

Yellowstone sets visitation record for June

Associated Press | Posted: Tuesday, July 7, 2009 11:35 pm

CHEYENNE - Visitors flocked to Yellowstone National Park in June, propelling the park to its busiest January-June period on record, according to numbers released Tuesday.

About 644,000 visitors entered the nation's first national park last month, up 8.5 percent from about 593,400 in June 2008. May was also a busy month for Yellowstone, with visitation up 20 percent from the May before.

Park spokesman Al Nash attributed the May numbers partly to good weather, which could have encouraged more regional residents to visit the park.

He said park officials have expected a decent summer but didn't foresee that June visits would set a record. He attributed the increase partly to the fact that people can tailor their Yellowstone trips to their budgetary constraints.

"It is a trip that many people plan to take months or even years in advance," Nash said. "They may change their destination, they may change the length of their trip, they may be changing their spending patterns a bit, but Yellowstone remains a strong draw for visitors."

This June marked the only time in the park's history besides June 2007 when visitors exceeded 600,000 for the month.

But 2009 could be on track to top 2007. This is the only year in Yellowstone's history when more than 1 million people visited in the first six months of the year. Year-to-date, the number of visitors is up 9.3 percent from last year.

Yellowstone is entering the height of its summer season, made up of July and August. Nash said the park doesn't have visitor numbers for the July 4 weekend, but he said it felt busy.

"There certainly could be things that happen that impact our subsequent season numbers, but we remain cautiously optimistic that we'll continue to have a good summer season," Nash said. "But if July, August and September weren't to be as record-breaking as June was, it wouldn't be a surprise, and it wouldn't be a disappointment."

The surge in May and June visitors followed a slow winter season for Yellowstone. The park's numbers were off 8 percent in January, 15.5 percent in February and nearly 10 percent in March. Park managers attributed the decrease to a lack of early-season snow, the weak economy and confusion over the legal status of snowmobiling in the park.