

State parks report record attendance of 15.6 million in 2014

North Carolina's state parks and state recreation areas had record attendance in 2014, with 15.6 million visitors, a 10 percent increase over 14.2 million the previous year.

Among 39 state parks and state recreation areas, 27 reported increases in attendance in 2014. William B. Umstead State Park in Wake County reported the highest attendance at 1.3 million visits, and was among six state park units logging more than a million visitors. The others were Fort Macon and Jockey's Ridge state parks and Falls Lake, Jordan Lake and Kerr Lake state recreation areas.

"Record visitation in 2014 dramatically reflects the value North Carolinians place on our state parks, especially for the communities where they're located and their economies," said Mike Murphy, state parks director. "The state parks system will hold its centennial in 2016 and planning is underway for special events and opportunities to celebrate a system that has become an institution for recreation, conservation and connection with nature in our state"

Over the past 25 years, attendance at state parks has nearly doubled. In 1989, eight million people visited state parks and state recreation areas.

A number of factors likely contributed to the record visitation, among them a long list of special events at the parks, beginning with First Day Hikes on Jan. 1. More than two dozen events were scheduled for National Trails Day in June and every park held special interpretive programs during Take a Child Outside Week in September.

And, newly created events began to gain traction, including a paddle festival at Hammocks Beach State Park and a long-distance hiking challenge at Hanging Rock State Park. Additionally, no parks were closed for extended periods due to weather emergencies or construction.

The new Carvers Creek State Park in Cumberland County logged its first full year of operation, reporting 74,220 visitors. Parks reporting the largest increases in visitation included Crowders Mountain in Gaston County (65 percent), Hammocks Beach in Onslow County (32 percent), Lake Norman in Iredell County (70 percent), Lake Waccamaw in Columbus County (26 percent) and Morrow Mountain in Stanly County (64 percent).

Lake James is NC State Park of the Year

Lake James State Park in Burke and McDowell counties has been named the North Carolina 2014 State Park of the Year.

The park was chosen for its "exemplary contribution to the North Carolina state parks mission of stewardship, public service and education," and specifically recognized for initiatives in natural resource management, volunteerism and expanded recreation opportunities.

"Lake James State Park is fulfilling the promise it has held since 2004 when it was expanded with 2,900 acres of property acquired from Crescent Resources Inc. Its staff has been adept at balancing exciting new recreation opportunities with careful protection of natural resources on that property," said Mike Murphy, state parks director.

During the year, Lake James opened a 15-mile network of

Continued Other Side



mountain biking trails, began offering kayak and canoe rentals and staged multiple special events. The park's rangers reached more than 4,000 visitors with interpretive programs, and guided volunteers for more than 1,100 hours, a 400 percent increase over the previous year.

The maintenance staff continued trail construction and launched a project to build canoe-in campsites. The division's natural resource staff and park rangers initiated a prescribed burn program and a kudzu management program and staged a "bioblitz" to inventory plant and animal species.

The state parks system began choosing a State Park of the Year in 2010 with nominations from each of four districts. Each park submits an annual report that is objectively scored on progress in recreation, natural resource protection, sustainability, public safety and environmental education.

First Day Hikes draw 2,980 to state park trails

In crisp, clear winter weather, the fourth annual First Day Hikes in North Carolina's state parks set a record that will be hard to top in coming years; 2,980 hikers covered more than 7,000 miles on park trails in just a few hours of winter daylight.

The 49 guided hikes ranged from modest "leg-stretchers" on easy interpretive trails to a six-mile trek from Crowders Mountain State Park into South Carolina on the Ridgeline Trail. At Haw River State Park, 62 visitors were the first ever to walk a new, 3.2-mile trail to be opened to the public later in 2015. At Pettigrew State Park, visitors watched wintering tundra swans, while at Lake James they explored an old homestead.

Attendance was highest at Eno River State Park, where a popular New Year's Day hike staged by the Eno River Association has long been a tradition. The park had 702 visitors enjoying two leisurely hikes and fellowship. Elsewhere, attendance was highest at Raven Rock State Park (243), Haw River State Park (123), Dismal Swamp State Park (105) and Fort Macon State Park (101).

Rangers at many parks reported full parking lots throughout the day, suggesting that visitors registered for First Day Hikes were just a slice of total attendance on the first day of 2015.



Raven Rock steers toward mountain biking

Raven Rock State Park in Harnett County will join a select group of mountain biking destinations, with plans to build up to 20 miles of bike trails over the next several years. With a group of volunteers, the park launched the project Jan. 19 by clearing brush from the first trail corridor.

"There is a lot of excitement from park visitors, volunteers and the local community about adding new mountain bicycle trails to the region," said Superintendent Jeffrey Davidson. "It is proposed to have the first of three loops bike-ready in mid- to late 2015."

The park received two grants totaling \$200,000 from the federal Recreational Trails Program to create a network of beginner, intermediate and advanced trail loops. The first step is to build the beginner loop, expected to cover about six miles. Hikers will be welcome on the new trails, as well.

The trail network will be in the southeastern section of the park (Moccasin Branch area) with a trailhead near the picnic shelter.

Mountain biking is a booming outdoor sport, and the state parks system is adding trail networks in parks that can accommodate them.

The Steward is an e-newsletter of the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. To learn how to subscribe to the complete version and have news of the North Carolina state parks sent directly to your email inbox, scan the QR code here with a smartphone app or visit www.ncparks.gov, and click "News."

