

Life *in the* Valley

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Oregon's outdoor beauty brings record crowds again

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Oregon's outdoors has never been more popular — or crowded.

For the second year in a row, visits are expected to shatter records at Oregon's state parks and on federal lands.

The rise in crowds that began picking up steam in 2013 shows no signs of slowing down, according to data from multiple agencies.

The fastest-growing areas for recreation continue to be the Columbia River Gorge and Central Oregon, a trend fueled by the booming population of the Portland and Bend areas, officials said.

But visits to the Oregon Coast, Crater Lake National Park and John Day Fossil Beds — in three different sections of the state — have also skyrocketed, making clear the trend isn't isolated.

"The upside is that we're serving more people than ever before — and seeing more smiles than ever before," Oregon Parks and Recreation Department spokesman Chris Havel said. "At the same time, we're having problems keeping up with crowding, trash, and the wear and tear on parks."

The impact, both positive and negative, has been seen in multiple ways.

Tourism is a \$10.8 billion industry in Oregon that accounts for more than 105,000 jobs, according to the state's tourism bureau, Travel Oregon. In rural towns still struggling from the decline in logging and mining, tourism can offer an economic boost.

The downside, however, is the increasingly familiar lament of Oregon's most spectacular destinations being "loved to death."

Popular but ecologi-



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Crater Lake broke its attendance record in September with 702,050 visits.

cally sensitive areas — Opal Creek Scenic Area, Oneonta Gorge and Blue Pool on the McKenzie River — have seen damage and fatal accidents in recent years from spiking crowds. Oregon land managers are increasingly considering a cap on the number of people allowed into specific destinations.

"(It) puts a tremendous amount of pressure on this fragile, natural environment," said Josh Weathers, developed recreation manager for Willamette National Forest, about the Opal Creek area. "From trash and human waste, fires left burning, to just trampled vegetation and soil ... it's being loved to death."

Federal and state agencies, charged with managing the growth, have been stretched thin trying to keep up with everything from vandalism to restocking toilet paper.

"It's such a mixed blessing," said Shelly Hall, superintendent of the John Day Fossil Beds. "I love that we're sharing our story and

getting people outdoors. But it's also challenging because staffing and our budget just hasn't kept pace."

The numbers

The best data for measuring visitation comes from Oregon's state parks. The 180 sites, spread throughout the state, provide the best snapshot and tend to reflect empirical trends seen in less well-documented areas.

And, overall, the numbers are growing.

From January to September 2016, park visits rose to 41.8 million, up from 39.2 million a year ago and 36 million in 2014.

The fastest growing parks are in the Gorge and Central Oregon. Parks in those areas saw a 10 percent increase over 2015. The largest raw numbers for state parks are at the Oregon Coast, where visits increased to 23.9 million, up from 20.5 million in 2014.

"The biggest growth has been from Lincoln

City to the north," Havel said. "There's not one standout place — the coast as a whole has trended upward."

Havel said one major reason for the increase has been weather. Spring in 2015 and '16 have been some of the warmest in state history, leading to 20 percent increases in visitation during April.

"Weather is the single biggest driver," Havel said. "We gain or lose the most visitation in the spring and fall, and the past two years, it's been a big gain."

The numbers from state parks are reflected just as starkly at Oregon's national parks and monuments.

Crater Lake broke its attendance record in September with 702,050 visits, surpassing last year's record-setting total with three months remaining on the calendar. The John Day Fossil Beds and Oregon Caves national monuments, along with Lewis and Clark National Historical Park, could also set records.

Issues at the fossil

Rising visitation in Oregon

Oregon State parks (January to September)

2016: 41.803 million
2015: 39.219 million
2014: 36.026 million

John Day Fossil Beds National Monument (January through August)

2016: 161,178
2015: 152,252
2014: 136,092
2013: 146,223

Oregon Caves National Monument (January to August)

2016: 62,519
2015: 56,238
2014: 54,184
2013: 56,691

Lewis and Clark National Historic Park (January to October)

2016: 260,400
2015: 251,518
2014: 227,395
2013: 202,734

counting people who enter and exit Oregon's vast system of forest lands.

Even so, recreation managers on U.S. Forest Service lands across Oregon have noted the increase in visitors, said Stephen Baker, Public Information Officer for USFS's Pacific Northwest Region.

"The general consensus is that recreation numbers are high across the region but more significant on some forests, especially those near growing urban areas like Portland and Bend," Baker said in an email. "In these forests, we're seeing higher use, especially at the more popular, easily accessible sites. Compared to previous years, campgrounds are filling up earlier in the season and staying full later in the season, and they're even busier during holidays."

And not all the news is about growing crowds.

Visits to the deep interior of many wilderness areas has actually declined during the past 20 years, said Oregon State University professor Troy Hall.

"People aren't going away for that week-long backpacking trip as much as they used to," Hall said. "For the most part — and there are some notable exceptions — the use is concentrated within six miles of trailheads."

Solitude, in other words, is possible for people willing to work for it.

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beds include people disregarding signs and stepping on the park's iconic Painted Hills. People can be cited for such behavior, but it can take an entire summer for the damage to wear off, Hall said.

"You're always going to have a small percentage of people who don't follow the signs and go off the trail," she said. "The issue is that when you have so many more people, that percentage is more."

National forests, despite being the largest chunk of public land in Oregon, are the hardest to measure. With a few exceptions — such as wilderness permits — there's no mechanism for

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303 N. Church Street, Silverton, OR 97381
Phone: (503) 873-8656
Pastor Leah Stolte-Doerfler
Sunday School 9:15 a.m.
Service time 10:30 a.m.
Nursery Available

ST. MARY'S CHURCH
Pastor: Fr. Philip Waibel
575 E. College St. 503-845-2296
Weekday Mass 6:50 a.m.
Saturday Vigil Mass 5:30 p.m.
Sunday masses 7:30 a.m., 10 a.m.,
and 12:30 p.m. (Spanish Mass) at
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Mission at Crooked Finger
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Confession: 3:30 - 5:00 p.m.
on Saturday

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Sunday Worship Service: 10:45 am
Full Nursery Care • Youth Group
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St. Paul Catholic Church
Pastor:
Fr. William Hammelman, OSB
503-873-2044
1410 Pine Street
Silverton
www.stpaulsilverton.com
Weekday Mass 8 a.m.
Saturday Vigil 5:30 p.m.
Sunday Morning Mass
8:00 & 10:30 a.m.
12:00 Noon (en español)
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