

Life in the Valley



Views from the summit of Neahkahnie Mountain at Oswald West State Park. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

Coastal state parks dominate Oregon's 10 most popular in 2017

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USA TODAY NETWORK

The Oregon Coast is king. When it comes to state parks, that is.

Driven by fire in the mountains and smoke in the valley, Oregonians flocked to the beach like never before in 2017.

Of the 180 state parks across Oregon, eight of the 10 most popular were on the Oregon Coast.

Here's a look at the most visited state parks from 2017, according to numbers from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

10: Heceta Head Lighthouse Scenic Viewpoint (1,056,538 visits)

Showcasing one of the most scenic lighthouses on the Oregon Coast, this fairly small park was jam-packed this summer.

Heceta Head, located just north of Florence, jumped to over 1 million visits after getting just 214,764 in 2016, an almost 400 percent increase.

The spike could have to do with the lighthouse recently being reopened for tours. Historically, the park pulled in closer to 600,000 to 700,000 visits. So an increase would be expected.

Even so, this park made one of the biggest jumps in the system.

9: Fort Stevens State Park (1,103,072)

From the Civil War to World War II, this site near Astoria was a military installation guarding the mouth of the Columbia River.

Today, Fort Stevens is a 4,300-acre park offering exploration of history, nature and many recreational opportunities.

The barnacle-covered remains of the shipwreck Peter Iredale still lures visitors to the Clatsop Spit at the park. An observation tower at the South Jetty allows visitors to see where the Columbia meets the ocean.

The park has a network of 9 miles of paved bicycle trails and 6 miles of hiking trails that allow for exploring a variety of habitats including spruce and hemlock forests, wetlands, dunes and shore pine areas.

8: Tolovana Beach State Recreation Site (1,105,198)

This popular recreation site offers access to one of Oregon's most beautiful stretches of sand — Cannon Beach.

Located at the south end of the tourist town west of Portland, To-

lovana offers a long stretch of sand highlighted by Haystack Rock, a towering 235-foot basalt sea stack.

Tolovana is a second coastal park that saw major gains in 2017 visitation, likely spurred by wild-fires and smoke pushing Oregonians to the coast.

Along with sand, Cannon Beach is known for boutiques and local eateries, found in the nearby areas of Tolovana Park and Cannon Beach's midtown and downtown.

7: Silver Falls State Park (1,154,944)

Oregon's largest state park is one of only two destinations on this list not located on the Oregon Coast.

Silver Falls is home to 10 waterfalls, half of which are more than 100 feet. It was almost turned into a national park during the 1920s.

Suffice to say, Silver Falls is beautiful. Home to the Trail of Ten Falls, one of Oregon's most iconic pathways, the park is located east of Salem.

Silver Falls has seen consistent growth during the past few years, with the last two years setting records for visitors.

The park features a lodge with food, guided nature walks, a dog park, swimming area and lots of other amenities.

6: Oswald West State Park (1,201,592)

Some of the Oregon Coast's most dramatic views can be had at this coastal state park just north of Manzanita.

The hike to the summit of Neahkahnie Mountain offers the park's most iconic vista, while Short Sand Beach features a cliff-walled beach beloved by surfers (and children).

Named for the Oregon governor credited with making Oregon's beaches public, Oswald West cracked 1 million visits for the first time in 2016. Previously, it averaged closer to 500,000 visits.

Oswald West does not offer camping.

5: D River State Recreation Site (1,201,723)

Although named for what's supposedly the world's shortest river, this recreation site is really all about access to a wide swath of beach in the heart of Lincoln City.

The 440-foot D River begins at Devils Lake, runs under Highway 101 and rolls onto the highly popular beach.

The area is popular due to a large parking area along Highway 101 in Lincoln City. The annual kite festival is held at the site, and a



The D River State Recreation Site hosts an annual Summer Kite Festival for guests to enjoy. PHOTO COURTESY OF SUMMER KITE FESTIVAL

steady stream of visitors is often found here.

D River has long been a popular spot, luring over 1 million visits every year since 2002.

4: Sunset Bay State Park (1,387,544)

Located about 12 miles south of Coos Bay, this iconic coastal state park offers a stunning beach enclosed between cliffs, along with a campground and a network of trails.

Sunset Bay is one of three parks sitting next to each other — Shore Acres and Cape Arago are the other two — and one trail connects all three.

Sunset Bay has been a fast-growing park, breaking the 1 million visits mark for the first time in 2014.

3: Harris Beach State Park (1,637,444)

That this state park on the South Coast made the list isn't a surprise — it's long been one of the state's most popular parks.

But this was no ordinary year at Harris Beach. This summer, the Chetco Bar Fire, Oregon's largest inferno, roared dangerously close to Brookings and Harris Beach.

The state park was transformed into a shelter for people displaced by the fire during late summer until the fire wound down in fall. The area gained an extra 1,600 people in the form of fire crews that arrived to fight the fire.

Despite that — or maybe because of it — Harris Beach broke its record for visitation.

2: Yaquina Bay State Recreation Site (1,691,972)

Set in the midst of the bustling

coastal town of Newport, this recreation site offers a forested bluff, beach and a historic lighthouse.

The lighthouse — later used as a Coast Guard Lifeboat Station — has been restored and is open to the public.

The site's popularity is due largely to its location in the heart of Newport's tourist center. Attractions nearby include the Newport bayfront, Hatfield Marine Science Center and the Oregon Coast Aquarium.

The site also was a popular spot to view last August's total solar eclipse.

Valley of the Rogue State Park (1,790,076)

Few people would ever peg this little-known spot in Southern Oregon as the state's most popular park.

Located between Grants Pass and Medford, this park offers a campground, hiking and access to the Rogue River.

The biggest reason for the park's popularity is its close proximity to Interstate 5 — there's an exit specifically for Valley of the Rogue. Many road-weary travelers stop at this green oasis.

Still, the park is an excellent place to fish and serves as a good place to put a boat in the water or take it out.

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