



# MONTANA STATE PARKS NEWSLETTER

## SUMMER 2020

### **PARKS DIVISION UPDATES 2015-20 STRATEGIC PLAN**

In spite of being one of the busiest visitation years on record, the Parks Division is undertaking a significant effort, in collaboration with several other FWP staff, to update its strategic plan, Charting a New Tomorrow.

Earlier this year, Parks set up a Strategic Plan Advisory Committee comprised of a blend of both staff representing the Division from across the state, as well as staff from other FWP Divisions.

“With the high level of importance of this effort, and the many ways our work crosses over to so many parts of the agency, we very purposefully sought to convene a panel of in-house experts who can bring to bear valuable input and share their perspectives and diverse voices with us,” said Beth Shumate, Parks Division Administrator.

With facilitation assistance from RMU’s Deb O’Neill, staff and the Advisory Committee have been reviewing recent planning documents and reports (see list below), since each have either directly guided the division’s work, or had some impact on how current and future priorities can be established.





Brush Lake State Park

- FWP's Vision and Guide, 2016-2026
- A New Day for Montana State Parks (issued by the Parks in Focus Commission), December 2018
- Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), 2020-2024
- Montana State Parks' Heritage Resources Plan, 2017-2024
- Legislative Performance Audit recommendations, issued in April 2018

Additionally, the Division organized a 12-member Strategic Plan Sounding Board, which primarily consists of a broader group of key partners, representing a variety of sectors, issues, and ideas that play an important role in state park work and outdoor recreation

management topics - tourism, education, historic preservation, and Indian Country affairs, as a few examples.

The 2021 Action Plan will serve as a road map, enumerating specific actions and goals that Parks can begin to work on, or continue to undertake, for the forthcoming two years. Future action plans are being envisioned to occur on a two-year cycle, thereby aligning the division's planning efforts with the legislative cycle.

Many factors are being considered when thinking about all that the Parks division can do as it seeks to rebuild. And, with COVID inspiring a significant spike in the amount of people turning to the outdoors, never before has the need for Montana having a strong and resilient state park system been more important. While funding and capacity have, and

may continue to be, long-term needs, there are also a number of successes to highlight, especially recently.

The current plan is set to expire at the end of this year. As such, staff will issue a draft action plan for public comment in September, with final delivery set to take place in advance of the 2021 legislative session.

For questions about this effort, or for more information, feel free to contact Kyan Bishop, Parks and Recreation Planner, at [Kyan.Bishop@mt.gov](mailto:Kyan.Bishop@mt.gov).



## LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND UPDATE

The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) was passed by the United States Congress and signed into law by President Donald Trump on August 4. This landmark conservation legislation has two major components: permanently and fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900 million per year and creates the National Park and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund that will provide \$9.5 billion over the next five years to address deferred maintenance at national parks, wildlife refuges, forests, and other federal lands, with \$6.5 billion earmarked specifically to the 419 national park units.

“This is a tremendous outcome for communities across the country that benefit from the economic, cultural and recreational value of America’s public lands and facilities,” said Lewis Ledford, executive director the of the National Association of State Park Directors.

LWCF has two parts, the “state-side” which funds state and local projects, and the “federal-side” which funds federal land purchases. The Parks Division administers only the “state-side,” the state and local portion of LWCF. The vast majority of the “state-side funding gets allocated to municipalities, counties, tribes and NGO’s across Montana and is a key funding source for critical recreation infrastructure, especially in rural communities. Early estimates are that Montana will see a 50% increase in available annual LWCF allocation. It will be exciting to see this increase in funding turn into exciting projects across Montana.

For More information on the Great American Outdoors Act:

<https://www.stateparks.org/news-events/press-releases-and-media/great-american-outdoors-act-preserves-nations-natural-heritage/>

## STATE PARKS COVID-19 PUBLIC RELATIONS PARTNERSHIP

As impacts of visitation due to COVID-19 began to significantly impact State Parks across Montana, the Parks Division partnered with the Montana State Parks Foundation on six weeks of online, radio, social media, and email advertising that focused on socially responsible recreation. The campaign centered around practicing socially responsible behavior, social distancing while recreating, and following Leave No Trace Principles, including packing out your waste. This messaging was hitting on themes that remained constant and would withstand the rapidly changing situation across the state. Additionally, the campaign spoke to the lengths that State Park staff were taking to keep sites open as well as the partnerships that were aiding in this effort.

The Montana State Parks Foundation used this outreach opportunity to not only encourage people to recreate responsibly but also launch their branded COVID-19 masks. For each Montana State Parks Foundation mask that is sold, they donate one back to State Parks staff. To date, masks have been distributed to R1 & R3 with more regions on the way. The campaign, through all mediums, reached over 1.1 million people and was a great example of our strong partnership with the Montana State Parks Foundation.

Online Ad from the COVID Campaign:

<https://www.ktvh.com/brand-spotlight/montana-state-parks/lets-be-socially-responsible-in-all-55-of-montanas-state-parks>



*Black Sandy State Park*



*Finley Point State Park*



*Tongue River State Park*

## PARKS RESPOND TO CLOSURES BY MOVING EDUCATION & INTERPRETATION ONLINE

State Parks pride themselves on education and interpretation. These efforts go a long way in explaining the significance of the sites they manage as well as making them relevant to visitors. In a typical winter, Parks staff and AmeriCorps Members are busy creating programming and events for the upcoming season. In the late winter of 2020, reality set in that this was not going to be a normal year for interpretation and that a more innovative approach was going to be needed for educational offerings in spring and summer.

As COVID-19 locked down the state, the question came up as to how to deliver virtual interpretation across the state in the face of travel limitations and Visitor Center closures. To address this need, a group was formed that consisted of Park Managers, Park Rangers, AmeriCorps Members, and State Parks Marketing and Communications staff. The group came up with a statewide collaborative social media takeover that would allow would-be park visitors to explore the wide variety of offerings at state parks across Montana without leaving their homes, while potentially increasing interest in lesser-known or more rural state parks and increasing future tourism.

For eight weeks, 16 different Montana State Parks held 40 “takeovers” of the main Montana State Parks social media channels. Each week, a single topic was selected for different State Parks to build content around. Topics were chosen that were relevant across the State Park system and that each park could develop unique content to as the topic pertained to their park.

Staff voted on weekly topics, then selected parks that best represented

# SOCIAL MEDIA TAKEOVER



## INSIGHT ANALYSIS

### 360K

unique individuals  
interacted with the  
content posted  
during the Social  
Media Takeover

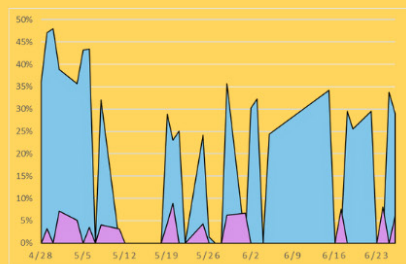


## INTERACTIONS

### 8

topics covered:  
Geology, Park Lore,  
Pollinators, Mammals, Native  
Plants, Things That Go Bump,  
Recreation, History

## ENGAGEMENT



Facebook

Instagram

### 31%

average engagement from Facebook  
users with video content

### 6%

average engagement from  
Instagram users with photo content

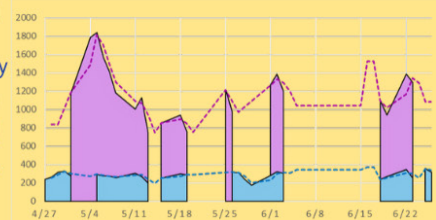
## STORY VIEWS

### 1,185

average views of an Instagram story

### 285

average views of a Facebook story



## AUDIENCE



### 8.7%

increase in Facebook Likes from  
April 26-June 28 (2196 people)

### 3.9%

increase in Instagram Followers  
from April 26-June 28 (1026 people)

## THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING!

Look out for State Parks Social Media Takeovers in the future!





Ackley Lake State Park

those topics through Survey Monkey polls. Early planning included conference calls to determine the structure of the social media takeovers and a discussion of the guidelines.

Over the course of the eight-week campaign, our content reached over 163,000 people while increasing our social channels engagement levels and likes. The content reached new audiences across Montana and the country and raised the awareness of State Parks. Stay tuned for a variation of the takeover in 2021!

#### Complete Park and Feature List:

- Bannack State Park: Park Lore, Things That Go Bump, History
- Chief Plenty Coups State Park: Park Lore, History
- First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park: Park Lore, Mammals, Native Plants, History
- Flathead Lake State Park-Wayfarers: Geology, Park Lore, Recreation
- Flathead Lake State Park -Wild Horse Island: Mammals
- Giant Springs State Park: Geology, Pollinators, Native Plants, Things That Go Bump, Recreation
- Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park: Geology, Lore, Mammals, Bump
- Lone Pine State Park: Pollinators, Native Plants, Recreation
- Makoshika State Park: Pollinators, Things That Go Bump, Recreation
- Medicine Rocks State Park: Geology
- Milltown State Park: Native Plants, History
- Missouri Headwaters State Park: Pollinators
- Greycliff Prairie Dog Town State Park: Mammals
- Sluice Boxes State Park: Geology
- Smith River State Park: Recreation
- Travelers' Rest State Park: Pollinators, Mammals, Native Plants, History

#### Takeover Video Content:

##### Facebook Video Playlist:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?list=PLO2FXZaNUj9Qc99Lv8ACCF9TRKYKq4nVD>

##### YouTube Video Playlist:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLO2FXZaNUj9Qc99Lv8ACCF9TRKYKq4nVD>





Madison Buffalo Jump State Park

## A MIDYEAR UPDATE ON STATE PARK VISITATION

As we look back on the first half of 2020, it has become evident that COVID-19 has pushed many individuals and families outdoors, and during this unprecedented time, public land use has seen exponential growth. In light of the State Park Division's vision of fostering recreational access and opportunity for all, it's encouraging to observe an influx of people finding solace and enjoyment outdoors.

There are a number of factors that impact a park's visitation - weather and outdoor conditions, nearby events, local news, and of course what is top of mind for many in 2020 -- COVID-19. Other mechanisms that can have an impact on the accuracy of visitation reporting, such as the condition and functionality of visitation devices utilized in the field, the applicability of a system's visitation methodology to each park's situation

can come into play. State Park staff members do their best to minimize such factors, striving toward accuracy in the system's reporting practice.

A look at the visitation data collected for the first half of this year, and how it compares with the same time period last year, reveals a number of significant trends.

- It is estimated that there were 1.412 million visitors between January and June of 2020. This represents a 25.4% increase compared with the same time period last year.
- For 79.1% of state parks, visitation increased during the first half of 2020 compared with the same time period last year.
- There was a spike in visitation across the system that was highly visible in the months of February, March and April, with some leveling in May. February was a relatively warm

month which enabled some parks to open earlier than usual, and for visitors to recreate comfortably outdoors. The COVID-19 pandemic was likely a key factor behind increases in the following months.

- Each state park region has experienced a relatively consistent change in their visitation when comparing this year's trends to last year's.

What does statewide visitation look like for the first half of this year compared with 2019?

The below table depicts overall year to date visitation for 2019 and 2020. Between January and June, total state park visitation increased by 25.4% when compared with the same time period last year. The spike in visitation across the system is highly visible in the months of February, March and April, with some leveling in May.

How has visitation changed between 2019 and 2020 for each state park?

### STATEWIDE VISITATION — First half of this year compared with 2019

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	YTD TOTAL
<b>2019</b>	72,608	53,884	94,648	146,589	284,340	474,364	1,126,433
<b>2020</b>	92,121	83,506	151,911	224,062	396,508	464,823	1,412,931
<b>% Change</b>	26.9%	55.0%	60.5%	52.9%	39.4%	-2.0%	25.4%

Between the months of January and June visitation has increased for 79.1% of state parks in 2020 in comparison with last year. Some have experienced explosive growth during 2020, even with the absence or sharp decline in school groups, field trips, and other group activities that normatively would take place at parks.

Stay Tuned for the full midyear State Parks visitation report, which will be sent out to staff, and be listed online, in the coming weeks.

NOTES: Visitation data is based on reported estimates from 46 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.

In the 2020 season, Montana State Park managers and staff will be installing new visitation counters to gain a better understanding of overall statewide visitation. This will fill gaps at entrances where currently there are no devices, or where there may be mechanical issues with existing counters that leads to some degree of miscounting. These new devices will represent an increase in park entrance coverage from about 37% to 90%.

Staff members are also 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.

REGION	STATE PARK	JAN TO JUNE 2019	JAN TO JUNE 2020	% CHANGE
4	Giant Springs	186,605	199,774	7.10%
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	123,140	159,640	29.60%
5	Cooney Reservoir	106,995	149,650	39.90%
5	Lake Elmo	80,147	120,747	50.70%
4	Spring Meadow	61,506	79,659	29.50%
1	Lone Pine	52,443	67,594	28.90%
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	42,887	60,154	40.30%
6/7	Makoshika	36,713	58,470	59.30%
4	Ackley Lake	12,977	33,217	156.00%
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	31,568	30,732	-2.60%
2	Frenchtown Pond	26,831	30,149	12.40%
3	Missouri Headwaters	17,679	29,541	67.10%
4	Black Sandy	19,614	28,779	46.70%
1	Whitefish	28,082	28,732	2.30%
2	Placid Lake	19,450	26,193	34.70%
2	Milltown	16,201	25,712	58.70%
2	Salmon Lake	17,415	24,274	39.40%
5	Pictograph Cave	26,585	22,083	-16.90%
2	Council Grove	16,715	21,652	29.50%
2	Travelers' Rest	19,872	21,035	5.90%
6/7	Hell Creek	15,092	16,141	7.00%
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	33,408	15,761	-52.80%
1	Lake Mary Ronan	11,293	15,320	35.70%
4	Sluice Boxes	9,326	14,997	60.80%
4	Tower Rock	5,171	14,090	172.50%
1	Logan	10,835	12,791	18.10%
1	Les Mason	8,236	12,518	52.00%
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	7,382	12,103	64.00%
6/7	Medicine Rocks	7,227	11,346	57.00%
3	Bannack	14,173	9,071	-36.00%
2	Beavertail Hill	8,017	8,960	11.80%
2	Painted Rocks	3,972	6,841	72.20%
1	Thompson Falls	5,214	5,713	9.60%
5	Chief Plenty Coups	7,025	5,491	-21.80%
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	7,218	5,343	-26.00%
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	4,475	5,260	17.50%
3	Lost Creek	4,396	5,013	14.00%
4	Smith River	4,427	4,417	-0.20%
6/7	Brush Lake	2,125	2,770	30.40%
6/7	Pirogue Island	1,373	2,565	86.80%
2	Fort Owen	2,149	2,310	7.50%
6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	3,529	1,871	-47.00%
3	Clark's Lookout	2,015	1,531	-24.00%
Flathead Lake	FL-Finley Point	6,938	16,770	141.7%
	FL-Yellow Bay	7,843	10,627	35.5%
	FL-Wayfarers	73,647	92,556	25.7%
	FL-Big Arm	16,953	21,226	25.2%
	FL-West Shore	12,588	14,767	17.3%
	FL-Wild Horse Island	5,171	3,694	-28.6%



## ALL NEW STATE PARK PHOTO CONTENT COMING SOON!

Over the last year, Marketing & Communications Staff have been working with partner organizations from the tourism industry on creating all new photo assets for the State Park system. It's been over five years (and in some cases way longer) since many of our parks had a new batch of images that they can use for marketing, online promotion, social media content, and their park landing pages. By the end of August, we will have high-resolution imagery for each park! Imagery includes people camping, recreating, landscape shots, aerial (drone) imagery, and visitor centers amongst others. This project was many years in the making and much of the thanks goes to our partners in the tourism industry. In all, we will have over 1,000 new images that will show off the incredible assets that we manage across Montana!

## STATE PARKS DIVISION MEETING UPDATE

It seems like a lifetime ago that we postponed the State Parks Division Meeting in Red Lodge. The next opportunity to have all Parks staff meet in person would be in the winter of 2021, which coincides with the next legislative session. There was brief discussion about having staff meet this Fall, but that falls in a time where field staff are usually taking much needed time off after a chaotic summer as well as Hunting season getting underway. Therefore, we will all plan on meeting, in Red Lodge, at Rock Creek Resort, in the Spring of 2022. A huge THANK YOU to Parks Staff who served on various planning committees throughout this process and the expertise that they provided!

**SEE YOU IN 2022!**



*Medicine Rocks State Park*



MONTANA FWP