

Drones: the good, the bad and the ugly

By Katie Vane, High Country News

The Zapata Ranch in southern Colorado is one of the few places that bison can still roam freely. Until recently, scientists and volunteers surveyed the herd the old-fashioned way: with binoculars and the naked eye. “It’s a shock how you can lose track of 2,000 bison on a 45,000-acre unfenced pasture,” says Chris Pague, Colorado Nature Conservancy senior conservation ecologist. But last year, The Nature Conservancy counted the herd using an increasingly ubiquitous conservation tool: an unmanned aerial vehicle, more commonly known as a drone.

Drones can be cheaper, more efficient and safer than traditional manned aircraft, and may also provide more accurate data. A six-bladed drone and camera costs about \$1,500, and can deliver imagery with resolution at the centimeter level. Government agencies and nonprofits are already exploring their use in conservation, land management and wildland firefighting, with at least a dozen pilot projects currently in the works.

But introducing new technology to wild areas is tricky. Drones may unduly stress wildlife, as a study of black bears in *Current Biology* last year demonstrated. Recreational drones have also endangered wildland firefighting crews.

And problems will likely mount as drone sales outpace regulations.

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