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## **Special Report: Wildlife Problems at Colorado national Monument**

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SPECIAL REPORT

WILDLIFE PROBLEMS AT COLORADO NATIONAL MONUMENT

By

W. B. McDougall  
Regional Biologist

National Park Service  
Region III

Santa Fe, New Mexico

July 1, 1940

## SPECIAL REPORT

### WILDLIFE PROBLEMS AT COLORADO NATIONAL MONUMENT

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Colorado National Monument was visited by the writer on June 10 and 11 and until noon on June 12, 1940. The first day was spent in going over the two stock drives through the Monument with Ranger Luther by car and on foot. The second day was spent in riding part of the buffalo range on horseback with Ranger Luther and Project Superintendent Gross. The forenoon of the third day was spent in examining the mesa by car and on foot with Ranger Luther.

There are two stock drives through the Monument, one extending more or less lengthwise of the western portion of the Monument and the other extending across the Monument toward the south end. A portion of the drive in the western part of the Monument is already outside of the Monument and parallel with its boundary. All of the remainder, with the exception of one mile at the north end, can readily be eliminated from the Monument by shifting it to the west in accordance with suggestions made by Ranger Luther. The one mile that cannot be eliminated from the Monument should be shifted to the west to bring it on the opposite side of a prominent elevation away from the entrance road. This latter change will involve a small amount of trail work which can readily be done with CCC labor. These changes are agreeable to the stockmen and their details are well known by Mr. Luther who first suggested them. Mr. Luther's recommendations should, therefore, be closely followed in making these changes. The changes will aid materially in restoring and protecting natural wildlife conditions in the Monument.

The drive through the south end of the Monument should be shifted from the Serpent's Trail road to the Old Toll Road that branches off from the Parks and Blue Hills Road. This change has already been agreed to by most of the stockmen and the Old Toll road has been used to a certain extent this year. The change takes the stock drive away from the Monument entrance road and through a part of the Monument that has a very rocky surface with very little plant or animal life. A sufficient amount of work should be done on the Old Toll Road so that it will be navigable by trucks. This is necessary in order that the sheep men may follow their flocks with a truck and it will also make this trail useful for patrolling that portion of the Monument.

The upper or mesa portion of the Monument is covered with a pinon-juniper woodland interspersed with sagebrush flats where there is some grass. In some places there are scattered mountain mahogany shrubs. So far as food is concerned, this mesa will support a limited number of animals but there is no water anywhere on the mesa. Along most of the eastern side of the Monument there is a granite shelf or mesa about half way down the slope. In some places this shelf is rather narrow, but in other places it is quite extensive. For the most part, the main canyons, Monument, Ute, Red, and No Thoroughfare, are eroded down to the level of this shelf. The vegetation on this shelf is partly pinon-juniper woodland interspersed with other shrubs, partly sagebrush flats, and partly a rather poor grade of grassland. At the base of the slope is the grassland that extends to the Colorado River but only a limited amount of which is included within the Monument.

Practically the only water within the Monument, aside from several springs in the bottom of the creek in the extreme southeast, is that which seeps out from the base of the sandstone at the surface of the granite shelf. One of these seep springs, midway between Monument and Ute Canyons, has been developed and water is collected in a tank for the benefit of the buffalo. This spring should be cleaned out at its source, walled up to prevent it from being filled with silt, and one or more additional tanks provided for water storage. It is probable that other seep springs could be developed at other places along the shelf. The development of these springs for the use of the buffalo is justified because of the fact that the animals have been fenced away from the river which would be their natural source of water. There is usually some water in Monument and Ute Canyons that is available to the buffalo but the animals have to travel very long distances to get from one watering place to another.

The buffalo pasture cannot be considered good buffalo range anywhere except on the grassland at the base of the cliffs and most of this has been fenced away from the buffalo. However, there is some feed on the entire granite shelf and in both Monument and Ute Canyons. The animals spend a considerable amount of time in the two canyons. We found most of the herd in Ute Canyon. We saw 17 adults, 10 female and 7 male, and two calves, 1 female and 1 male. It is believed that there are 3 more adults, probably 1 female and 2 males, and there may be another calf since, at an inspection earlier in the season, Mr. Luther believed there were 3 pregnant cows. This brings the number of animals to 20 adults and either 2 or 3 calves. The buffalo that we saw were in good physical condition. I do not believe, however, that the pasture, as now constituted, can safely be depended upon to take care of any increase in the numbers of ungulates and in times of

drought it would likely be insufficient for the present number. There are believed to be about 38 elk and a considerable number of deer in addition to the buffalo. We saw 2 deer in Ute Canyon, but did not see any elk. The deer go up on the upper mesa freely and it is believed that occasionally some of the elk get to the upper mesa and escape to other regions. The buffalo cannot get on to the upper mesa at all.

The buffalo pasture fence is built very close to the cliffs and in two places it abuts the cliffs so that the animals have to climb up to the granite shelf and down again to get from one part of the grassland to another. It is said that their feet sometimes become so sore from climbing over the rocky cliffs and traveling such long distances for food and water that it is painful for them to walk. In some places the fence is not even on the Monument boundary. If the fence could be moved to the Monument boundary it would aid the animals materially in getting from one part of the area to another.

From time to time the question has arisen whether, under National Park Service policies, buffalo should be in this Monument at all. Personally, I do not think there is any question at all that buffalo are native to the region. It is even probable that under former, natural conditions, buffalo often wandered up into these canyons to graze, since grazing conditions in the canyons undoubtedly were formerly very much better than they are now. It is said that Indians formerly drove herds of these animals into Ute Canyon in order to kill them there. At the same time, it is certain that the animals prefer grassy plains rather than these rocky cliffs and canyons. It is probable that public, and especially local, sentiment would preclude any possibility of removing the buffalo from the Monument entirely, in any case, and, therefore, every effort should be made to give the animals a comfortable and approximately natural place in which to live. This can be done, to a certain extent, by developing more water and by moving the present fence to the Monument boundary line.

There is another change that could be made to the advantage of both the buffalo and the visiting public. This is to open up Red and No Thoroughfare Canyons to the use of the buffalo. This would involve some additional fencing and certain small boundary changes to give a buffer area at the base of the cliffs to enable the buffalo to travel readily from one part of the range to another. The advantages of this change would be that the carrying capacity of the range would be approximately doubled and there would be very much more opportunity for the Monument visitors to see buffalo, when they were in the vicinity of the Serpent's Trail road.



Unless some of the above changes can be brought about soon, the present herd of buffalo should be reduced by about 25 percent and the number should then be kept at about 15 or 16 head until such time as a part, at least, of the relief advocated in this report can be provided.

Although the Regional Forester, several months ago, recommended porcupine control along the road in this Monument, I see no reason for such action. Pinon trees are abundant and are reproducing satisfactorily and the amount of porcupine damage is only such as should be expected in such a woodland.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The stock drive through the western part of the Monument should be moved entirely outside of the Monument with the exception of one mile at the north end, as suggested by Ranger Luther, and the necessary trail construction should be done to enable this one mile to be moved to the west away from the immediate vicinity of the entrance road.
2. The stock drive in the south end of the Monument should be moved from the Serpent's Trail to the Old Toll Road and the necessary amount of trail construction should be done to make this old road passable for trucks.
3. The seep spring that has been developed for the buffalo should be cleaned out and given better protection, one or more additional tanks for storage of the water should be provided, and other seep springs should be developed at convenient places along the granite shelf within the buffalo pasture.
4. The present buffalo fence should be moved to the Monument boundary to give the buffalo more grassland and enable them to travel from one part of the pasture to another without climbing over the rocky cliffs.
5. Red Canyon and No Thoroughfare Canyon should be opened up to the buffalo as soon as possible to increase the size of the pasture and make observance of the animals by the public more convenient.

6. If none of the recommended changes can be made very soon, the number of buffalo in the Monument should be reduced to 15 or 16 and kept at approximately that number until additional food and water can be provided.
7. Porcupines should be given the same protection as all other animals in the Monument.

*W. B. McLaughlin*  
Regional Biologist.



Portion of the buffalo herd in Ute Canyon.



Close view of several buffalo including two  
1940 calves.