

Visitation increases induced by Covid-19 are pushing Montana's state parks—already struggling with insufficient staff, limited infrastructure, and growing shoulder season attendance—to their breaking point.

BY TODD WILKINSON

# OVERWHELMED

**M**arina Yoshioka knew it would be a challenging day when she looked out the window of her office at Cooney State Park, 35 miles southwest of Billings. It was May 1, 2020, and the park manager was preparing for the season's first weekend of overnight camping. "I could see a line of vehicles with impatient people waiting to get in," Yoshioka says. "I would describe what followed as a morning of unpleasant chaos."

As she left her office, the 30-something state parks manager was confronted by a man furious that all the park's campsites were already occupied. "He pushed his fingers into my face and screamed obscenities that I will not repeat," Yoshioka says. Other visitors also were rude and insistent. Some honked, demanding to enter the park before the gates opened.

In the weeks that followed, behavior at Cooney pushed Yoshioka and her staff nearly to the breaking point. Daily and weekly attendance broke record after record, as people from nearby Billings and elsewhere fled Covid-19 confinement for the scenic reservoir-side park, nestled in the foothills of the Beartooth Mountains. Rowdy visitors tore down cedar fencing and used the wood to make campfires. Hooligans driving off-road tore up a sagebrush meadow. Drunk and sober visitors unwilling to wait in line relieved themselves outside vault latrines. "We dealt with human waste issues every day," Yoshioka says, wincing at the memory.

The state parks deluge happened elsewhere across the state too. Staff at the already overcrowded Wayfarers State Park on Flathead Lake reported daily visitation "unlike anything they'd ever seen before," says Dave Landstrom, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' northwestern region parks manager. Along Whitefish Lake, the single volunteer who staffs the popular Les Mason State Park worked from noon until well past dinnertime seven days a week, week after week, trying to manage unprecedented crowds. "Many of our people were

*Todd Wilkinson is a journalist in Bozeman and the author of Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek: An Intimate Portrait of 399, the Most Famous Bear of Greater Yellowstone.*



**IN THE THICK OF IT** Masked up as a Covid-19 precaution, Placid Lake State Park manager Ryan Sokoloski surveys the crowded beach during a midsummer weekend day. Like many state park staff, Sokoloski was caught unprepared for the visitation crush as pandemic-weary Montanans and tourists turned to nearby parks for outdoor recreation relief.

TOMMY MARTINO

working 16-hour days,” says Beth Shumate, head of the FWP Parks Division. “They had no relief. Some volunteers said they couldn’t take it anymore and left.”

Many visitors ignored “parking full” signs, illegally leaving their vehicles in barrow pits or along county roads. At Fish Creek State Park near Alberton, campers parked wherever they desired. They crushed vegetation with their tires, cut down trees for wood, and defecated along roadsides. Park manager Colin Maas closed one popular trail at Sluice Boxes State Park that was severely eroding, “but people walked right past the closure sign and used it anyway.”

In many state parks, tempers flared. At Lewis & Clark Caverns, employees had to turn away visitors after limiting cave tour group size to comply with new health guidelines. “One person told me we ruined their vacation,” says Julia Smit, a park ranger.



**OBSTRUCTION** Cooney State Park manager Marina Yoshioka pleads with a driver at Cooney State Park near Billings to abide by parking regulations during a weekend rush. Covid-19-related stress and months of indoors isolation this past summer seemed to bring out the worst in some visitors.

### THE OUTDOORS ESCAPE

What accounts for the visitation onslaught? FWP officials point to huge numbers of homebound Montanans who heeded advice to social distance in the great outdoors. With national parks and federal campgrounds shuttered early in the season, state parks absorbed the full brunt, only to see pressure intensify as summer wore on. What’s more, summertime youth sports events were canceled, driving even more families to nearby parks for convenient, low-cost outdoor recreation. “Last year [2019] broke all records for state parks attendance, and January through June of this year was 25 percent higher than that,” Shumate says.

Not all parks reported increases, and

Sluice Boxes, Cooney, Madison Buffalo Jump, Missouri Headwaters, Milltown, Ackley Lake, and Makoshika. “If it was within a half-hour drive from town, people went there in droves,” says Shumate.

Adding to the frustration for staff were new sanitation requirements to comply with state Covid-19 guidelines. Each day park employees and volunteers wearing plastic suits and masks spent hours disinfecting countertops, handrails, restrooms, and pit latrines in addition to their regular maintenance and customer service duties.

There was something else, too. Perhaps

rules,” Shumate says.

Despite the problems, Shumate is quick to note that the vast majority of visitors behaved themselves. “And it was great to see more people enjoying their state parks,” she adds. “It’s just that we didn’t have the capacity to absorb the increase.”

### DECADES OF SHORTAGES

Montana’s state parks, each a source of pride and commerce for local communities, were already struggling from decades of insufficient staff and funding. In *Great Escapes: Montana’s State Parks*, published in 1988, former FWP Parks Division administrator Don Hyypa lamented that “the number of state parks and the amount of use they receive by Montanans and their guests have outpaced our ability to properly manage them.” A 2019 *Montana Outdoors* article (“Behind the Curtain”) documented how park visitation had risen by more than 50 percent since 2008 while funding barely increased and staffing remained flat. At the time, just 98 employees covered the entire state and managed 2.5 million annual visits.

In that article, Montana State Parks and Recreation Board chair Angie Grove pointed out that, lacking sufficient paid staff, far too



**LINED UP** Top: At Milltown State Park near Missoula, a parking area recently upgraded to accommodate 200 vehicles was hit with up to 500 on weekend days as innertubers arrived to float the Clark Fork River. Left: FWP’s Brett Zarling scrubs the floors in a bathroom at Placid Lake State Park.



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: JOHN WARNER; TOMMY MARTINO

growth of spring and fall “shoulder season” visitation. “It used to be that Memorial Day and Labor Day were the start and end of people going to state parks,” Shumate says. “Now they are coming in March and April and in September and October. We don’t have staff to accommodate that.”

### STILL WORKING AT MIDNIGHT

On an early Saturday morning in August, I meet a fatigued Ryan Sokoloski at Placid Lake State Park 30 miles northeast of Missoula. Standing on a rickety dock in need of repair, we watch several kids fish for bass. A long line of SUVs pulling boat trailers is backed up waiting to unload at the ramp. By noon, the campground is full, with some sites packed with a dozen or more people where only eight are allowed. At the park’s perimeter, vehicles that can’t find space

many parks relied on volunteers who couldn’t be asked to handle medical emergencies, deal with campground conflicts, or write resource-management plans. “We can’t continue to expect volunteers to make

up for those shortages,” she said. Each year, the hours that volunteers contribute equal that of 20 full-time staff.

Adding to the burden facing state parks managers over the past decade has been the

“Many of our staff were working 16-hour days. They had no relief. Some volunteers said they couldn’t take it anymore and left.”

some even saw slightly fewer visitors due to the sharp decline in school groups, field trips, and interpretive program presentations. But nearly 80 percent of Montana’s 55 state parks, especially those near cities, saw increased visitation over last year, including Flathead Lake, Salmon Lake, Placid Lake,

due to Covid-19-related stress, many visitors acted belligerently, leaving employees feeling threatened and vulnerable. “During weekends, some parks with just one or two staff were dealing with hundreds and in some cases a thousand or more people, many of them angry and unwilling to follow

inside illegally leave their vehicle on the shoulder of a county road. Meanwhile, visitors crowd around the park's official "office"—an entrance station barely bigger than a phone booth—which serves as a fee-collection post, home base for the park ranger and groundskeeper, staging area for the two campground volunteers, and campground reservation center. Two people can barely fit inside.

Sokoloski points to a particularly vexing problem this summer: an increase in people camping on nearby national forest and other recreation lands who drive to the park to use the bathrooms and dump their garbage.

Like other state parks staff, Sokoloski isn't comfortable complaining about this year's crush of visitors and his lack of staff to manage the increase. "Complaining isn't in our DNA," he says. "We want our guests to have a great time. We're about solving problems."

Lacking bodies to help meet the growing need, however, requires Sokoloski to ask even more of himself. As of this afternoon, the park manager tells me, he hasn't had a completely work-free day off in 90 days. "Many nights I'm out here after dark, when most of our guests are finally asleep, checking the water system or lighting. It's the only time I have available," Sokoloski says.

### A SYSTEM IN TROUBLE

Chris Smith, retired FWP chief of staff who serves on the board of the Montana State Parks Foundation, believes that park employees' selfless commitment, while admirable, may actually add to the problem. Dedicated managers and volunteers continue to find ways to consistently deliver services "but without the funding and staffing they so desperately need," he says. Now, with employees burned out and the toll of deferred maintenance like failing sewage and electrical systems raising safety and health issues, a reckoning has arrived. "Montana's state park system has never faced a challenge like the one it's seeing right now," Smith says.

What does that system require? As has been the case for years, state parks' greatest necessity is sufficient resources to serve the hundreds of thousands of people who visit each year to have fun and learn about Montana's storied past and diverse cultures. "We'll definitely have to continue reexamining staffing needs to address the visitation issue, which isn't going away," Grove says.

Another vital need: additional funding to fix ailing water systems, sewers, electrical lines, RV dumping stations, docks, roads, and other infrastructure. "Infrastructure is such a challenge, because there's so much of it that



### CONSTANT CRUSH

Far left: Park ranger Ben Dickinson checks day-use fee packets at Milltown State Park. Left: A few hours later, Dickinson takes a break from cleaning bathrooms at Frenchtown Pond State Park. Below: Marina Yoshioka ends a long day in her office at Cooney State Park. "Nobody should have to put up with what we faced this year," she says.

people don't see. But it's necessary and it's expensive," Grove says. She notes that updating an old, leaking sewer system at a single park can cost \$1 million.

There's hope the appeals will be heard. Shumate points out that state lawmakers in 2019 were receptive to requests for infrastructure maintenance funding. "We were grateful to secure \$2 million last session and are making a similar request for 2021," she says.

Based on trends, Grove and Shumate say they don't think 2020 is a one-off year. Park attendance, especially during the off-

seasons, has been growing for years. Now that thousands of additional people have seen the wonders of Montana's state parks for the first time, many will no doubt return.

That's something Yoshioka doesn't want to think about right now. Back at Cooney, the park manager is weighing her options.

She remains committed to public service and enjoys seeing people find joy and restoration in the natural world. But this past season has taken its toll.

"I love Montana and I love our parks, but nobody should have to put up with the abuse and challenges we faced this year," Yoshioka

says. "The most valuable assets of our parks, besides the special settings, are the people who commit themselves to doing a great job, often under very troubling circumstances. But we need help. And if we don't get it, good employees will leave and the parks will be even worse off." 🐾

## Game wardens and fishing access site crews catch their breath

State parks staff aren't the only FWP employees reeling from the recent outdoor recreation boom. Dave Loewen, chief of the agency's Enforcement Division, says that because state parks staff aren't authorized to handle illegal parking, vandalism, disorderly conduct, and other criminal behavior, they have had to call on game wardens to help. "We beefed up high-profile patrols so that people at the parks and fishing access sites could see our wardens out there, which helps keep violations down," Loewen says. "All that came on top of our regular enforcement duties, so it definitely was a challenge keeping up."

Dustin Ramoie, who manages FWP's Fishing Access Site (FAS) Program, says his field crews report spring and summer usage up 30 to 50 percent from previous years. "Demand for these sites has been through the roof," he says of the 339 water recreation sites across the state.

On the front lines were FAS crews cleaning pit latrines, picking up trash, and maintaining properties. "We have such a dedicated staff, and fortunately not one has gotten Covid-19, even though they are in those latrines every single day, hour after hour," says Ramoie.

Though visitation at some state parks and fishing access sites slowed down after kids headed back to school in September, Loewen predicts another upsurge once hunting season begins. "And I don't see any letup next year, either" he adds. "We've recruited all these new visitors to our sites, and I expect many will be back." ■



**NO VACANCY** Vehicles fill every space at the Wolf Creek Bridge Fishing Access Site on the Missouri River. "I don't expect any letup next year, either," says Dave Loewen, FWP Enforcement Division chief.



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: TOMMY MARTINO; TOMMY MARTINO; JOHN WARNER; MONTANA FWP