

# Record Utah Park Visitation Spanned Seasons and Destinations in 2021

*Note: The opinions expressed are those of the author alone and do not reflect an institutional position of the Gardner Institute. We hope the opinions shared contribute to the marketplace of ideas and help people as they formulate their own INFORMED DECISIONS™.*

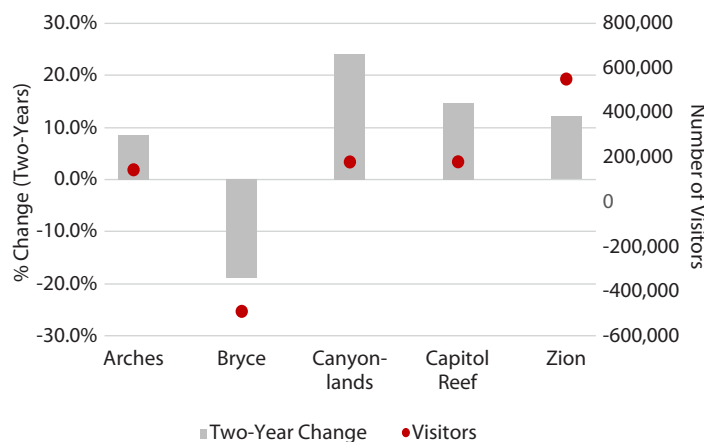
As 2021 park visitation numbers roll in, Utah's parks appear to have remained virtually unscathed by the 2020 pandemic, with visitation spread among both seasons and destinations. For purposes of understanding 2021 park visitation in the context of "normal" visitation, I have compared 2021 with 2019 (pre-pandemic) visitation.

Utah's five national parks reported a record 11.3 million visits in 2021 compared with 10.7 million in 2019; or, over a half-million additional visits and a 5.3% increase. However, on an individual level, not every national park reported record-setting visitation. In fact, while Zion gained a half-million visitors compared with 2019, Bryce Canyon was down a half-million (see Figure 1). Canyonlands had the largest two-year percent change (24.2%), while Capitol Reef and Canyonlands each welcomed around 180,000, and Arches experienced growth consistent with the past several years (8.7%).

In fact, interesting 2021 park visitation patterns arose when broken out by season. For instance, the greatest overall visitor growth (+475,446) occurred in winter compared with 2019, while the greatest visitor decline occurred in summer (-575,661) (see Figure 2). The national park seasonal share of visitors thus shifted as well, with winter visitation composing a 9% share of visitors in 2019 and a 13% share in 2021. Summer visitation, too, dropped from a 38% share of visitors in 2019 to a 31% share in 2021. This shift from the high tourist season to the off-season not only speaks to Americans' pent-up desire to travel in early 2021, but also highlights the continued absence of Utah's international travelers who are largely summer visitors.

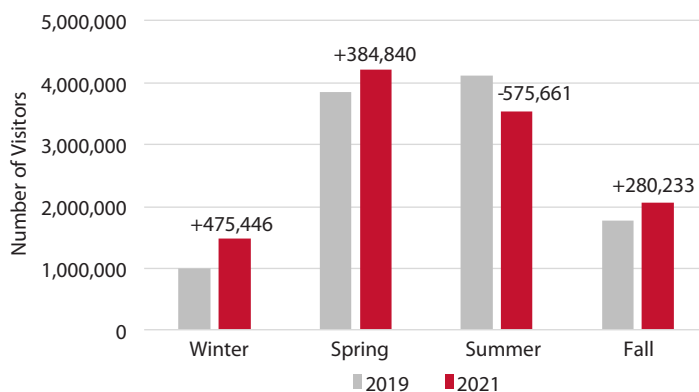
Utah state park visitation showed similar patterns in 2021. Utah's state parks welcomed an additional 3.5 million annual visitors (a 44.6% increase) with greater percent increases in winter and fall compared with spring and summer. However, unlike national parks, which experienced a 14% decrease in visitation during the summer months, state parks reported a

**Figure 1. National Park Visitation by Park, Two-Year Change, 2019—2021**



Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of National Park Service data

**Figure 2. National Park Visitors by Season, Two-Year Change, 2019—2021**



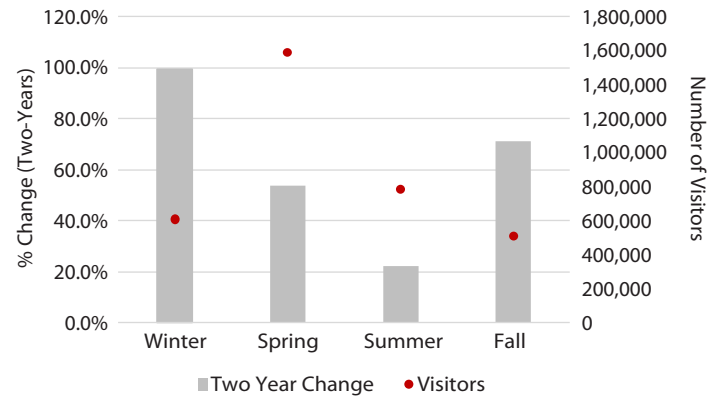
Note: Winter includes Jan-Mar; Spring is Apr-Jun; Summer is Jul-Sept; and Fall is Oct-Dec.  
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of National Park Service data.

22% increase in visitation during summer, welcoming an additional 785,000+ visitors (see Figure 3). In fact, spring 2021 was the real stand-out for state park visitation, with reports of over 1.5 million additional visitors compared with spring 2019.

Utah's 2021 park visitation data shows that despite the lingering complexities presented by COVID-19, travelers

continued to seek out Utah’s stunning and diverse landscapes in record numbers. The data also suggests that the Utah Office of Tourism’s “Forever Mighty” campaign, which aims to disperse visitors across season and destination may be experiencing some success. In any case, there’s no denying that Utah’s stunning beauty and endless outdoor recreational opportunities from border to border continue to draw visitors in record numbers, and there’s no telling when—or if—things will slow down.

**Figure 3. State Park Visitation by Park, Two-Year Change, 2019—2021**



Note: Winter includes Jan-Mar; Spring is Apr-Jun; Summer is Jul-Sept; and Fall is Oct-Nov. December 2019 and 2021 visitation is not included.  
 Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of Utah State Park data.