

Behind the Curtain

Montana's state parks system is struggling, even as employees do all they can to keep sites clean, accessible, and enjoyable.

BY TOM DICKSON

Amy Grout is nearing her breaking point. The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks state parks manager oversees five of the six state parks on Flathead Lake—including 2,160-acre Wild Horse Island and the always-crowded Wayfarer near Bigfork. Grout says her nine paid employees and 21 volunteers struggle to accommodate the 300,000-plus state parks visitors who throng to the mountain-framed lake each summer—and increasingly during the “shoulder seasons” of March, April, September, and October. On busy summer weekends, she and her assistant manager—a young mother with an infant at home—race from park to park helping other staff unclog toilets, empty trash cans, patrol beaches, take camping reservations, handle visitor conflicts, and respond to medical emergencies. The volunteers work long hours in hot parking lots, sometimes with just one 15-minute break all day. “We can barely hold it together,” Grout says.

Throughout Montana's state parks system, employees are feeling the strain of insufficient staff and failing infrastructure. While state-

wide park visitation has increased nearly 50 percent over the past decade, budgets and staff size have remained flat. To maintain basic visitor services, managers have had to postpone repairing sewage and electrical lines, roads, docks, and other aging infrastructure. The parks system now faces a \$22 million maintenance backlog. “We have underinvested in our parks, even as they have become more popular and staff struggle to manage growing demands and failing infrastructure,” a governor-appointed citizen commission created to improve and strengthen Montana's state parks recently concluded. “The result is a system that is stressed to the breaking point.”

Yet despite the pressures, parks employees make sure parks are clean, safe, and enjoyable. A recent audit by the Legislative Auditor's Office found that state parks are tidy and well run. In surveys, visitors regularly give the sites top marks. “Every grain in our being is about doing whatever it takes to keep parks open and making sure people have a positive experience,” Grout says.

Ironically, that dedication could be part of the problem.



BARELY AFLOAT A stand-up paddleboarder glides over the glassy waters of Flathead Lake, a treasured Montana weekend and holiday destination. Several state parks on the lakeshore are often full to capacity, forcing employees and volunteers to work long hours with little relief.

CRAIG MOORE



“We have this ‘cowboy up’ mentality, where we just suck it up and carry on. That means our guests never see all the stress and unpaid work going on behind the scenes.”

—Amy Grout, Flathead Lake State Parks Manager

“We have this ‘cowboy up’ mentality, where we just suck it up and carry on,” Grout says. “That means our guests never see all the stress and unpaid work going on behind the scenes.” Like many state parks employees, Grout says she’s coping the best she can. “But I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up.”

STEADY GROWTH

Montana launched a fledgling state parks system in 1939 when the legislature created a commission to preserve historic, scientific, archaeological, scenic, and recreational sites such as Lewis & Clark Caverns, the state’s first park. In 1953 the commission was abolished and parks lands were transferred to the State Highway Commission. When outdoor recreational activity in Montana exploded in the 1960s, the legislature consolidated administration of Montana’s recreational lands and waters and shifted parks management to the Department of

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Fish and Game (which changed its name to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in 1979).

Over the past 80 years, the state parks system has grown steadily as lawmakers have added sites, many of which are locally significant but too big for a county or city to manage. Today Montana is home to 55 state parks, compared with 30 in Idaho and 40 in Wyoming.

Montana’s state parks range from those that provide amenities found in national parks—visitor centers, guided tours, annual special events, campgrounds with electrical RV hookups—to primitive sites that lack even an outhouse. The system includes Native American cultural sites, geological wonders, recreational hubs, and seven National Historic Landmarks.

Almost every Montanan values state parks. A 2012 University of Montana survey found that 99 percent of residents considered Treasure State parks to be important.

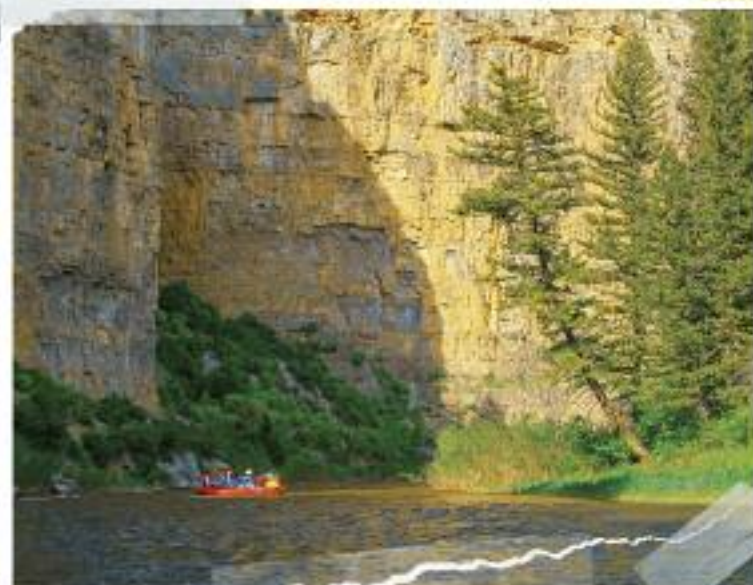
Yet many people mistakenly believe their state income tax dollars pay for state parks. In fact, funding comes from the light vehicle

registration fee, camping and nonresident entrance fees, and portions of the state accommodation, motorboat, and coal taxes.

Since 2013, the system has been overseen by the Montana State Parks and Recreation Board (similar to the Fish and Wildlife Commission), whose five members are appointed by the governor. The board sets policies, provides direction, establishes rules, and approves acquisitions, budgets, and major construction projects.

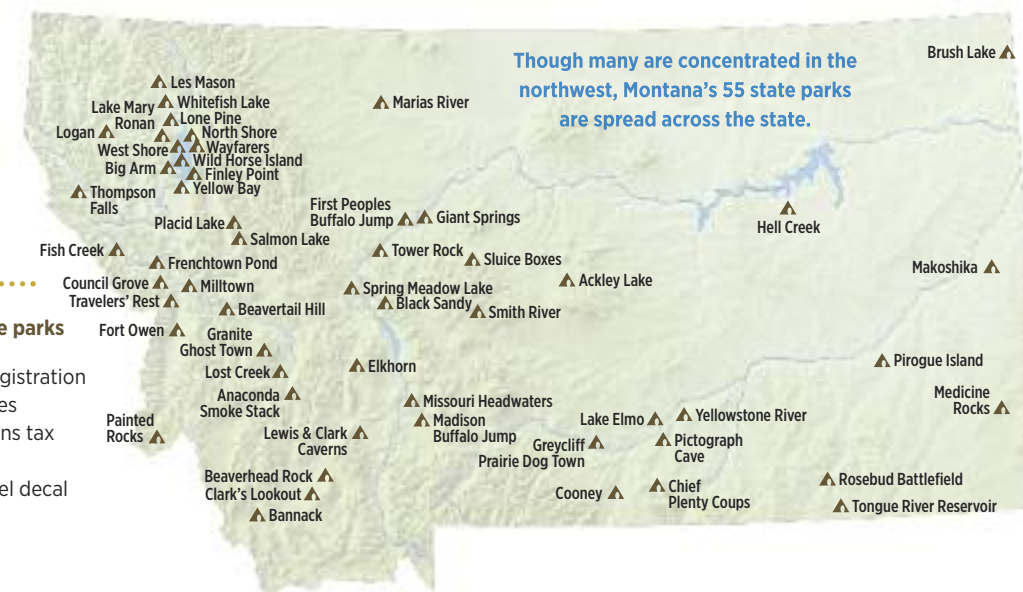
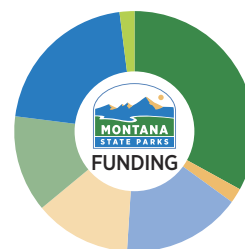
ROUGH PERIOD

Most state parks systems across the country are managed as part of wildlife departments or natural resources agencies. Yet some park advocates wonder whether the systems might be stronger and healthier if managed by other state agencies or even as their own departments (despite entailing costly additional administrative expenditures). In Montana during the 2010s, a movement to pull state parks out of FWP emerged; at one point, legislators considered a bill to move management to the Department of Commerce.



POPULAR PLACES Clockwise from top left: Montana’s state parks include geologic wonders such as Lewis & Clark Caverns and Medicine Rocks, recreational attractions like the Smith River, and National Historic Landmarks like Bannack. Almost all Montanans say a state parks system is important to them.

Most Montanans believe that their state income tax dollars pay for state parks. In fact, funding comes from the light vehicle registration fee, camping and nonresident entrance fees, and portions of state accommodation, motorboat, and coal taxes.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JEREMIE HOLLIMAN; JACK AND LISA BALLARD; DAN OLDENBURG; JAY L. CROSS

Debate over the parks system's future created friction within FWP. Internal communication rifts in turn hampered the department's ability to provide strict financial oversight of the Parks Division budget. During the 2017 legislative session, lawmakers learned the division had built up a fund balance of \$11 million, even as it was publicizing a \$22 million backlog in deferred maintenance. "Apparently, since its future was in limbo, Parks delayed spending on budgeted expenditures while waiting to see what its final administrative location would be," explains Angie Grove, chair of the Parks and Recreation Board and former deputy of performance audits with the Montana Legislative Audit Division. "At the same time, FWP also lacked some essential financial tracking controls."

Controversy over the budget issue triggered a legislative audit, replacement of the

Parks Division administrator, and appointment of a new Parks and Recreation Board. Governor Steve Bullock also appointed a 12-member Parks in Focus Commission in early 2018 to advise FWP and the board on improving operations and generating more public support and funding. The governor made clear that the Parks Division would remain in FWP.

"Montana has had this discussion again and again over where Parks should reside, and the final answer is always the same," Grove says. "FWP is the logical fit because the department is responsible for managing outdoor recreation such as hunting and fishing. Parks-based recreation fits right in."

Beth Shumate, who now heads the Parks Division, says another reason FWP is the logical home for Parks is the agency's network of regional offices. "They are where people across Montana find information about hunt-

ing, fishing, camping, state parks, trails—you name it," she says. "The department also has enforcement capabilities to ensure public safety and protect resources, which are key needs for Montana's state parks system."

"A WORLD OF TROUBLE"

On a windy afternoon in late December, park manager Clark Carlson-Thompson emerges from his closet-sized office to show a visitor around Giant Springs State Park. Few people are braving the chill this day to view the park's namesake natural feature, which gushes 150 million gallons of water daily into the Missouri River. But according to Carlson-Thompson, the park is mobbed most months. Its 400,000-plus annual visitors make Giant Springs Montana's busiest state park. Without the \$85,000 for extra staffing he receives each year from North-Western Energy, which owns much of the



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—Angie Grove, Chair, Montana State Parks and Recreation Board

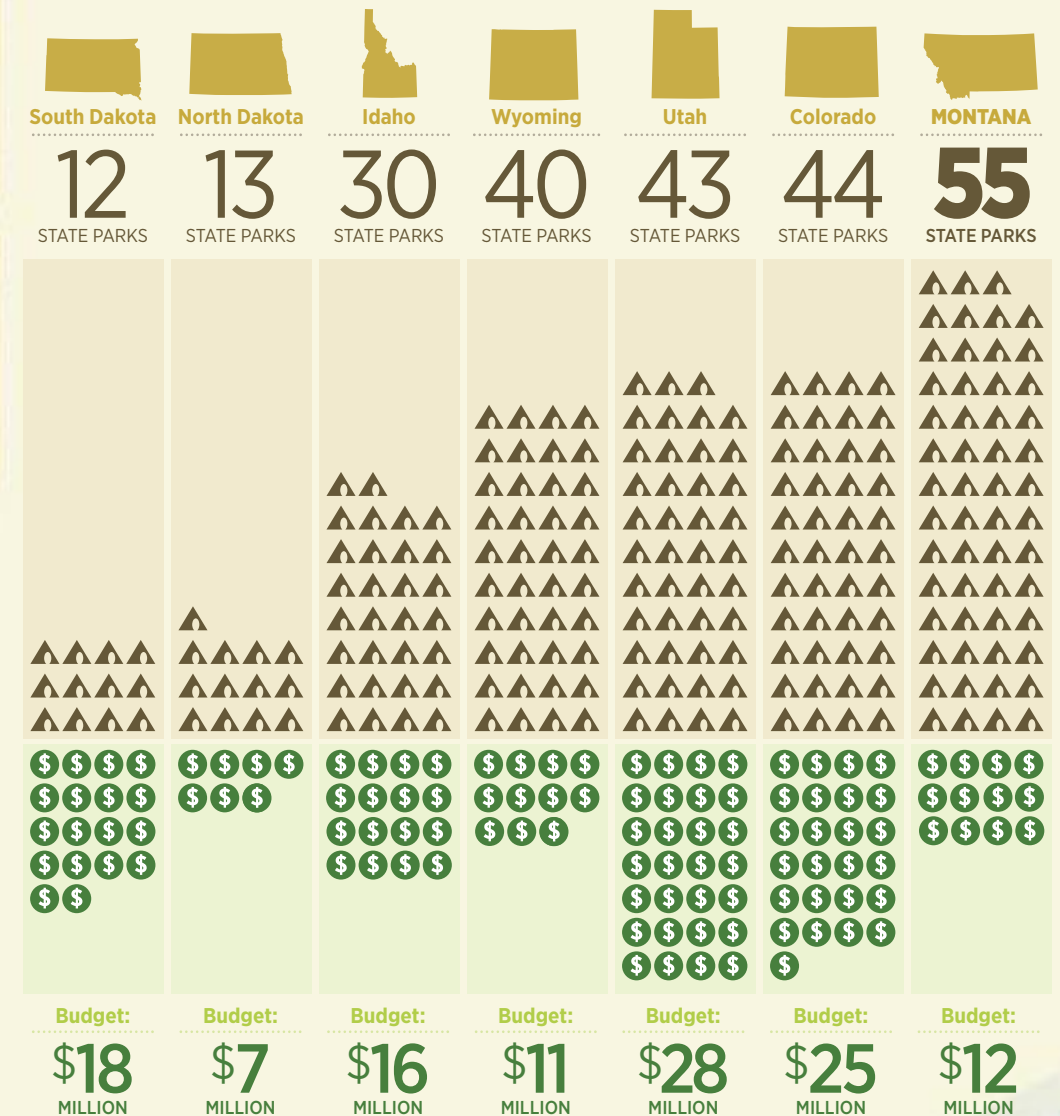
THOMBRIDGE



MORE PARKS, LESS FUNDING

Montana has the most state parks of any state in the region, yet one of the smallest state parks budgets. South Dakota, by comparison, has a 50 percent larger budget with less than one-quarter the number of parks. The closest state in park numbers is Colorado, with 44, but with a budget more than double Montana's.

Montana's state parks budget from recent FWP summaries. Other states' estimated park numbers and budgets from "Montana State Parks & Recreation Strategic Plan 2015-20."



park's property, "we'd be in a world of trouble," Carlson-Thompson says.

Other managers are already there. The manager of three northwestern Montana state parks, Brian Schwartz says recent budget cuts required laying off a part-time maintenance worker at Lone Pine State Park. "He was working only 400 hours a year, but the loss has meant that remaining staff and I have to abandon other duties to clean the park and visitor center and operate the welcome desk on summer weekends," Schwartz says.

Dave Bennetts, responsible for three other northwestern state parks, says his entire staff at Les Mason State Park, on

popular Whitefish Lake, consists of two volunteers. "It's in desperate need of capital investment and staffing assistance," he says. "There's no drinking water, only one latrine, and the parking lot is packed all summer."

Throughout Montana's parks system, aging trucks, tractors, backhoes, and other essential equipment constantly require repair. In some parks, leaky roofs and sagging windowsills need replacing. Peeling paint, clogged septic lines, potholed roads, faulty electrical systems, and failing RV dump stations afflict others. Several boat ramps and docks are broken down. Staff burnout is common.

Adding to the stressed system is ever-

increasing visitation. The number of visits to Travelers' Rest State Park has doubled over the past decade. "Shoulder season visitation alone is now higher than our entire annual visitation 10 years ago," says park manager Loren Flynn. The park's operating budget—like that of the entire state system—has not kept pace. "That means a greater percentage of our budget goes to toilet paper, cleaning and office supplies, rising energy and other utility costs, and training the volunteers and AmeriCorps members we increasingly rely on," Flynn says. "We end up skipping long-term maintenance but then having to spend precious time putting Band-Aids on immediate problems like leaking septic systems."

With only 98 employees to manage the 55 state parks and 2.5 million annual visits, the FWP Parks Division increasingly relies on volunteers. Flynn says Travelers' Rest could not function without Lewis and Clark enthusiasts who help lead tours and staff the visitor center. The same holds true elsewhere. "I don't even want to think what would happen if we lost even a few of our volunteers. Weekends at Flathead would be chaos," Grout says.

Even volunteers are finding it hard to keep pace. Bannack State Park relies on several thousand hours of volunteer work each year. "Some of them say they just can't do it anymore," park manager Dale Carlson says. "Add to that our paid employees working up to 16 hours a day in peak periods, and we're looking at some extremely stressed staff."

Grove says the state should not expect volunteers to make up for shortages in paid

employees. "You need trained staff who can handle major issues like medical emergencies, dealing with campground conflicts, and writing resource-management plans," she says.

Montana's isn't the only parks system struggling to accommodate burgeoning use. City, state, and national parks across the country report increased visitation—spurred by growing populations and more active retirees—that outpaces budgets and staff size. Record attendance in recent years at Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks has contributed to a combined maintenance backlog of \$700 million.

HAPPY CAMPERS

Yet visit a state park, and all seems rosy. "Unless they somehow know what's happening behind the scenes, our guests have no idea that we're barely keeping the wheels on the bus," says Dave Landstrom, FWP's northwestern region parks manager. A 2017 post-visit survey of nearly 3,000 Montana state parks campers found that 85 percent rated their experience as very good or excellent.

Those rave reviews could soon turn sour. Without funding and staffing hikes, state parks officials fear that visitors will see a decline in service and facilities. A possible attendance drop could hurt local economies and even state coffers. Visitors to Montana's state parks spend nearly \$300 million each year on gear, lodging, food, gas, and more, sustaining 1,600 tourism jobs in local economies, according to a 2010 UM report.

With so much at stake, state parks advocates welcomed the 2018 legislative audit and Parks in Focus Commission review. In December, the commission submitted four final recommendations, similar to those made by auditors earlier in the year: accelerate cohesion between FWP's Parks and other department divisions; strengthen the Parks Division's capacity by increasing and developing staff and establishing clear strategic priorities and efficient management systems; build stronger partnerships and advocacy groups; and develop short- and long-term funding strategies to "build now for the future state parks system that

Parks Division makes progress

Despite chronic budget and staffing shortages, FWP's Parks Division has made major capital investments over the past several years thanks to funding authority granted by the Montana Legislature, says assistant administrator Tom Reilly. Progress includes:

- ▶ A partnership with the University of Montana's Biological Research Station on Flathead Lake to upgrade the failing septic system shared by the station and Yellow Bay State Park. FWP provided \$50,000 toward the project and resolved a long-standing wastewater infrastructure problem within the park.
- ▶ Improvements, to be completed this spring by a private contractor's crew, to the interior lighting, electrical systems, and handrails at Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park. This spring FWP will also seek bids for replacing the wastewater-treatment system that serves the upper area and concession building.
- ▶ Replacement of an outdated 1980s fire alarm system within the historic townsite at Bannack State Park.
- ▶ Upgrading roughly two miles of failing access road within Makoshika State Park. The project began in fall of 2018 and will be completed this spring.

"We're proud of the progress we've made over the past two years. But there's still much more to be done to upgrade the infrastructure of Montana's state parks to where it needs to be," Reilly says. ■



Makoshika State Park, where two miles of failing road is being upgraded this spring.



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Montanans deserve.”

Grove reports that FWP is taking the recommendations to heart. The department has already begun to categorize state parks

in a way that guides user experiences, budget priorities, and investment strategies. “This needs to happen quickly, so people see the Parks Division taking concrete steps to

improve visitor services while also improving the way it allocates and generates money,” she says.

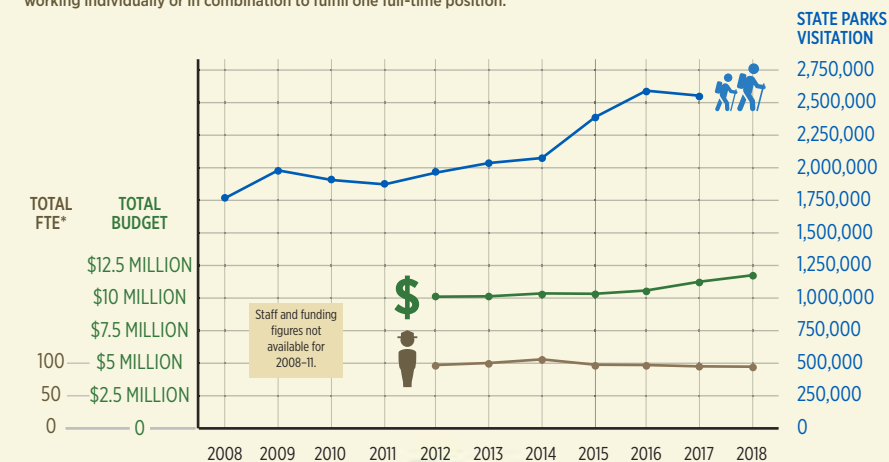
The agency has also fully integrated the Parks Division into its long-term vision plan. It has consolidated all budget functions in a centralized administrative unit to ensure transparency and consistency. FWP's chief financial officer has been given enhanced fiscal oversight and regularly meets with Parks personnel to review the division's budget. After a several-year hiatus, department communication outlets such as *Montana Outdoors* once again include state parks programs and issues.

Flynn, the Travelers' Rest manager, says he's encouraged that Montana leaders are working to make state parks stronger, more resilient, and better able to meet public needs. “Here at Travelers' Rest, there's so much more we could be providing visitors and local residents,” he says. “We want to succeed. But right now, we don't have the staff or resources we need to succeed. That's a heavy burden to carry to work every day.” 🐾

Staff and funding lag behind visitation

From 2008 to 2017, the number of visits to Montana's state parks rose by 47 percent. Yet funding and staff size has stayed roughly the same. The disparity has created staff burnout along with deteriorating electrical, sewage, water, road, and trail systems.

*FTE = An FTE (Full-Time Equivalent) represents one or more persons working individually or in combination to fulfill one full-time position.



LEFT TO RIGHT: DEE LINNELL/BLANK; TOMMY MARTINO