

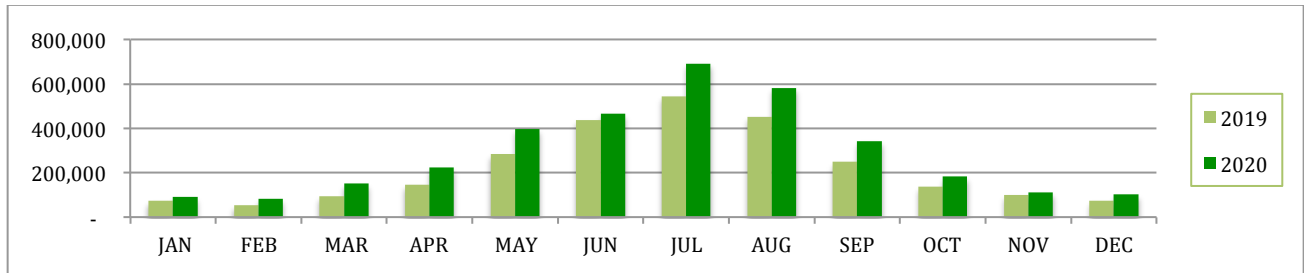


MONTANA FWP

2020 Montana State Parks Annual Visitation Update

Issued January 2021

The Montana State Parks system experienced more visitors in 2020 than ever before. Driven by a desire to head outdoors, over 3.4 million individuals were estimated to have visited a state park. This represents a **29.5%** increase over 2019's estimates. Visitation increased **every** month in 2020 over 2019, in spite of temporary closures at a small handful of parks and the absence or sharp decline in school field trips, and other group activities. Some parks experienced explosive growth. As viewed in the chart below, June was the only month in which there was a single digit increase in visitation.



	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	
2019	72,608	53,884	94,648	146,589	284,340	437,261	
2020	92,121	83,506	151,911	224,062	396,508	465,567	
% Change	26.9%	55.0%	60.5%	52.9%	39.4%	6.5%	
	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	EST. TOTAL
2019	545,156	452,339	248,866	138,170	99,648	73,678	2,647,187
2020	691,549	582,160	342,403	182,221	112,466	103,013	3,427,487
% Change	26.9%	28.7%	37.6%	31.9%	12.9%	39.8%	29.5%

The 10 top visited parks in 2020 are listed below.

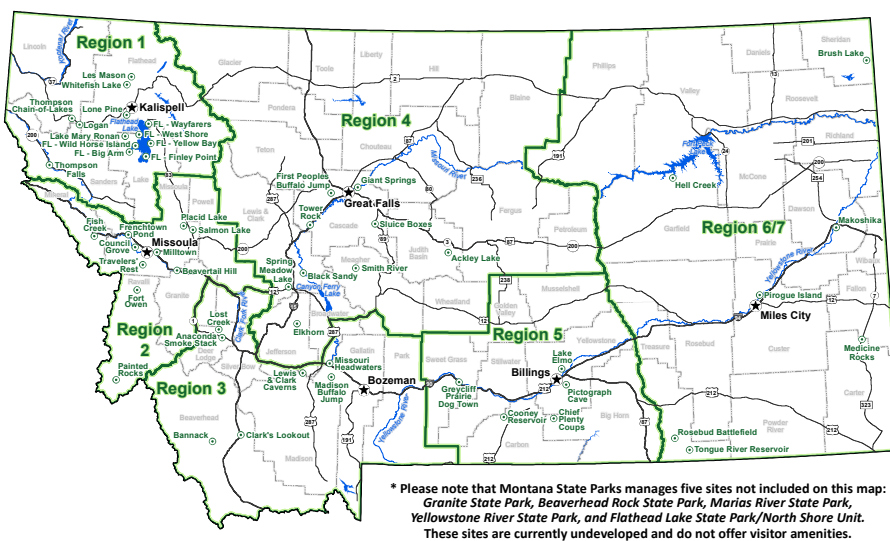
State Park Region	State Park (City/Town)	Estimated 2020 Visitation
1	Flathead Lake-all units (Kalispell)	471,690
4	Giant Springs (Great Falls)	384,309
5	Cooney (Roberts)	359,607
5	Lake Elmo (Billings)	231,388
4	Spring Meadow (Helena)	178,156
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes (Libby)	169,296
1	Lone Pine (Kalispell)	129,747
6/7	Makoshika (Glendive)	128,288
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir (Decker)	92,492
2	Placid Lake (Seeley Lake)	90,179

Introduction

The forthcoming report has been developed utilizing 2019 and 2020 reported numbers by park managers. The system's visitation methodology and reporting practices did not substantially change during this time. However, it is noteworthy to mention that staff members have begun undertaking a significant look at ways to improve accuracy. This has included installing new vehicle and trail counters at park entrances where there were none, and replacing devices that were no longer reliably functioning. Please see other reporting notes at the end of this summary.¹

A region-by-region glimpse

An interesting way to look at visitation data is to see what has happened across each state park administrative region for 2020 versus last year. The Montana State Parks system is sub-divided into six administrative regions with regional headquarter offices located in Kalispell, Missoula, Bozeman, Great Falls, Billings, and Miles City.



Although Regions 1 and 5 experienced the most net growth between 2019 and 2020, the rate of growth was also high in Regions 2 and the combined Regions 6 and 7. Region 3 was the small exception in 2020, with a slight dip of 8.3% below 2019 estimates. This was attributable to the sharp decline in tour offerings at Lewis and Clark Caverns due to COVID-19. In that park alone, visitation was down an estimated **52.8%** for the year. Another state park in that region, Bannack, was also impacted negatively by COVID-19 - the historic ghost town structures were temporarily closed and unfortunately staff members were unable to carry out the annual Bannack Days event this year, which typically attracts at least 5,000 visitors in a single weekend.

Region	# Parks reporting	2019 Total	2020 Total	Change	% Change
1	8	769,922	997,562	227,640	29.6%
2	9	328,092	467,906	139,814	42.6%
3	7	234,713	215,287	-19,426	-8.3%
4	8	653,939	780,899	126,960	19.4%
5	5	438,278	659,559	221,281	50.5%
6/7	7	222,243	306,274	84,031	37.8%
TOTAL		2,647,187	3,427,487		

State parks sorted by highest total 2020 visitation

Parks Region	State Park	2019	2020	% Change
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	354,826	471,690	32.9%
4	Giant Springs	384,023	384,309	0.1%
5	Cooney	175,870	359,607	104.5%
5	Lake Elmo	182,022	231,388	27.1%
4	Spring Meadow	134,992	178,156	32.0%
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	123,682	169,296	36.9%
1	Lone Pine	114,132	129,747	13.7%
6/7	Makoshika	85,272	128,288	50.4%
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	64,504	92,492	43.4%
2	Placid Lake	67,695	90,179	33.2%
1	Whitefish	72,573	86,398	19.0%
2	Frenchtown Pond	51,272	83,670	63.2%
2	Salmon Lake	50,754	72,709	43.3%
2	Milltown	36,387	72,433	99.1%
3	Missouri Headwaters	51,898	70,917	36.6%
4	Black Sandy	43,241	69,288	60.2%
4	Ackley Lake	32,522	66,480	104.4%
1	Les Mason	35,898	50,638	41.1%
2	Travelers' Rest	39,851	49,545	24.3%
2	Council Grove	35,868	46,757	30.4%
5	Pictograph Cave	54,273	42,870	-21.0%
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	86,077	40,591	-52.8%
3	Bannack	43,804	38,085	-13.1%
1	Logan	30,050	35,928	19.6%
1	Lake Mary Ronan	23,086	34,625	50.0%
6/7	Hell Creek	36,189	34,515	-4.6%
4	Sluice Boxes	22,085	31,847	44.2%
4	Tower Rock	14,777	29,172	97.4%
2	Beavertail Hill	22,201	29,104	31.1%
6/7	Medicine Rocks	16,819	27,527	63.7%
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	15,649	24,715	57.9%
1	Thompson Falls	15,675	19,240	22.7%
2	Painted Rocks	12,987	19,014	46.4%
3	Lost Creek	15,346	18,633	21.4%
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	16,309	16,787	2.9%
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	16,202	15,376	-5.1%
5	Chief Plenty Coups	15,907	13,017	-18.2%
3	Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	10,206	12,677	24.2%
6/7	Brush Lake	8,556	11,270	31.7%
4	Smith River	6,097	6,271	2.9%
6/7	Pirogue Island	4,340	6,209	43.1%
6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	6,563	5,973	-9.0%
3	Clark's Lookout	5,630	5,559	-1.3%
2	Fort Owen	4,796	4,495	-6.3%
2	Fish Creek	6,281	N/A	N/A

How has state park visitation changed between 2019 and 2020?

Visitation at state parks increased for **77.8%** of state parks in 2020 compared with last year. Some experienced explosive growth during 2020, even with the absence or sharp decline in school field trips and other group activities that ordinarily would take place.

Parks sorted by the largest to smallest % change between 2020 visitation and last year's

Parks Region	State Park	2019	2020	% Change
5	Cooney	175,870	359,607	104.5%
4	Ackley Lake	32,522	66,480	104.4%
2	Milltown	36,387	72,433	99.1%
4	Tower Rock	14,777	29,172	97.4%
6/7	Medicine Rocks	16,819	27,527	63.7%
2	Frenchtown Pond	51,272	83,670	63.2%
4	Black Sandy	43,241	69,288	60.2%
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	15,649	24,715	57.9%
6/7	Makoshika	85,272	128,288	50.4%
1	Lake Mary Ronan	23,086	34,625	50.0%
2	Painted Rocks	12,987	19,014	46.4%
4	Sluice Boxes	22,085	31,847	44.2%
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	64,504	92,492	43.4%
2	Salmon Lake	50,754	72,709	43.3%
6/7	Pirogue Island	4,340	6,209	43.1%
1	Les Mason	35,898	50,638	41.1%
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	123,682	169,296	36.9%
3	Missouri Headwaters	51,898	70,917	36.6%
2	Placid Lake	67,695	90,179	33.2%
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	354,826	471,690	32.9%
4	Spring Meadow	134,992	178,156	32.0%
6/7	Brush Lake	8,556	11,270	31.7%
2	Beavertail Hill	22,201	29,104	31.1%
2	Council Grove	35,868	46,757	30.4%
5	Lake Elmo	182,022	231,388	27.1%
2	Travelers' Rest	39,851	49,545	24.3%
3	Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	10,206	12,677	24.2%
1	Thompson Falls	15,675	19,240	22.7%
3	Lost Creek	15,346	18,633	21.4%
1	Logan	30,050	35,928	19.6%
1	Whitefish	72,573	86,398	19.0%
1	Lone Pine	114,132	129,747	13.7%
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	16,309	16,787	2.9%
4	Smith River	6,097	6,271	2.9%
4	Giant Springs	384,023	384,309	0.1%
3	Clark's Lookout	5,630	5,559	-1.3%
6/7	Hell Creek	36,189	34,515	-4.6%
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	16,202	15,376	-5.1%
2	Fort Owen	4,796	4,495	-6.3%

6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	6,563	5,973	-9.0%
3	Bannack	43,804	38,085	-13.1%
5	Chief Plenty Coups	15,907	13,017	-18.2%
5	Pictograph Cave	54,273	42,870	-21.0%
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	86,077	40,591	-52.8%
2	Fish Creek	6,281	0	N/A

**Flathead Lake units (Region 1)*

Park	2019	2020	% Change
FL-Finley Point	29,106	47,443	63.0%
FL-Big Arm	50,579	68,264	35.0%
FL-Wayfarers	196,434	262,402	33.6%
FL-West Shore	29,127	38,839	33.3%
FL-Yellow Bay	25,412	32,811	29.1%
FL-Wild Horse Island	24,168	21,931	-9.3%

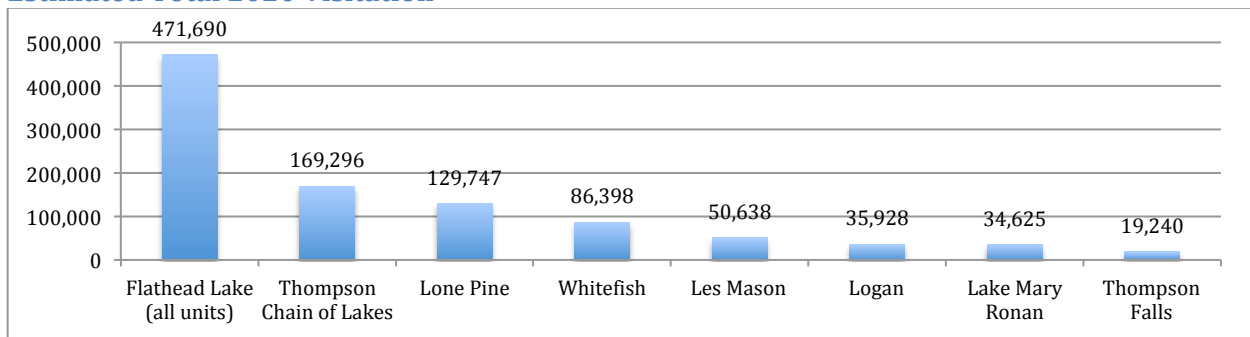
A look into the regions

A closer look at visitation for each state park reveals more information about what is occurring. What follows is a region-by-region look at the changes in visitation for 2020. A more detailed look at month-to-month data for each park is available upon request.

REGION 1

Region 1 experienced an estimated **29.6%** increase in its 2020 visitation as compared with last year. It is the only region that saw an increase at all of its state parks and it is the first year the Region played host to nearly 1,000,000 visitors. Flathead Lake alone, known for its beauty and access to camping and water recreation, saw an estimated 471,690 visitors across its six units in 2020, making it the most visited park in the state for 2020. Thompson Chain of Lakes also experienced a high level of growth in 2020, with an estimated 45,614 more visitors than last year.

Estimated Total 2020 Visitation



Region 1 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	Change	% Change
Lake Mary Ronan	23,086	34,625	11,539	50.0%
Les Mason	35,898	50,638	14,740	41.1%
Thompson Chain of Lakes	123,682	169,296	45,614	36.9%
Flathead Lake (all units)	354,826	471,690	116,864	32.9%
Thompson Falls	15,675	19,240	3,565	22.7%
Logan	30,050	35,928	5,878	19.6%
Whitefish	72,573	86,398	13,825	19.0%
Lone Pine	114,132	129,747	15,615	13.7%
	769,922	997,562	227,640	29.6%

It is also interesting to observe changes at the individual Flathead Lake units, as depicted below.

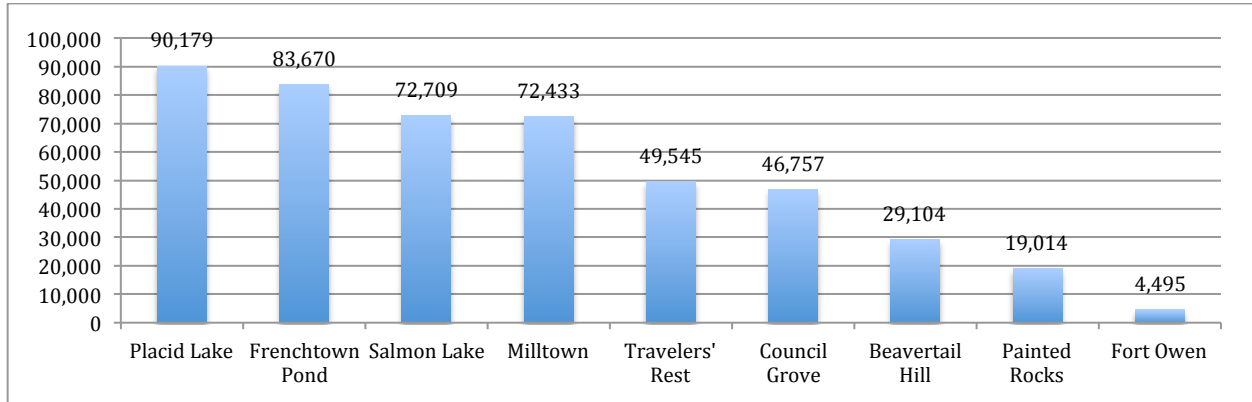
Flathead Lake Units	2019	2020	Change	% Change
FL-Finley Point	29,106	47,443	18,337	63.0%
FL-Big Arm	50,579	68,264	17,685	35.0%
FL-Wayfarers	196,434	262,402	65,968	33.6%
FL-West Shore	29,127	38,839	9,712	33.3%
FL-Yellow Bay	25,412	32,811	7,399	29.1%
FL-Wild Horse Island	24,168	21,931	-2,237	-9.3%
	354,826	471,690	116,864	32.9%

NOTE: Visitation data is not collected at FL- North Shore.

REGION 2

With an estimated **467,906** visitors, Region 2 experienced a **42.6%** increase in its 2020 visitation as compared with last year. It is the second largest rate of change of all regions. There was only one park that experienced a slight decline in visitation, which was Fort Owen. In part this is attributable to its temporary closure beginning in October due to construction. On the other hand, there was significant growth at Milltown, Frenchtown Pond, Council Grove, and Salmon and Placid Lakes.

Estimated Total 2020 Visitation



Region 2 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

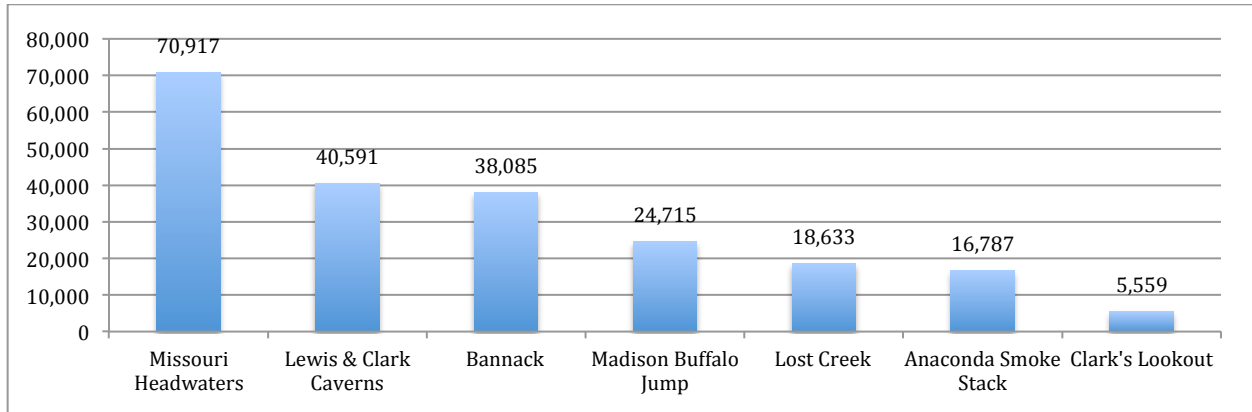
State Park	2019	2020	Change	% Change
Milltown	36,387	72,433	36,046	99.1%
Frenchtown Pond	51,272	83,670	32,398	63.2%
Painted Rocks	12,987	19,014	6,027	46.4%
Salmon Lake	50,754	72,709	21,955	43.3%
Placid Lake	67,695	90,179	22,484	33.2%
Beavertail Hill	22,201	29,104	6,903	31.1%
Council Grove	35,868	46,757	10,889	30.4%
Travelers' Rest	39,851	49,545	9,694	24.3%
Fort Owen	4,796	4,495	-301	-6.3%
Fish Creek	6,281	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	328,092	467,906	139,814	42.6%

NOTE: Visitation data at Fish Creek was not collected in 2020; Beavertail Hill is often seasonally closed; and, Fort Owen was temporarily closed beginning in October 2020 due to construction.

REGION 3

With an estimated **215,287** visitors, Region 3 experienced an **8.3%** decrease in its 2020 visitation as compared with last year. It is the only region that experienced a drop in its overall visitation, driven primarily by decreases at Lewis and Clark Caverns. Regrettably, COVID-19 prohibited staff from offering their normal levels of cave tours and programming. Visitation levels at Bannack were also impacted by the health pandemic.

Estimated Total 2020 Visitation



Region 3 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

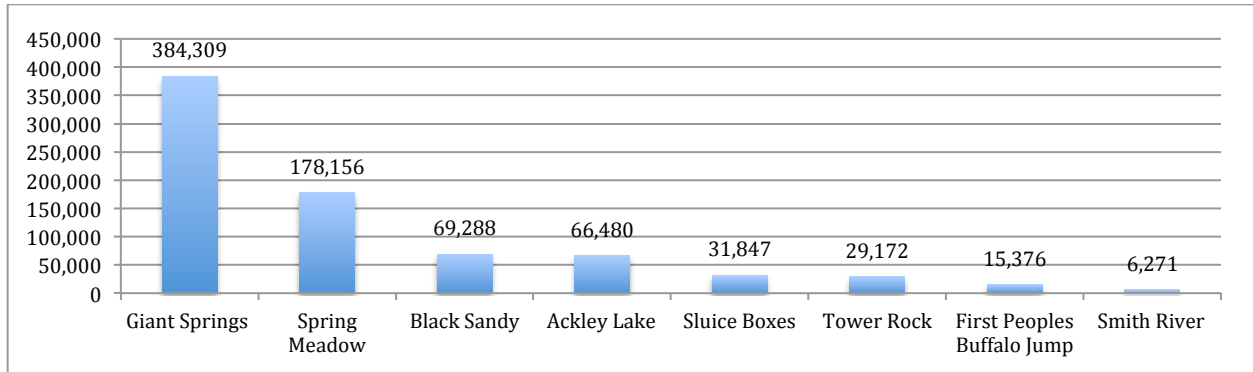
State Park	2019	2020	Change	% Change
Madison Buffalo Jump	15,649	24,715	9,066	57.9%
Missouri Headwaters	51,898	70,917	19,019	36.6%
Lost Creek	15,346	18,633	3,287	21.4%
Anaconda Smoke Stack	16,309	16,787	478	2.9%
Clark's Lookout	5,630	5,559	-71	-1.3%
Bannack	43,804	38,085	-5,719	-13.1%
Lewis & Clark Caverns	86,077	40,591	-45,486	-52.8%
	234,713	215,287	-19,426	-8.3%

NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Beaverhead Rock or Granite Ghost Town. Additionally, Clark's Lookout is typically seasonally closed; Bannack experienced a temporary closure due to COVID-19; and cave tour tickets were limited in 2020 at Lewis & Clark Caverns.

REGION 4

With an estimated **780,899** visitors, Region 4 experienced a **19.4%** increase in its 2020 visitation as compared with last year. The only park that experienced a slight decline in visitation was First Peoples' Buffalo Jump, whose programming typically attracts a large number of school field trips and group activities and was impacted negatively by COVID-19s. On the other hand, there was substantial net growth at Ackley Lake, Black Sandy and Spring Meadow this year.

Estimated Total 2020 Visitation



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Marias Rive or Elkhorn. Visitation data for the Smith River is captured using float logs and is not recorded during the winter months.

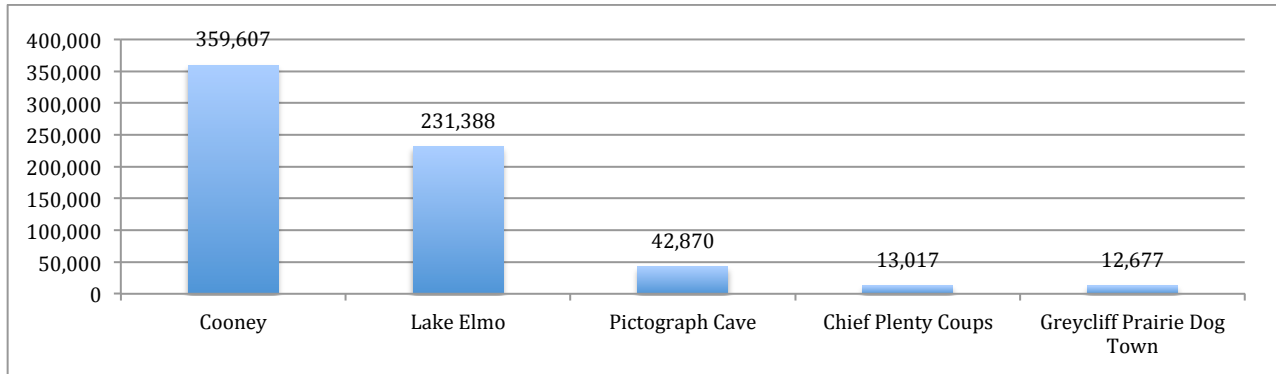
Region 4 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	Change	% Change
Ackley Lake	32,522	66,480	33,958	104.4%
Tower Rock	14,777	29,172	14,395	97.4%
Black Sandy	43,241	69,288	26,047	60.2%
Sluice Boxes	22,085	31,847	9,762	44.2%
Spring Meadow	134,992	178,156	43,164	32.0%
Smith River	6,097	6,271	174	2.9%
Giant Springs	384,023	384,309	286	0.1%
First Peoples Buffalo Jump	16,202	15,376	-826	-5.1%
	653,939	780,899	126,960	19.4%

REGION 5

Region 5 experienced a **50.5%** increase in its 2020 visitation over last year, with an increase to approximately **659,559** visitors. Growth was especially prominent at Cooney and Lake Elmo while COVID-19 unfortunately had negative impacts on visitation at Chief Plenty Coups and Pictograph Cave, parks that are known to attract a broad base of school field trips and group outings.

Estimated Total 2020 Visitation



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at the Yellowstone River while Greycliff Prairie Dog Town is typically seasonally closed.

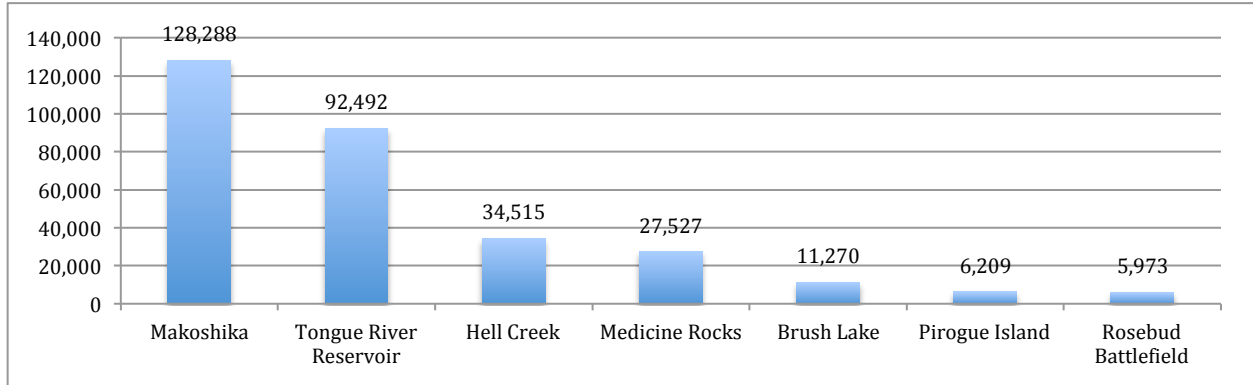
Region 5 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	Change	% Change
Cooney	175,870	359,607	183,737	104.5%
Lake Elmo	182,022	231,388	49,366	27.1%
Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	10,206	12,677	2,471	24.2%
Chief Plenty Coups	15,907	13,017	-2,890	-18.2%
Pictograph Cave	54,273	42,870	-11,403	-21.0%
	438,278	659,559	221,281	50.5%

REGIONS 6 and 7

With an estimated **306,274** visitors, Regions 6 and 7 experienced a **37.8%** increase in its 2020 visitation as compared with last year. With **84,031** more visitors than last year, net growth in the region was driven by gains at Tongue River Reservoir and Makoshika.

Estimated Total 2020 Visitation



NOTE: Visitation data is not collected at Brush Lake during the months of January thru April as it is closed for the season.

Regions 6 and 7 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	Change	% Change
Medicine Rocks	16,819	27,527	10,708	63.7%
Makoshika	85,272	128,288	43,016	50.4%
Tongue River Reservoir	64,504	92,492	27,988	43.4%
Pirogue Island	4,340	6,209	1,869	43.1%
Brush Lake	8,556	11,270	2,714	31.7%
Hell Creek	36,189	34,515	-1,674	-4.6%
Rosebud Battlefield	6,563	5,973	-590	-9.0%
	222,243	306,274	84,031	37.8%

ⁱ **Reporting notes:**

Visitation data is based on reported estimates from 45 of Montana's 55 state parks. In the earlier months of the year, some parks are seasonally closed. In several instances campgrounds were closed on/around March 21 due to the state's COVID-19 directive. Typically, most campgrounds do not open until May 1 with reservations beginning on May 15. While the system does experience some off-season camping, numbers are generally low.

Staff members are currently working with experts at the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) to gain assistance with revising its visitation methodology. Currently visitation data only includes estimates for visitors arriving by vehicle. Looking ahead, walk-in/bike-in visitors will be counted after this season. At several parks, there are a significant number of individuals that access the park in this manner.

For this report:

Region 1 includes Flathead Lake being counted as one park comprised of six units but does not include data for the FL-North Shore unit.

Region 2 does not include Fish Creek data for 2020.

Region 3 does not include data for Granite Ghost Town or Beaverhead Rock.

Region 4 does not include data for Elkhorn or the Marias River.

Region 5 does not include data for Yellowstone River.

Additionally there are typically seasonal closures at the following parks: Beavertail Hill (Region 2), Clark's Lookout (Region 3), the Smith River (Region 4), Greycliff Prairie Dog Town (Region 5), and Brush Lake (Region 6/7).

It should also be noted that at some parks, gates are seasonally closed to prohibit vehicles from entering but walk-in visitors are allowed. Last, there were temporary closures at Fort Owen (Region 2), Bannack (Region 3), and the Smith River (Region 4) in 2020.