



GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

Visitor Experience Stewardship Newsletter

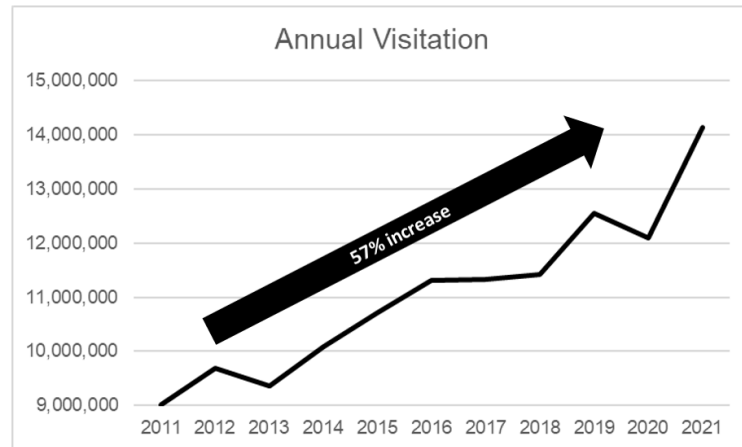
January 2022

Visitors at Laurel Falls on a Wednesday in June 2021.



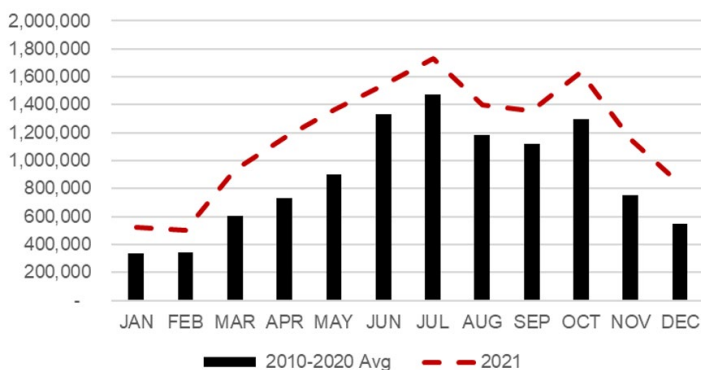
Great Smoky Mountains National Park is consistently the most visited national park in the country. It is situated within a day's drive of one-half the population of the United States and was visited more than 14.1 million times in 2021. Providing a high-quality visitor experience has grown more challenging due to increasing visitation. Since 2011 annual visitation to the Smokies has increased by 57%, resulting in congested roadways, overflowing parking lots, roadside soil erosion, vegetation trampling, and long lines at restroom and visitor center facilities. Meanwhile, staffing levels have decreased, and funding have remained flat over the last ten years.

Park managers are committed to working hand-in-hand with gateway communities, business and non-profit partners, and visitors to find solutions that improve the quality of visitor experiences, address congestion, and maintain the tremendous economic engine our park provides in a manner that continues to protect park resources and values.



The bar chart shows annual visitation to Great Smoky Mountains National Park from 2011-2021. There has been a 57% over the last decade. (NPS Graph)

Monthly Visitation



The black bars shows average visitation to Great Smoky Mountains National Park per month from 2010-2020. The red, dashed line shows 2021 monthly visitation. (NPS Graph)

| Month | Average Monthly Visitation, 2010-2020 | % Average Annual Visitation, 2010-2020 | Monthly Visitation, 2021 | % 2021 Annual Visitation |
|-------|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| JAN | 338,138 | 3% | 525,801 | 4% |
| FEB | 341,864 | 3% | 502,459 | 4% |
| MAR | 602,324 | 6% | 931,060 | 7% |
| APR | 735,196 | 7% | 1,169,469 | 8% |
| MAY | 905,514 | 9% | 1,363,183 | 10% |
| JUN | 1,335,788 | 13% | 1,539,247 | 11% |
| JUL | 1,471,781 | 14% | 1,730,987 | 12% |
| AUG | 1,187,538 | 11% | 1,398,161 | 10% |
| SEP | 1,121,462 | 11% | 1,355,599 | 10% |
| OCT | 1,295,366 | 12% | 1,633,547 | 12% |
| NOV | 756,450 | 7% | 1,155,227 | 8% |
| DEC | 548,686 | 5% | 836,531 | 6% |

Average monthly visitation from 2010 - 2020 as well as 2021 are displayed in the table for comparison. Additionally, monthly contribution to the annual visitation is displayed, both for the 2010 - 2020 average and for 2021 visitation. (NPS Table)

For extensive visitation statistics, check out the **Public Use Statistics Office**.

Laurel Falls Congestion Management Pilot

The Laurel Falls Trail Congestion Management Pilot ran from Sept. 7 through Oct 3, 2021. Through the Visitor Experience Stewardship engagement detailed above, park managers were able to learn about what a desirable visitor experience for Laurel Falls would be and also some potential management strategies.

The park's Visitor Experience Stewardship outreach gathered feedback on the desired conditions and recommended management actions at some of the most congested sites in the park. Read more in the [January 2021 Newsletter](#).

So, what did we hear from the public when we asked about a desirable visitor experience for Laurel Falls?

- Visitors have the opportunity to access safety information before beginning their hike.
- Visitors experience a well-ordered flow of foot traffic to the falls.
- Visitors have adequate physical space and time to enjoy and perhaps take photographs of the falls.
- Parking is available in designated spots.
- Visitors can safely travel from their vehicle to the trailhead.

And what did the public recommend the park do to better manage the Laurel Falls site?

- Reduce or eliminate roadside parking.
- Charge a parking lot fee.
- Make repairs to the trail and falls viewing area.
- Increase the presence of rangers and volunteers in the parking area and on the trail.
- Provide information about congestion conditions to the public.
- Provide alternative transportation to the trailhead from the surrounding gateway communities.

Pilot Goals:

- Improve safety conditions
- Provide a high-quality visitor experience
- Gain information about management strategies

- Protect park resources
- Manage crowding and congestion
- Gather visitor use data
- Inform future management strategies

Pilot Strategies:

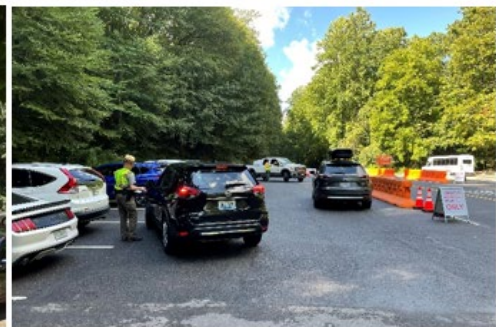
- Prohibition of roadside parking
- Park managers prohibited roadside parking through use of physical barriers and staff presence. This improved the safety conditions at the trailhead parking area and along the road corridor.
- Timed-entry parking reservations
- To allow for better trip planning during the pilot project, Park managers implemented a timed-entry parking reservation ticket system administered through <https://www.recreation.gov>. Parking reservations were available for official parking areas at the trailhead only. The fee was \$14 per vehicle.
- Additional opportunity for trail access
- Rocky Top Tours provided shuttle service during the pilot period. Shuttles ran approximately every half hour from a parking lot just outside Park boundaries in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

Pilot Results:

The Laurel Falls pilot received a **4.6 out of 5 average rating** on recreation.gov and overwhelmingly positive feedback through comment cards and emails, with **91% expressing support** for the pilot. Visitor use management strategies for Laurel Falls will continue to be reviewed as a part of the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan Environmental Assessment (EA). Until this process is complete, no reservation or shuttle systems are planned for Laurel Falls. Park managers plan to hold a public scoping period for the EA during the first half of 2022 and plan to release the EA for public comment during the second half of 2022.



June 2021- pre-pilot



During pilot



June 2021- pre-pilot



During pilot

During pilot period:

- 97% of parking reservation tickets were sold and confirmed
- Only 16% of reservation holders did not show up for their reservation
- No out of bounds parking for Laurel Falls Trail was observed
- Crowding at Laurel Falls was substantially reduced
- Litter was reduced from the pre-pilot average of 2.2 grocery bags per 6-hour shift to only 0.5 grocery bags per shift during the pilot

- Shuttles were 30% full on average with an average daily ridership of 83 people
- Visitors stayed for an average of 104 minutes, well within the 2-hour reservation time block
- Although there were no formal measurements, anecdotal accounts suggest crowding at other locations such as Elkmont day-use area may have increased.