

Yellowstone visitation soars

By BRETT FRENCH
The Billings Gazette
Wednesday, August 5, 2009 10:59 PM MDT

After a slow start to the year, Yellowstone National Park is on pace to set a new annual visitation record.

Just-released visitor numbers from July show that more than 900,000 people entered the park that borders Wyoming, Idaho and Montana. The figure is up 11.4 percent from July last year and tops the previous all-time record for July of 847,000 visitors in 1995.

"We expected a good year," said Al Nash, Yellowstone's chief of public affairs. "No one would've expected a record year."

Nash attributed the increase to lower gas prices, which were above \$4 a gallon last July. This year, the average is around \$2.50 a gallon. National parks also have been promoted as less costly places for Americans to vacation during an economic downturn.

To help out, the National Park Service has offered free entrance for three weekends, the last of which is Aug. 15-16.

Any entrance

All five of Yellowstone's entrances reported an increase in the number of visitors over last year. The West Entrance remains the park's busiest, with more than 385,000 visitors in July compared with 337,000 a year ago. The greatest percentage increase in visitation was recorded through the East Entrance, up 15.1 percent from July 2008.

July is typically the park's peak month for visitation, followed by August, June, September and May. The average visitation per day in July was 29,000 people.

"That July saw an 11 percent increase over the previous year is certainly not something we would've predicted," Nash said. "It's the biggest visitation month ever, period."

Record pace

This is the second record-setting month for the park this year. Visitation in June was just less than 644,000, well above the previous record of 609,000 visitors in June 2007.

For the first seven months of the year, more than 1.9 million people have visited Yellowstone. That's up 100,000 from the previous record of 1.8 million recorded for the period in 2007. With August and September, two more boom months, yet to come, the park could break the annual visitation record of 3.15 million set in 2007, Nash said.

Lack of snow and lawsuits led to confusion about the winter season last year. Visitation for the first three months of this year was down from 2008, especially in February, which saw a drop of more than 15 percent.

"Winter's important, but it is a small component when compared to the summer's impact," Nash said.