stockgrowers' Association and Gunnison County to develop a Candidate Conservation Agreement for the Gunnison sage grouse in Gunnison County.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to issue a listing decision for the Gunnison sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act late this year or early 2013, and a Conservation Agreement has been seen as a way for local interests to influence management of the sage grouse if it is listed.

St. George says he's not looking to pursue the specific trail makers or get them in trouble—he just wants them to understand what the BLM and its partners are trying to do and support their efforts instead of poaching trails.

According to St. George, the Candidate Conservation Agreement sets aside three areas for recreational use, including Signal Peak. "We've been able to gain the partnership and support from the Fish and Wildlife Service for recreational areas close to town, urban recreational areas where we'd be allowed to continue building trail opportunities, regardless of a [sage grouse] listing. Signal Peak is first and foremost on my list," he said.

The BLM's goal is to balance conservation with recreation, but the bandit trail circumvents that process. According to St. George, it also results in a trail that isn't professionally built or necessarily sustainable in the long term. The BLM closed the trail with a sign, which was ignored, and then partnered with a youth conservation corps to restore the area to its natural state.

According to Kristi Murphy, outdoor recreation planner for the BLM, a crew of eight college students from the Western Colorado Conservation Corps, most of whom attend Western State University of Colorado, joined volunteers to scarify the soil—they broke up the soil to stop compaction and planted live and dead vegetation to disguise the trail and allow new plants to take root. Murphy estimates they did about $1,500 worth of work, only to have someone reopen the trail this fall.

COURTESY PHOTO

"We worked on that project for a full day on July 17, and the crew was in that area for four weeks doing route restoration work on trails and some roads, trying to disguise and make those roads go away to create more sage grouse habitat," Murphy said.

It's disappointing, St. George said, to see the youth corps' efforts go to waste as well as be engaged in what he called a battle of the wills when a little patience would go a long way.

"I know we don't work quickly but we are moving in that direction," St. George said.

To that end, Gunnison mountain biker Dave Wiens has posted a sign at the start of the new trail. He sits on the Gunnison Sage Grouse Strategic committee, helping spearhead local conservation efforts, and his sign aims to draw the attention of local bikers—to choose between riding an illegal trail or join in efforts to plan the wider recreation area.