

VISITOR USE STUDY

Summary by
CWC Trails Committee
February 2023



Trail Use in the Central Wasatch

CWC Visitor Use Study conducted by Dr. Jordan Smith
Utah State University Institute of Outdoor Recreation

GOALS

- Quantify the number of hikers including place and time-of-day.
- Show where infrastructure may be needed.

DATA CAPTURE

This study provides time-specific visitor use for 37 trails in Little Cottonwood, Big Cottonwood, and Mill Creek Canyons from January 2019 to April 2022. The visitor count was obtained by using cell phone geo-tracking, plus 31 infrared trail counters to be sure kids and older model phone users were factored in.

TRENDS

- There are places with exceptionally high use, but people acclimate to increased numbers. Places of solitude are still available.
- Trails that terminate at high-altitude lakes are the most popular.
- Seasonal Peak. Trail use is 2 times higher in summer on popular trails than any other season
- Weekend Peak. Trail use is 2 times higher on weekends than on week days.
- Daily Peak. 10 am to 3 pm is the busiest time.
- Average Hiking Trip: 49 minutes.

HIGH-USE TRAILS

Brighton Lakes, White Pine, Secret Lake, Catherine Pass, Lake Blanche, Ferguson Canyon, Neff's Canyon, Donut Falls, Red Pine, Albion Meadows.

MEDIUM-USE TRAILS

Days Fork, Mineral Fork, Mill Creek Canyon, Bells Canyon, Porter Fork, Mill Creek Winter Gate, Dog Lake, Gobblers Knob.

STRATEGIES

- Concentrate trail use to areas where it is already high, so a smaller area of the forest is impacted.
- Infrastructure such as restrooms, signage, clear boundaries, and hardening of trails where appropriate would be needed.
- Concentrate trail use near ski resorts at the tops of the canyons where amenities and parking already exist. Public transportation would focus on transit to resorts.
- Concentrate trail use at the base of the canyons where amenities and parking already exist.
- Mid-canyon trails may be best served by car.
- Begin to focus on ways to accommodate those 49-minute hikers.

FOLLOW-UP

Dr. Smith will also present a follow-up study about the economic benefits of recreation in the Wasatch, and a canyon-by-canyon count of the tri-canyon trails.

For more information go to:

<https://extension.usu.edu/iort/research/central-wasatch-visitor-use-study>

TRI-CANYONS TRAILS MASTER PLAN

The USFS and SLCo Parks and Recreation has completed the first round of public listening sessions facilitated by consultant Landmark Designs. The interactive website map allows users to provide specific trail improvement ideas. The USFS is in communication with Dr. Smith and they are in general agreement on trail use monitoring and management concepts. A draft USFS trails plan is expected by Fall 2023 for public comment, and the final plan should be complete in early 2024.