

BC Parks Visitor Cap Methodologies

June 2021

What is BC Parks doing?

BC Parks is limiting the number of visitors in five popular provincial parks by implementing the day-use pass pilot program during peak season. The parks include:

- Garibaldi Park – Cheakamus, Rubble Creek, and Diamond Head Trailheads
- Golden Ears Park
- Stawamus Chief Park – Backside Trail
- Joffre Lakes Park
- Mount Robson Park – Berg Lake Trail

BC Parks first implemented free day passes during peak season as a pilot program in 2020 in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic and growing visitor use. The pilot program has been extended for the 2021 season. Broadly speaking, visitor use at all five of the parks where the day pass is being implemented has increased in ways that impact both the ecological values and visitor experience within the parks. Rangers have documented numerous concerns at each of these parks during peak use, including:

- Vegetation trampling and trail degradation
- Trash accumulation
- Congestion in parking lots with visitors often parking on roadways and walking on roads to trailheads
- Altercations with wildlife, whether that includes feeding wildlife or more dangerous encounters between people and bears

The free day pass is expected to improve ecological values and visitor experience by reducing incidences of crowding and congestion.

This program builds on the visitor use management work and visitor cap methodology development BC Parks initiated with Lil'wat Nation and N'Quatqua at Joffre Lakes Park in 2018. The Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resources, and Rural Development has been concurrently exploring similar visitor use management tools in the Sea to Sky Natural Resource District.

What is a visitor cap?

BC Parks has relied on visitor use management research and information developed by the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council (IVUMC) in the United States to guide the implementation of visitor caps (see IVUMC Visitor Capacity Guidebook, 2019). A visitor cap is defined by the IVUMC as “the maximum amounts and types of visitor use that an area can accommodate while achieving and maintaining the desired resource conditions and visitor experience that are consistent with the purposes for which the area was established (IVUMC, 2019).

Visitor Cap Methodology

For the 2021 season, BC Parks is relying on the number of trailhead parking spaces to establish visitor caps for the day passes. Details on how BC Parks calculated visitor caps for specific parks are outlined in Appendix A.

Tying visitor caps to parking spaces achieves several general BC Parks objectives not tied to specific parks and includes:

- Reduces crowding on trails and protects ecological values. Historical peak-use on many of the trails within these five parks is associated with overflowing parking lots. Rangers have documented associations between these peak-use days and trampling of vegetation and trail degradation. Simply reducing use on these trails using available parking spaces will help prevent vegetation trampling, trail widening, trail braiding, and soil erosion.
- Improves visitor safety. Congested parking lots, illegal parking along roadways, and park visitors walking in traffic to reach trailheads presents safety challenges that are avoided when they are guaranteed a parking space upon arrival.
- Enhances the visitor experience by reducing vehicle line-ups at the trailhead and cultivating an experience focused on nature rather than on navigating crowds.
- Improves predictability. Recreationalists driving long distances to parks like Joffre Lakes Park or Golden Ears Park have greater assurance that they can find a parking space.
- Prevents parking in undesignated areas. Illegal parking outside BC Parks parking lots impacts our neighbours, environmental values, and road infrastructure.
- Achieves broader sustainability goals by encouraging use of public transit, active modes of transportation, and car-pooling.
- Allows BC Parks staff to focus on visitor education and protection of park values rather than traffic management.

Assumptions for this method include:

- Three people per vehicle, a rate specific to traveling habits establishing during the pandemic (carpooling rates were higher pre-pandemic).
- Parking spaces are 9'x20' in gravel parking lots.
- Generally, parking on roadways is not considered a legal parking space. However, where the road is a dead-end road leading only to a trailhead and where there are *safe* places to park alongside that road (BC Parks has widened the road shoulder) we will include roadway parking in the visitor cap calculations to maximize the number of day-use passes available.

Parking lots can be expanded in some circumstances, and therefore the associated visitor cap could increase as the expansion of lots are considered. For this summer season, however, BC Parks is not considering expansion of parking lots. There are several reasons for this:

- BC Parks balances recreational needs with conservation values. Expanding parking lots and allowing more visitation to certain areas can put those natural values at risk.
- BC Parks does not always own the land needed to expand parking.
- BC Parks has already invested significant resources in parking lot expansion over the last several years (e.g., Garibaldi-Rubble Creek Trailhead and Golden Ears Park).
- Parking lot expansions take time to consider and require environmental impact assessments and First Nations engagement prior to breaking ground. BC Parks is actively exploring parking lot expansions at the Diamond Head trailhead in Garibaldi Park, at the Stawamus Chief Park, and at the Berg Lake Trailhead in Mount Robson Park.

Implementation – Trail or Vehicle Pass

Day-passes and associated caps are implemented either as trail/per-person passes or vehicle passes. For trail passes, we will have staff checking passes per-person at the trailheads. For vehicle passes, we will have staff checking vehicles for passes as they approach parking lots.

General Considerations

There are several general considerations that apply regardless of the method used to establish visitor caps:

- Visitors coming to parks outside of peak hours will not need passes and are not included in the visitor cap.

- To maximize the number of visitors at a destination, we have assumed 10% of visitors who acquire a day-pass will cancel their trip to the park. That 10% is added onto the cap (the Berg Lake Trail being the exception).
- Visitors with camping permits will not need a day-use pass to access their campsite. The number of camping permits available at certain destinations is subtracted from the total visitor cap, unless otherwise specified. We assume one vehicle for each campsite.
- Park Use Permit holders (e.g., commercial groups with guided clients of up to 10 people) do not require a reservation. Why? Park Use Permits are approved only after careful review by BC Parks staff. The impacts these commercial uses will have on visitors is expected to be minimal as their visits to the park are often guided and occur during off-peak hours.
- The software BC Parks uses to manage day-use passes allows AM/PM passes but does not currently have flexibility to assign visitors to specific time windows for visiting their destination.
- Monitoring and Adjusting: If the current cap proves ineffective or overly restrictive, BC Parks will adjust the visitor cap. Our goal is to maximize the number of visitors at these parks.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

BC Parks is committed to continually improving our methodology for setting visitor caps. In the future, we will further explore recommendations from the IVUMC for setting caps, including establishing site specific desired conditions to guide the setting of caps, improving our visitor use data collection to monitor the effectiveness of the caps, and deeper engagement with the public.

Appendix A –Park-Specific Visitor Cap Methodologies

Garibaldi Park – Vehicle Pass

Cheakamus

There are 55 parking spaces, with potential to fit four to -five more cars down the middle of the gravel lot. We assume a total of 59 parking spaces. While the Cheakamus trailhead provides link-ups to the broader trail network, rangers report most visitors spend two to four hours in the area. There will be an AM and PM window for reservations. There are 14 campsites at Cheakamus.

AM Cap: 59 parking spaces -14 campsites + 10% cancellation rate = 49 vehicles

PM Cap: Because we do not know the exact turnover rate at Cheakamus in the afternoon, we reduced the PM cap by an additional 10 vehicles in case some visitors choose to stay longer or arrive mid-day. 59 parking spaces – 14 campsites + 10% cancellation rate – 10 contingent parking spaces = 39 vehicles.

Day-Use Visitor Cap: 88 vehicles

Diamond Head

There are 65 parking spaces at Diamond Head plus another 10 spots in the overflow lot. Visitors to Diamond Head typically spend more than half a day in the area. Therefore, there is only a daily intake (not AM/PM). There are 35 campsites at Diamond Head.

Day-Use Visitor Cap: 75 parking spaces – 35 camping permits + 10% cancelation rate = 44 vehicle passes

BC Parks recognizes the Diamond Head trail to Red Heather and Elfin Lakes is wide and could accommodate more visitors. We are exploring additional parking options for future years. For now, parking is limited to existing spaces. The road is too narrow and steep for parking along the sides of the road. There is also little to no room for vehicles to wait for a parking space.

Rubble Creek

There are 190 parking spaces in the parking lots, and another 100 spaces along the road where BC Parks has widened the shoulder to accommodate additional vehicles. Because visitors typically spend more than four hours per day at this part of the park, BC Parks is only offering a daily intake (no AM/PM). There are 90 campsites accessed from Rubble Creek.

Day-Use Visitor Cap: 290 parking spaces – 90 camping permits + cancelation rate = 220 vehicles

Stawamus Chief, Backside Trail – Trail Pass

BC Parks is implementing the Stawamus Chief – Backside Trail visitor cap as a trail pass because visitor management concerns are limited to visitor congestion-related impacts specifically on the trail. The Stawamus Chief Park is a world-class rock-climbing destination, and climber's use of the park's parking lots was also taken into consideration.

There are 200 parking spaces with quick access to the Backside Trail at the Stawamus Chief Park: the Upper Parking Lot, the Grand Wall Parking Lot, and a third parking lot under the Ministry of Transportation's jurisdiction adjacent to Highway 99. Campsites at the Stawamus Chief have their own parking. Most people spend fewer than four hours on the Backside Trail, therefore there will be an AM and a PM pass. We assume 70 spaces will be needed at the Grand Wall for climbers, who typically spend the entire day in the park.

AM Cap: $(200 \text{ parking spaces} - 70 \text{ climber parking spaces}) \times 3 \text{ people per vehicle} + 10\% \text{ cancellation rate} = 429 \text{ visitors}$

PM Cap: $(200 \text{ parking spaces} - 70 \text{ climber parking spaces}) \times 3 \text{ people per vehicle} + 10\% \text{ cancellation rate} = 429 \text{ visitors}$

Day-Use Visitor Cap: 858 visitors

The parking spaces calculation does not include the Apron Parking Lots or the Gondola Parking Lots. While some visitors to the Backside Trail may park in these areas, ranger observations suggest the majority of these users go elsewhere. The Apron lots are often used by climbers or recreationalists accessing other opportunities off the Mamquam FSR. People parking at the Sea to Sky Gondola lot predominately focus on the experiences offered by the gondola.

Squamish residents often recreate at the Stawamus Chief in the evenings after work. As evenings are considered off-peak hours, anyone recreating in the evening will not need a trail pass.

Joffre Lakes Park –Trail Pass

The Joffre Lakes Draft Visitor Use Management Strategy originally proposed a visitor cap of 1,500 visitors. The cap was developed using analysis of data from visitor satisfaction and perceptions of safety surveys (see 2019 public survey summary), ranger perceptions of safety and resource-capacity, and visitor crowding at viewpoints within the park.

There are 345 legal parking spaces at Joffre Lakes Park. The previous visitor cap work assumed 3.88 people per car. However, due to Covid-19, fewer people are carpooling. To reflect this change, we adjusted the carpooling rate in our methodology to three people per vehicle.

The previous visitor cap work also assumed most park visitors spend only four hours at the park, meaning an AM/PM pass could be considered. However, many people travel to the park from the Lower Mainland. This means they are likely to arrive mid-morning and stay into the afternoon. BC Parks does not have data on the turnover of parking spaces at Joffre, and because most people drive more than two hours to reach the park, we want to ensure those who have acquired their day-use pass have a place to park. Consequently, the day-use pass will be an all-day pass only. AM/PM windows will be considered when we have more data on turnover which we will be collecting this summer.

In light of the developments noted above, BC Parks has reduced the initial visitor cap proposal to 1053 people or 351 vehicles, assuming some small amount of turnover.

There are 26 campsites at Joffre.

Day-Use Visitor Cap: (345 parking spaces – 26 campsite parking spaces) x 3 people per vehicle + 10% cancellation rate = 1053 visitors

Golden Ears – Vehicle Pass

Day-use passes are required only for the high use parking lots and trailheads in Golden Ears Park. Campsites have their own parking and are not considered in the day-use visitor cap.

Golden Ears Park	Parking Spaces	AM Pass #s /PM Pass #s	Plus 10% Cancellation Rate	Total Day-Use Visitor Cap (Vehicles)
Boat launch	97	97 (AM Pass only)	100*	100
East Canyon Trail, Lower Falls and Gold Creek	90	100/50	110/60	170
West Canyon Trail	40	50/25	55/30	85
Alouette Lake (South beach)	717	715/350	790/385	1175

*Based on past visitation patterns, we expect a much lower cancellation rate (~3%) at the Boat Launch.

Mount Robson Park, Berg Lake Trail – Vehicle Pass

Park name	# passes available /intake per day	Historical numbers (July/August)	Explanation of pass visitor cap calculations
Mount Robson	35 – AM 35 – PM Total = 70 parking spaces	Peak day-use in normal season is ~1,000 excluding bus numbers as traffic counter only catches them as one vehicle.	<p>Parking lot capacity is 104 vehicles. When busy there are issues with larger RVs navigating the parking lot.</p> <p>The number has to balance accommodation between visitors staying at the campground and trail users with free day use. Backcountry campers also account for between 300-400 users on the trail (numbers are higher than expected, but still below normal)</p> <p>Number was an approximation of 35 spaces (AM and PM) and an estimated 150 people for day use and the remaining 79 spaces for camping clients on the trail and from the campground.</p> <p>Mount Robson is a destination park, with many campers in the frontcountry campgrounds (166 campsites) wanting to hike at least a portion of the trail. The trail itself includes another 98 backcountry campsites, for a total of 264 campsites in the area. When busy, vehicles end up parking up to 1 km along the road outside of the parking lot.</p>