

Youth Conservation Corps completes 80-hour 'spike' clearing invasive salt cedar at Big Bend Conservation Area

By Nathan Lenon, a Biologist with the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program



Working a total of 80 hours, the a five-person conservation crew cleared approximately ¼ mile of an embankment along a publicly accessible levee road between the Colorado River and the Big Bend Conservation Area. *LCR photos by Alex Stephens.*

The Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program (LCR MSCP) recently partnered with the Nevada Conservation Corps, based in Las Vegas, to remove invasive salt cedar at Big Bend Conservation Area, near Laughlin for fuels reduction to protect the nearby area from fire risks.

Youth Initiative projects are intended to introduce young people to public land stewardship and conservation through on-the-job training and education.

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Young men and women, who range in ages between 18 and 25, comprise the crews, who work on projects a minimum of 80 consecutive hours. These work periods are referred to as "spikes."

The Project Site

Conservation corps groups typically camp at or near the project site for the duration of their spike, which make the entire experience a rugged, outdoor adventure that includes "dry" camping, preparing their own meals, site set-up and tear-down, and travel to and from the project.

The Big Bend Conservation Area spike involved five young people – a crew leader and four corps members. All of them were recent college graduates in conservation or biology-related disciplines.

Big Bend Conservation Area is a 15-acre backwater and a 15-acre mesquite woodland. The site is cooperatively managed by the LCR MSCP and the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA). Some of the fish and wildlife species of program interest frequenting this area include the razorback sucker, bonytail, flannelmouth sucker, and the Colorado River cotton rat. Between Sept. 4 and 11, 2012, the youth corps cleared salt cedar from approximately ¼ mile of embankment along a publicly accessible levee road between the Colorado River and the conservation area to reduce the risk of wildfire damage to the habitat. Using chain saws, corps members cut the invasive trees, loaded them onto trucks, and hauled them to a trail network onsite, where they chipped the branches into mulch. With recycling in mind, corps members re-used the mulch within the project site as bedding material to line trails and for dust reduction.



The conservation crew's work site targeted areas overgrown with salt cedar, an exotic tree that has invaded riparian areas throughout the southwest, forcing out native species. After the trees were cut, branches had to be hauled up a steep embankment for transport to the mulching site. *LCR photos by Alex Stephens*

The crew also cleared a ¼ mile fire break, clearing a 1/8 mile foot path, and repairing storm water damage to a drainage culvert.

Documented Sighting - Until Allen Calvert and Chris Dodge, LCR MSCP wildlife biologists, confirmed the presence of the Colorado River cotton rat at the site, the species had not been contacted in Nevada since 1961. Calvert and Dodge are preparing a note for submission to the Southwestern Naturalist.

Education

Conservation crew sponsors commonly provide an educational component that draws a connection between the specific work tasks to broader conservation issues and programs. LCR MSCP Project Manager Jed Blake and Nick Rice, SNWA project manager, provided overviews of habitat conservation activities at the site.

LCR MSCP General Biologist Allen Calvert discussed the rediscovery of the Colorado River cotton rat, and the area's bats and the monitoring techniques used to study them. For variety in the curriculum, Realty Specialist Jason Kirby of the Resources Management Office provided an afternoon talk and tour of the recently dedicated America's Great Outdoors Project, the Colorado River Greenway Heritage Park and Trail connecting Laughlin and Davis Dam. This recreation area offers hiking, biking, horseback riding, fishing, and picnic areas along its several miles of trails, gazebos and fishing piers.

After their work hours, they enjoyed swimming, hiking and bird watching.

The Corps Members

The corps members were relatively new to the West, they were originally from Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, New York, and Connecticut. To get to the job site, they traveled, from their headquarters in Las Vegas in a crew cab truck, carrying a variety of brush-clearing equipment, and camping and safety gear.

This is the second conservation corps group to work at Big Bend Conservation Area this year. A blanket purchase agreement was established last March to expedite contract awards for conservation corps. This would not have been possible without the help of the Regional Contracting Office, the America's Great Outdoors Initiative, SNWA, and our co-workers who helped coordinate and participate in this project. The site has been greatly improved and is less prone to wildfire.