



2017 Regional Parks System Annual Use Estimate

The seven-county Twin Cities region is home to a system of regional parks and trails that are nationally renowned for their beauty, size and variety of features. The system includes 55 regional parks and preserves (totaling about 54,000 acres), approximately 400 miles of interconnected trails and eight special recreation features. It provides a wealth of opportunities for recreation, exercise and just plain fun. It also preserves significant green space and wildlife habitat.

Metropolitan Council has produced estimates of visits to the Regional Parks System annually since 1995. We base the park use estimates on visit data collected within each of the 106 regional park and trails, with additional calculations.¹

Key Findings

- An estimated 58.3 million visits were made to the Regional Parks System in 2017—a 22% increase from 2016. Most of this growth is attributed to this year’s update of the estimate’s seasonal inputs for fall, winter and spring visitation, which had not been updated since 2008.
- One regional park (Above the Falls Regional Park) and two regional trails (Lake Links in Ramsey County and Minnesota River Greenway in Dakota County) were added to the system in 2017.
- With over seven million visits, Minneapolis Chain of Lakes was the most-visited park in the Regional Parks System in 2017, followed by Como Park, Zoo and Conservatory (5.3 million visits).



Above the Falls Regional Park
Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board [\[Source\]](#)



Lake Links Regional Trail
Ramsey County [\[Source\]](#)



Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail
Dakota County [\[Source\]](#)

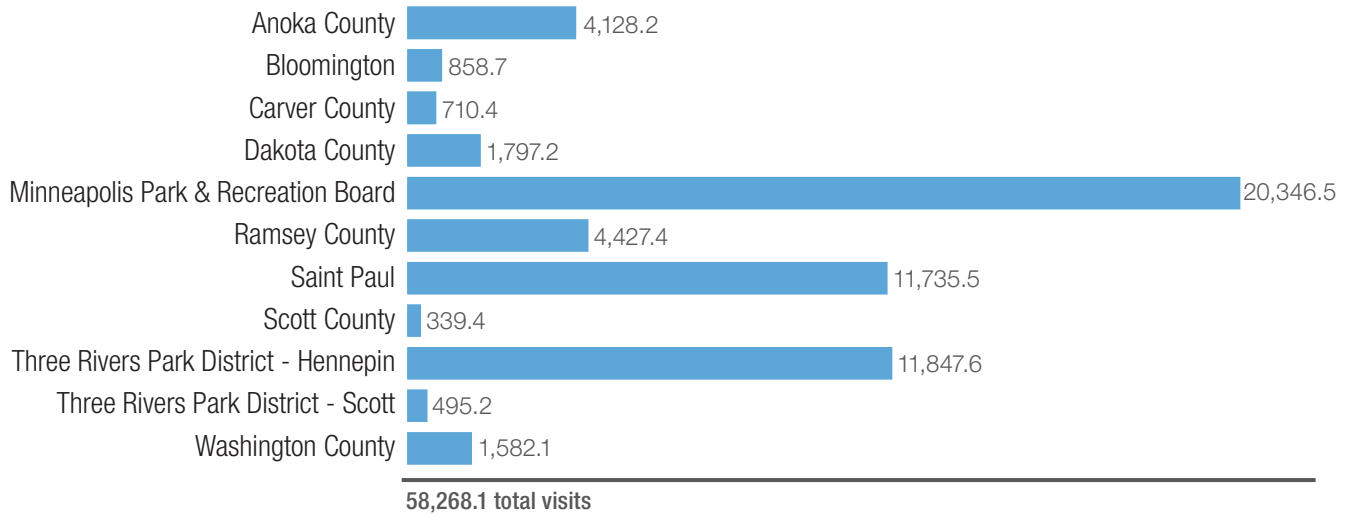
A high-water mark for visits and system size in 2017

An estimated 58.3 million visits were made to the Regional Parks System in 2017. Overall, 75.5% of visits were to regional parks, park reserves and special recreation features, while the remaining visits were to regional trails. With over seven million visits, Minneapolis Chain of Lakes was the most-visited park in the Regional Parks System in 2017, accounting for 12% of all visits system-wide. The region has 106 regional parks and trails, but the top 20 most-visited regional parks and trails account for nearly two-thirds of all visits.²

One regional park and two regional trails were new to the 2017 estimate. Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board added Above the Falls Regional Park; Ramsey County added Lake Links Regional Trail; and Dakota County added Minnesota River Bluffs Regional Trail.³ These three additions to the Regional Parks System totaled approximately 700,000 visits in 2017.

Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and the City of Saint Paul had the largest share of visits in 2017 with 34.9% and 20.1%, respectively (below). At under 1%, Scott County (excluding parks and trails operated by Three Rivers Park District) had the lowest share of regional park and trails visits in 2017.

2017 VISITS BY PARK AGENCY (IN THOUSANDS)



Source: Metropolitan Council's Park Use Estimate, 2017.
 Also available: The [2017 Park Use Estimate methodology report \[PDF\]](#) and [Appendix Tables \[PDF\]](#).

2017 use estimate reflects updated visitor data and system expansion

Our annual park use estimate includes information gathered directly from regional park and trail visitors. This data—such as the number of people per vehicle, winter season visitation and spring/fall visitation—is vital to informing the assumptions we make in developing annual park use estimates. The most recent visitors study was conducted in 2016; prior to that, the last visitor study was done in 2008.³ The Regional Parks System visit estimates from 2008 to 2016 were based on the 2008 visitor data. In contrast, the 2017 use estimate presented here was based on the 2016 visitor data. Changes in visitor behavior is expected over time: a comparison between the 2008 and 2016 studies show noteworthy shifts in visitor behavior, including changes in seasonal visitation and average persons per vehicle. Most prominently, 2016 regional park and trail visitors indicated more frequent use of regional parks and trails during the fall, winter and spring seasons.

The 2017 Regional Parks System use estimate illustrates a significant increase in visits as compared to the previous year; however, this increase is largely due to the increased use of regional parks and trails during fall, winter, and spring seasons. Had we applied the 2008 seasonal visitation data to the 2017 estimate (instead of the 2016 information), the 2017 visit estimate would have totaled 48.2 million visits, slightly higher (by 400,000 visits) than the 2016 use estimate. Further, one regional park and two regional trails were added to the 2017 estimate, totaling about 700,000 visits. Therefore, 2017 visits would have declined had no new regional parks and trails been added to the Regional Parks System and no updates done to the seasonal visitation and persons per vehicle data. These factors make direct comparisons to previous years difficult.

Endnotes

- ¹ See the [2017 Park Use Estimate methodology report \[PDF\]](#) for more information.
- ² A detail map of the [2017 Regional Park System is available here \[PDF\]](#).
- ³ See the [2016 Regional Park System Visitor Study report \[LINK\]](#).

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