

SW Chapter Helps Obliterate Roads in Garden Park

In 2010 and 2011 the Southwest Chapter of CONPS played an important role in helping obliterate unauthorized social roads in the Garden Park Natural Area. Garden Park, located six miles north of Canon City is best known as one of the most important Late Jurassic vertebrate areas in the United States containing a rich array of dinosaur fossils, some of which are housed in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC. In addition to all those dinosaur bones, Garden Park contains three globally rare plant species, Brandegee's Buckwheat (*Eriogonum brandegeei*), Dwarf Milkweed (*Asclepias uncialis*) and Golden Blazing Star (*Nuttallia chrysantha*).

The Garden Park area, because it is so close to Canon City, is also a favorite area for recreation, especially off-highway vehicle and 4-wheel drive vehicle use, and over the years non-authorized roads were created in addition to the ones already there.

In 2009 the Bureau of Land Management, which owns the site, published its Revised Gold Belt Travel Management Plan. In it they set tighter limits on the roads in the area that motorized vehicles could use. In the old 2003 Travel Management Plan, motor vehicles were allowed to use "existing roads", but that was changed in the new plan to just the use of "designated roads". The plan, however, never indicated how the restriction of travel should be implemented. The problem with "social roads", roads that are illegally created by motorized vehicles, is that once they are visible, they attract more motorized use.

Jim Backstrand, a wildlife biologist in the Canon City BLM office had a special affection for the Garden Park area. After the travel management plan was published he decided that he would work to implement a plan for which the BLM would be proud. He met with Brian Kurzel, who worked for the Colorado Natural Areas Program and was also responsible for the Garden Park area because it had been designated as a State Natural Area in February 1991 both because of the rich trove of fossils and because of the three rare plants there.

Together Jim and Brian decided that the best way of restricting the use of the illegal roads would be to get rid of them altogether; by obliterating them. However, this would be a labor-intensive project and needed funds to support it. Jim raised the funds by getting a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Service. For the labor, they contacted CONPS member John Giordanengo, Projects Director at the Wildlands Restoration Volunteers.



Eriogonum brandegeei
Photo: Mo Ewing

Wildlands Restoration Volunteers is a wonderful organization with offices in Boulder and Fort Collins, which organizes groups of volunteers to work over 40 ecological restoration projects each year in Colorado. Their projects include everything from trail reconstruction to fire and wetland restoration.

Jim and Brian met with John and submitted a request to have their plan accepted. It was approved by WRV to be implemented in 2010.

Then, tragedy hit. On May 5, 2010, Jim Backstrand,

suddenly at the age of 59 died leaving his special project unfinished. The tragedy only further galvanized Brian Kurzel, "I should tell you that this project has taken on a new importance to me given that the BLM staff leader for this project has recently and suddenly passed away. I have a vested interest in getting the seed collection and the road obliteration project done somehow to honor the memory of Jim Backstrand." To the BLM's great credit, even though they were mostly unaware Jim's special project, they assigned Matt Rustand to take over.

Brian Kurzel, a member of CONPS, also runs a volunteer program in the Natural Areas Program, called the Rare Plant Monitoring Stewards. Many of his stewards are also members of the Colorado Native Plant Society, and so it was a natural for the Southeast Chapter to take on the project as it's major conservation program for the year. Ann Zielinski, the new chapter president sprang into action. She was not satisfied to make it just a CONPS project, but worked to include as many people in the community as she could.

In early 2010 John Giordanengo and Denise Wilson, another CONPS member visited the site to set up the obliteration plan. WRV had done a similar project of road obliteration in the Geneva Basin Iron Fen, in Clear Creek County in 2009. The first phase of the project called for collecting native seeds from the Garden Park site to be used when the area was revegetated in the following year. The Wildlands Restoration Volunteers provided seed collecting training to a small group of CONPS members and Brian's Rare Plant Monitoring Stewards early in the 2010 season. They went to the site several times in 2010 to collect seeds, collecting about 15 species that were key to the area's plant community. In 2011 they again went to the site to collect seeds, but last summer was bone dry, and the seed collecting was only moderately successful.

The following winter, Ann reached out to the community to recruit the larger number of volunteers needed to carry out the road obliteration set for the weekend of October 21, 2011. She set aside a monthly chapter meeting in February to promote the

project and then organized three field trips to the site in March, May and July to familiarize people with the area and project.



Work Crew Obliterating Road
Photo: John Giordanengo

In the end about 50 volunteers participated in "obliteration weekend". In addition to CONPS and Wildlands Restoration Volunteers, people came from hiking groups and the Gold Belt Tour Highway Association. Also eight members of the Canon City High School Environment Conservation Club came with their faculty adviser and her husband. People camped overnight and were fed hearty meals by several cooks from the local community.

The volunteers were split into three crews of 10 to 12 people and mulched and stabilized over 1/3 of an acre, closing three roads more than a mile long. 2.25 million seeds were sown, 25 rock structures were built and 14 yards of mulch was placed. The weekend was a great success.

John Giordanengo said, "What an interesting, wonderful, and hard working group of volunteers. We can't wait to work with you all again." And from Brian Kurzel, "I wanted to personally say thank you for your efforts to make the Garden Park Road Obliteration a success! It was great to have such devoted CONPS members out there, and I hope this will serve as a model for future CONPS conservation

work.



Obliterated Ditch Created by Illegal Road
Photo: John Giordanengo

Brian went on further to say, “ I wanted to let you know that I am in recruiting for a Volunteer Steward to watch over Garden Park, visit at least once annually, take monitoring photos around the area and provide me with a report every time they visit. I thought a CONPS member (especially if local to Canon City) would be a perfect fit.

Ann Zielinski said, “Working with Wildlands Restoration Volunteers was so easy, they organized and ran the project seamlessly. It made my job easy.”

An important postscript: It is now up to mother nature and she delivered. There were three good snows in November to get all the seeds off to a good start in their new home.