



MONTANA FWP

2020 Montana State Parks Midyear Visitation Update

Issued September 2020

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 - the novel Coronavirus. There are of course also 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, and even some basic human error, albeit unintended. Just as all park systems do, Montana state park staff members do their best to minimize such factors, striving toward accuracy in their reporting practice.

The forthcoming summary has been developed utilizing reported numbers by park managers for 2019 and 2020. The system's visitation methodology and reporting practices did not substantially change during this time. However, it is noteworthy to mention that in recent months system staff members have begun undertaking a very significant look at ways to improve accuracy. Looking ahead, the system will also be adding new vehicle and trail counters to park entrances where there have not been, and replacing existing devices that are no longer reliably functioning.

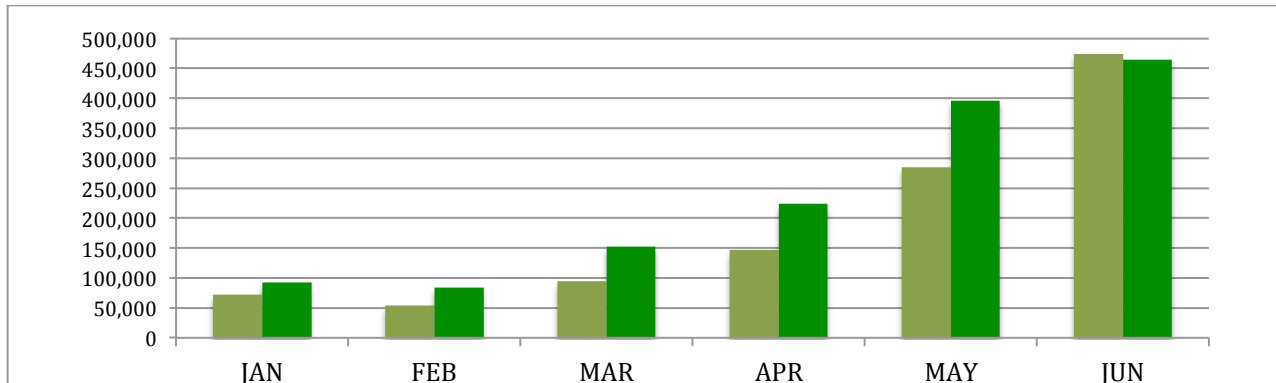
Some key observations for the first half of 2020 include:

- It is estimated 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.
- The **top 10** parks that experienced the **highest visitation levels** during the first half of 2020 are noted below. All but one experienced an increase over last year's visitation estimates.

State Park	Jan-June 2019	Jan-June 2020	% Change
Giant Springs	186,605	199,774	7.1%
Flathead Lake (all units)	123,140	159,640	29.6%
Cooney Reservoir	106,995	149,650	39.9%
Lake Elmo	80,147	120,747	50.7%
Spring Meadow	61,506	79,659	29.5%
Lone Pine	52,443	67,594	28.9%
Thompson Chain of Lakes	42,887	60,154	40.3%
Makoshika	36,713	58,470	59.3%
Ackley Lake	12,977	33,217	156.0%
Tongue River Reservoir	31,568	30,732	-2.6%

2019 versus 2020 total visitation

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. Please see other reporting notes at the end of this summary.¹



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

A region-by-region glimpse

Another way to look at the data is to see what has been reported across each state park region in terms of total visitation for January-June in 2019 versus that of 2020. Interestingly the regions have each experienced relatively consistent trend patterns from year to year.

Of note is the dip in Region 3. This can likely be attributable to the sharp decline in tour offerings at Lewis and Clark Caverns due to COVID-19. In that park alone, visitation dropped **52.1%** between January and June when comparing 2019 and 2020. Contributing to the decline in that region was likely the temporary closure of Bannack, also due to COVID-19.

It should also be noted that in Region 4 the Smith River was temporarily closed in the 2020 season between April 1 and 12 due to ice, and then again through May 12 due to COVID-19 concerns. Typically during that period there are several hundred floaters.

Region	# Parks reporting	2019 Total	% Of Total Statewide	2020 Total	% Of Total Statewide
1	*8	282,130	25.0%	362,462	25.7%
2	10	132,029	11.7%	167,126	11.8%
3	7	83,528	7.4%	78,280	5.5%
4	8	306,844	27.2%	380,276	26.9%
5	5	224,275	19.9%	300,892	21.3%
6/7	7	97,627	8.7%	123,895	8.8%
TOTAL		1,126,433		1,412,931	

* Includes Flathead Lake being counted as one park, comprised of 6 units

2020 Year to Date Visitation (January - June)

Parks sorted by highest total 2020 visitation

Parks Region	State Park	2019	2020	% Change
4	Giant Springs	186,605	199,774	7.1%
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	123,140	159,640	29.6%
5	Cooney Reservoir	106,995	149,650	39.9%
5	Lake Elmo	80,147	120,747	50.7%
4	Spring Meadow	61,506	79,659	29.5%
1	Lone Pine	52,443	67,594	28.9%
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	42,887	60,154	40.3%
6/7	Makoshika	36,713	58,470	59.3%
4	Ackley Lake	12,977	33,217	156.0%
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	31,568	30,732	-2.6%
2	Frenchtown Pond	26,831	30,149	12.4%
3	Missouri Headwaters	17,679	29,541	67.1%
4	Black Sandy	19,614	28,779	46.7%
1	Whitefish	28,082	28,732	2.3%
2	Placid Lake	19,450	26,193	34.7%
2	Milltown	16,201	25,712	58.7%
2	Salmon Lake	17,415	24,274	39.4%
5	Pictograph Cave	26,585	22,083	-16.9%
2	Council Grove	16,715	21,652	29.5%
2	Travelers' Rest	19,872	21,035	5.9%
6/7	Hell Creek	15,092	16,141	7.0%
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	33,408	15,761	-52.8%
1	Lake Mary Ronan	11,293	15,320	35.7%
4	Sluice Boxes	9,326	14,997	60.8%
4	Tower Rock	5,171	14,090	172.5%
1	Logan	10,835	12,791	18.1%
1	Les Mason	8,236	12,518	52.0%
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	7,382	12,103	64.0%
6/7	Medicine Rocks	7,227	11,346	57.0%
3	Bannack	14,173	9,071	-36.0%
2	Beavertail Hill	8,017	8,960	11.8%
2	Painted Rocks	3,972	6,841	72.2%
1	Thompson Falls	5,214	5,713	9.6%
5	Chief Plenty Coups	7,025	5,491	-21.8%
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	7,218	5,343	-26.0%
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	4,475	5,260	17.5%
3	Lost Creek	4,396	5,013	14.0%
4	Smith River	4,427	4,417	-0.2%
6/7	Brush Lake	2,125	2,770	30.4%
6/7	Pirogue Island	1,373	2,565	86.8%
2	Fort Owen	2,149	2,310	7.5%
6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	3,529	1,871	-47.0%
3	Clark's Lookout	2,015	1,531	-24.0%

How has state park visitation changed between 2019 and 2020?

Visitation at state parks between the months of January and June 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.

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

Parks Region	State Park	2019	2020	% Change
4	Tower Rock	5,171	14,090	172.5%
4	Ackley Lake	12,977	33,217	156.0%
6/7	Pirogue Island	1,373	2,565	86.8%
2	Painted Rocks	3,972	6,841	72.2%
3	Missouri Headwaters	17,679	29,541	67.1%
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6/7	Brush Lake	2,125	2,770	30.4%
1	*Flathead Lake (all units)	123,140	159,640	29.6%
2	Council Grove	16,715	21,652	29.5%
4	Spring Meadow	61,506	79,659	29.5%
1	Lone Pine	52,443	67,594	28.9%
1	Logan	10,835	12,791	18.1%
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	4,475	5,260	17.5%
3	Lost Creek	4,396	5,013	14.0%
2	Frenchtown Pond	26,831	30,149	12.4%
2	Beavertail Hill	8,017	8,960	11.8%
1	Thompson Falls	5,214	5,713	9.6%
2	Fort Owen	2,149	2,310	7.5%
4	Giant Springs	186,605	199,774	7.1%
6/7	Hell Creek	15,092	16,141	7.0%
2	Travelers' Rest	19,872	21,035	5.9%
1	Whitefish	28,082	28,732	2.3%
4	Smith River	4,427	4,417	-0.2%
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	31,568	30,732	-2.6%
5	Pictograph Cave	26,585	22,083	-16.9%
5	Chief Plenty Coups	7,025	5,491	-21.8%

3	Clark's Lookout	2,015	1,531	-24.0%
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	7,218	5,343	-26.0%
3	Bannack	14,173	9,071	-36.0%
6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	3,529	1,871	-47.0%
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	33,408	15,761	-52.8%

**Flathead Lake units (Region 1)*

Park	2019	2020	% Change
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%

A look into the regions

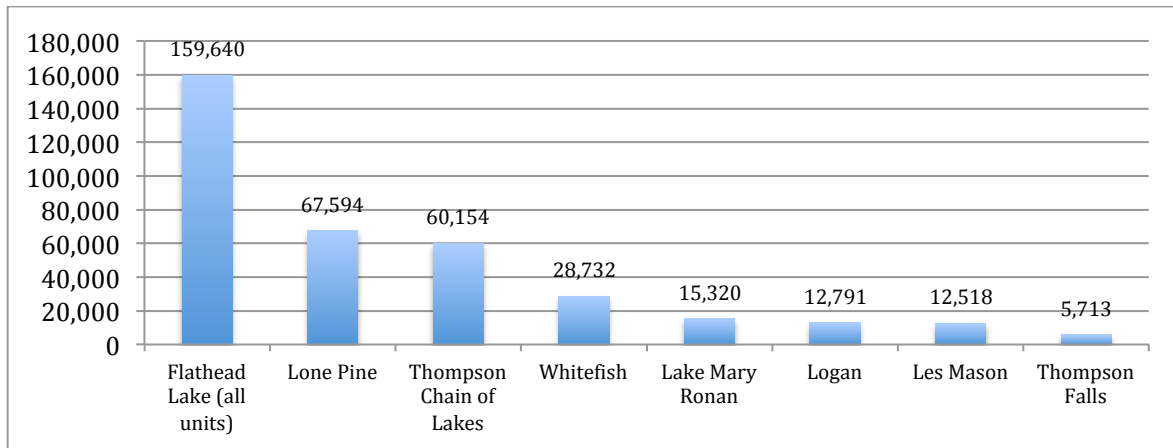
A closer look at visitation for each state park reveals more information about what is occurring. What follows is a region-by-region look at the changes in visitation between January and June for 2020 compared with last year during the same time period. A more detailed look at month-to-month data for each park is available upon request.

REGION 1

Region 1 experienced a **28.5%** increase in total visitation for the first half of this year as compared with last year. It is one of two regions that saw an increase at all sites. Camping in the region has been heavy, as has been day use. There were many times when parks needed to turn away visitors because parking lots and campgrounds were full, and the fear of overcrowding became a true concern. On hot, sunny days, volunteers were utilized to simply help visitors park cars. As with other years, there was spillover to several sites due to their proximity to Glacier National Park; however, this year such activity became extremely significant for adjacent state parks with the eastern portion of Glacier being closed and visitors being displaced to the western side.

- The **Flathead Lake** units almost all saw a substantial increase in visitation in 2020 when compared with last year. It was the state's second most visited park in 2020 and it experienced an overall 29.6% rise in visitors.
- **Les Mason**, a small park outside of Whitefish, continued to grow in popularity with overflow parking occurring on just about every sunny day. Though small in size, its visitation grew 52.0% in 2020 over last year's numbers.
- Another key driver for the region was the **Thompson Chain of Lakes**, which grew an estimated 40.3% in visitation during the reporting period. The park's water access and opportunities for camping were enjoyed by many out-of-state residents and locals, at times to the displeasure of local residents claiming they were unable to procure a campsite as readily as they had in the past.
- **Lake Mary Ronan** was another park that, although a bit off the beaten track, experienced a jump of 35.7% in its visitation in 2020.
- Another heavily used park in 2020 was **Lone Pine**, which saw a visitation increase of 28.9% when looking at 2020 versus 2019. Its proximity to Kalispell offers nearby residents respite and important opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.

2020 year to date visitation (January-June)



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

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Les Mason	8,236	12,518	52.0%
Thompson Chain of Lakes	42,887	60,154	40.3%
Lake Mary Ronan	11,293	15,320	35.7%
Flathead Lake (all units)	123,140	159,640	29.6%
Lone Pine	52,443	67,594	28.9%
Logan	10,835	12,791	18.1%
Thompson Falls	5,214	5,713	9.6%
Whitefish	28,082	28,732	2.3%
	282,130	362,462	28.5%

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

Flathead Lake Units	2019	2020	% Change
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-West Shore	12,588	14,767	17.3%
FL-Wild Horse Island	5,171	3,694	-28.6%
	123,140	159,640	29.6%

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

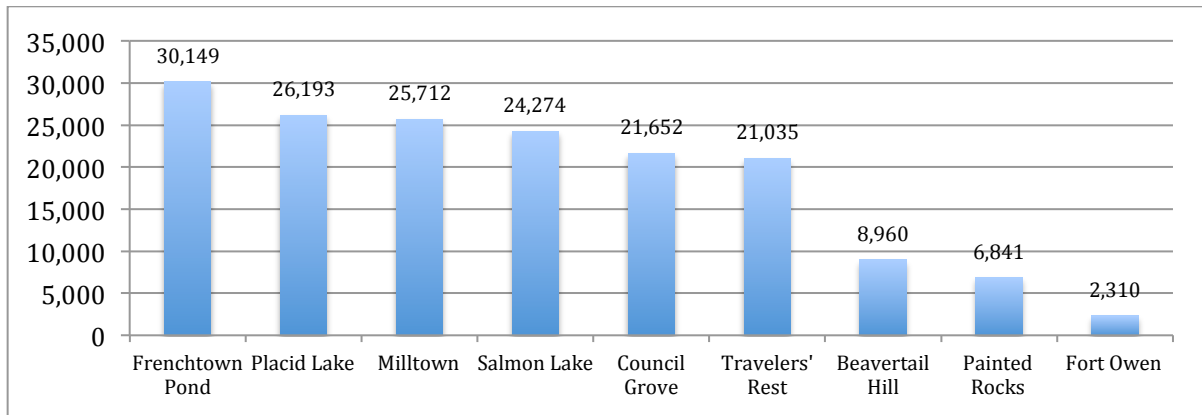
REGION 2

Region 2 experienced a **26.6%** increase in total visitation for the first half of this year as compared with last year. It is one of two regions that saw an increase at all sites. Both camping and day use were heavily on the rise in the region.

- Interestingly, **Painted Rocks** experienced the largest change in visitation for the region, rising 72.2% when compared with last year's visitation numbers.

- With its access to Missoula and its famed entry point for tubing once waters recede, **Milltown** experienced an estimated jump of 58.7% in its visitation for the reporting period compared with last year.
- **Salmon and Placid Lakes** also, given their access to water recreation and camping, saw relatively significant jumps in visitation between this year and last year.
- Day use parks such as **Council Grove, Frenchtown Pond, Fort Owen** and **Travelers' Rest** all saw increases in their visitation rates. This said, growth at the latter two parks was less intensive, likely in conjunction with the decline in school field trips and organized groups who tend to visit these parks.

2020 year to date visitation (January-June)



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

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Painted Rocks	3,972	6,841	72.2%
Milltown	16,201	25,712	58.7%
Salmon Lake	17,415	24,274	39.4%
Placid Lake	19,450	26,193	34.7%
Council Grove	16,715	21,652	29.5%
Frenchtown Pond	26,831	30,149	12.4%
Beavertail Hill	8,017	8,960	11.8%
Fort Owen	2,149	2,310	7.5%
Travelers' Rest	19,872	21,035	5.9%
	132,029	167,126	26.6%

NOTE: Visitation data at Fish Creek was not reported in 2020.

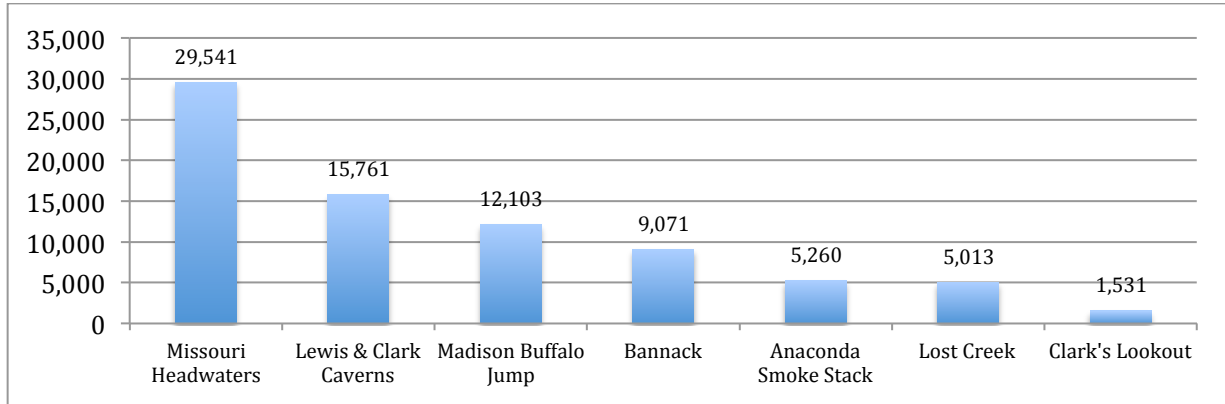
REGION 3

Region 3 experienced a **6.3%** decrease in total visitation for the first half of this year as compared with last year.

- Visitation at **Missouri Headwaters** and **Madison Buffalo** jumped 67.1% and 64.0%, respectively, during the reporting period. With ready access from the I-90 highway and the proximity of Bozeman, these parks have been growing in visitation rates over time.

- **Bannack** was one of two state parks that were temporarily closed to the public due to COVID-19. Its visitation was also impacted heavily by the decline in school field trips and organized groups that often frequent the park.
- Due to safety concerns related to COVID-19, tours at **Lewis and Clark Caverns** have been limited this season, in turn causing a decline in visitation.
- Last, **Anaconda Smoke Stack** and **Lost Creek** saw an increase in their visitation, growing 17.6% and 14.0%, respectively.

2020 year to date visitation (January-June)



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

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Missouri Headwaters	17,679	29,541	67.1%
Madison Buffalo Jump	7,382	12,103	64.0%
Anaconda Smoke Stack	4,475	5,260	17.5%
Lost Creek	4,396	5,013	14.0%
Bannack	14,173	9,071	-36.0%
Clark's Lookout	2,015	1,531	-24.0%
Lewis & Clark Caverns	33,408	15,761	-52.8%
	83,528	78,280	-6.3%

NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Beaverhead Rock or Granite Ghost Town. Additionally, visitation data was not collected for Clark's Lookout during the months of January thru April in 2019 and 2020.

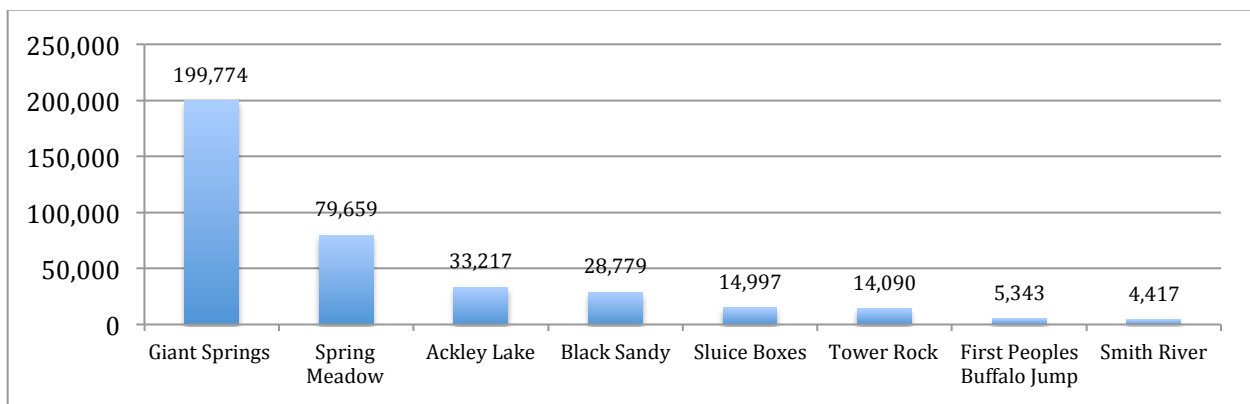
REGION 4

Region 4 experienced a **23.9%** increase in total visitation for the first half of this year as compared with last year.

- **Giant Springs** continued to experience the highest number of visitors of all parks in the state.
- Interestingly there was a significant spike at **Tower Rock** in 2020. According to the park manager, the installation of highway signs for the park could have been a driving factor, as well as the uptick in outdoor recreationists in the area.

- There was also a noteworthy change in the level of visitation between 2019 and 2020 at **Ackley Lake** and **Black Sandy**, with camping and the park's water access serving as appealing factors. Ackley Lake was the state's ninth most visited park during the reporting period.
- With **Spring Meadow's** proximity to Helena, it too experienced a rise in visitation, as did **Sluice Boxes**, which is a relatively short drive from Great Falls. **Spring Meadow** was the state's fifth most visited park during the reporting period.
- The **Smith River** was closed April 1-12 due to ice and again from April 13 until May 4 due to COVID-19 concerns. During that time there are typically hundreds of floaters and the impact on commercial outfitters was heavily felt. This notwithstanding, the park experienced its second highest May on record, and the highest June to date.
- Last, with the cancellation of school field trips and other group activities, there was a decline in visitation between 2020 and 2019 at **First Peoples' Buffalo Jump**, a park that normally sees several groups and especially during the school year.

2020 year to date visitation (January-June)



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Elkhorn and for the Smith River during the months of January thru March.

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

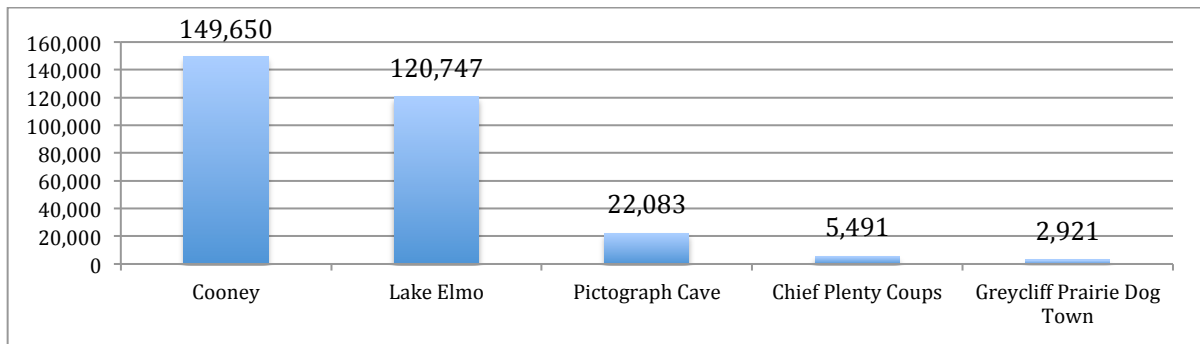
State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Tower Rock	5,171	14,090	172.5%
Ackley Lake	12,977	33,217	156.0%
Sluice Boxes	9,326	14,997	60.8%
Black Sandy	19,614	28,779	46.7%
Spring Meadow	61,506	79,659	29.5%
Giant Springs	186,605	199,774	7.1%
Smith River	4,427	4,417	-0.2%
First Peoples Buffalo Jump	7,218	5,343	-26.0%
	306,844	380,276	23.9%

REGION 5

Region 5 experienced a **34.2%** increase in total visitation for the first half of this year as compared with last year.

- Situated in Billings and adjacent to the Region 5 headquarters, **Lake Elmo** saw a 50.7% jump in its estimated visitation between 2020 and 2019 for the reporting period.
- Similarly, **Cooney Reservoir** experienced a 39.9% jump in visitation between 2020 and 2019. With its proximity to Billings and access to camping and water recreation, it has been operating at a near all time high.
- There were potentially some negative impacts on visitation due to COVID-19 at **Chief Plenty Coups**, not just with less school field trips, but also due to restrictions on the Crow reservation. Its visitation between 2020 and 2019 for the reporting period decreased by an estimated 21.8%.
- Last, **Pictograph Cave** also experienced a decline of 16.9% in its visitation between 2020 and 2019 for the reporting period, also likely due to less school field trips and group activities.

2020 year to date visitation (January-June)



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at the Yellowstone River and for the Greycliff Prairie Dog Town during the months of January thru April.

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

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Lake Elmo	80,147	120,747	50.7%
Cooney Reservoir	106,995	149,650	39.9%
Chief Plenty Coups	7,025	5,491	-21.8%
Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	3,523	2,921	-17.1%
Pictograph Cave	26,585	22,083	-16.9%
	224,275	300,892	34.2%

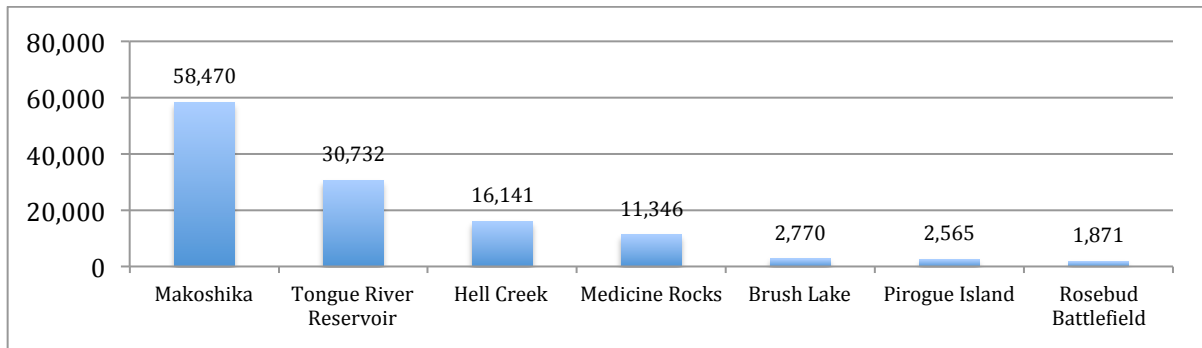
REGIONS 6 and 7

Regions 6 and 7 experienced a **26.9%** increase in total visitation for the first half of this year as compared with last year.

- **Tongue River** was the state's tenth most visited park in spite of its remote nature. The appeal of water access and camping opportunities drew in nearly 31,000 visitors.

- Though in relative terms **Pirogue Island** has experienced quite a spike in visitation compared with last year, the overall number of visits at Makoshika and Medicine Rocks are driving factors for the region.
- Visitation at **Makoshika** is estimated to have jumped 59.3% when comparing January-June 2020 with the previous year.
- **Medicine Rocks**, a park situated in a rather remote area, experienced a 57% increase in its visitation when comparing 2020 with 2019.
- **Brush Lake** experienced a 30.4% increase in visitors for the reporting period while **Hell Creek** held pretty steady.

2020 year to date visitation (January-June)



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Brush Lake during the months of January thru April.

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

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Pirogue Island	1,373	2,565	86.8%
Makoshika	36,713	58,470	59.3%
Medicine Rocks	7,227	11,346	57.0%
Brush Lake	2,125	2,770	30.4%
Hell Creek	15,092	16,141	7.0%
Rosebud Battlefield	3,529	1,871	-47.0%
Tongue River Reservoir	31,568	30,732	-2.6%
	97,627	123,895	26.9%

ⁱ **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.

Closures:

- 2019 - Smith River (January-March) and Brush Lake (January-April)
- 2020 - Smith River and Brush Lake (January-April)

No/low data reported:

- **2019** - FL-North Shore (R1), Granite Ghost Town (R3), Clark's Lookout (R3) - January-April, Beaverhead Rock (R3), Greycliff Prairie Dog Town (R5) - January-April; and, Yellowstone River (R5)
- **2020** - FL-North Shore (R1), Fish Creek (R2), Granite Ghost Town (R3), Clark's Lookout (R3) - January-April, Beaverhead Rock (R3), Greycliff Prairie Dog Town (R5) - January-April; and, Yellowstone River (R5)

In the 2020 season, Montana State Park managers and staff will be installing a set of 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 leading 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.