

NEWS RELEASE

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State park visitation down slightly through first half of 2008

Weather and gas prices are considered the main culprits in a slight 1.5 percent downturn in North Dakota state parks visitation through the first half of 2008. Fourth of July holiday weekend numbers are indicators that state parks may see higher use throughout the rest of the camping season.

A total of 173,779 people made visits to North Dakota's state parks in June as compared to 183,962 in 2007, a drop of 5 percent. In 2008, so far, a total of 356,137 visits have been made to state parks, while 2007, recorded 361,682 visits through the first six months.

Camper counts through June 29 were calculated at 20,923 while though June of 2007 there were 23,087, down about 10 percent. Parks providing cabins recorded 896 rental nights serving 2094 guests.

A consensus of the state park managers indicated cold and wet spring weather extending well into June kept visitation numbers down. Gas prices, settling at about \$4 a gallon, likely deterred visitors, too.

"Weather has been one issue," says Devils Lake park manager Henry Duray. "We've had a lot of cool, windy weather and it's been stormy a lot up until now. The season started slow with the ice coming off Devils Lake late. Without question, the price of fuel has had an effect. We've got a lot more people parking their campers in our storage lot."

A lot of the visitors to Graham's Island, Lake Sakakawea and Fort Stevenson state parks are there for one reason, to fish. The inclement weather meant fewer bites and that kept fishermen from the big lakes. But fishing is improving so are the numbers of sportsmen making their way to Lake Sakakawea and Devils Lake.

"Visitation at Lake Sakakawea State Park is down for three reasons," says manager John Tunge. "June weather, June fishing and fuel prices. But lately, the weather has been great, there's all kinds of good water and the fishing is really starting to pick up. We've opened up the Scoria Bay boat ramp for the first time since 1998 and Lake Sakakawea is pushing a level of 1823 (feet above sea level) and it wasn't that long ago it was 1807."

Fort Stevenson saw 128 more campers over the Fourth of July weekend than in 2007, Icelandic State Park was up 139 campers, Lewis & Clark State Park up 41, and Lake Metigoshe up 33.

"We were way up over the Fourth," says Fort Stevenson State Park manager Richard Messerly. "The water has come up and the fishing has really improved. Things are shaping up with the lake level recovering. I anticipate good visitation the remainder of the summer, unless there is another big jump in gas prices. People are learning to deal with it. Out of state travelers are about the same I think, but we're getting more locals and they're coming in earlier and staying longer."

Parks providing camper storage areas are seeing them fill up like never before. Fort Stevenson has room to store about 60 campers and it has about 40 in storage now. And John Tunge, manager of Lake Sakakawea State Park says his storage "is pretty full."

"People would rather park it than pull it," says Devils Lake's Duray. "A lot more people are parking their campers in our storage lot and then pulling them out to a camp site when they visit. We've got about 50 in storage now."

Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park numbers are holding steady, according to manager Dan Schelske. While numbers may be slightly lower people are camping longer.

"The biggest issue has been the gas prices," Schelske says. "We'd be ahead in the numbers if we would have had better visitation in April and May. It seems like I've seen few out-of-staters, but the ones that do come stay longer. The locals are rediscovering the park and are checking out more of our interpretive programs."