



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Superior National Forest | April 26, 2021

Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Superior National Forest Permit & Visitor Use Report 2016-2020



Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) is a unique area located in the northern third of the Superior National Forest in northeastern Minnesota. Over 1,098,000 acres in size, it extends nearly 150 miles along the International Boundary adjacent to Voyageurs National Park and Canada's Quetico and La Verendrye Provincial Parks. The BWCAW contains over 1,200 miles of canoe routes, 12 hiking trails and almost 2,000 designated campsites. This area was set aside in 1926 to preserve its primitive character and made a part of the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964 with subsequent wilderness legislation in 1978. The BWCAW Act of 1978 added more acreage and specific management direction with the purpose to preserve, manage, enhance, and restore the area. Designated wilderness offers solitude, freedom, primitive recreation, challenge, risk, and personal connection with nature. The BWCAW allows visitors to travel and camp in the spirit of those that came before them centuries ago.

BWCAW Permits – Need to Know

Permits are required year-round for all visitors to the BWCAW. Nine people and four watercraft are the maximum allowed together in the Wilderness anytime or anywhere (on water, portages, and campsites). One permit per group is required. Once a reservation is made, the permit holder, alternate permit holders, entry date, and entry point may not be changed. BWCAW permits are not transferable. Permits may only be picked up the day before or on the date specified on the permit. Quota permits are issued at USDA Forest Service Offices and cooperating businesses. For more information, please visit [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov).

First Come, First Served

All quota permits for all entry points are released on a first come, first served basis at 9:00 a.m. CST on the last Wednesday in January through [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) and the call center at: 877-444-6777. Reservations are recommended since there is a limited number of quota permits available for each entry point.

What is a quota?

A quota limits the number of permits available each day at BWCAW entry points.

What is an entry point?

An entry point is a lake, river, or trail where visitors enter the BWCA Wilderness. A quota permit is valid to enter the BWCAW only on the entry date and at the entry point specified.

What does a quota system do?

A quota system distributes visitor movement throughout the wilderness during the summer months when visitor use is at its highest level. Without a quota system, too many visitors would enter the BWCAW at the same locations resulting in significant physical and social resource damage to the Wilderness. A quota system helps to prevent wilderness character degradation as envisioned by the [Wilderness Act of 1964](#). Wilderness is an area where humankind's footprint does not dominate the landscape—where the earth and its community of life remains unimpaired for future generations—a place to visit but not remain. The quota system helps to maintain the integrity of the BWCA Wilderness.



BWCAW Quota Permits

Quota permits are issued from May 1 to September 30 for Overnight Paddle, Overnight Hiking, Overnight Motor, and Day Use Motor through the [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) reservation system. A \$6.00 non-refundable reservation fee is charged for each permit reserved. Recreation fees are charged per person for all permit types except Day Use Motor. When quota is available, “Walk In” permits may be reserved in person at any permit issue station on the entry date or one day prior. Most quota permits are reserved in advance.

BWCAW Non-Quota Permits

The Law does not require a quota system in the fall, winter, and early spring. However, Self Issued permits are required for all overnight visitors entering the BWCAW between October 1 and April 30. Self Issued permits are also required year-round for all non-motorized day use visitors, and for any motorized day use into Little Vermilion Lake. Self Issued Permits are available from kiosks at BWCAW entry points and Forest Service offices, no reservations are required and no recreation fees are charged.

What is a Cooperator?

A local business that has an agreement with the Forest Service to issue BWCAW permits at their location.

What is an Outfitter or Guide?

A Wilderness outfitter rents or delivers to the BWCAW, any motorboat, canoe, camping gear or similar supplies or equipment. A Wilderness guide provides services or assistance in the BWCAW (such as education, interpretation, training, packing, touring, food or transporting people) for monetary or other gains. Currently, there are (105) outfitter guides commercially operating in the Wilderness under a Special Use Permit granted by the USDA Forest Service.

What is an Exempt BWCAW Permit?

An exempt permit is exempt use from the quota system. In the BWCAW Act of 1978, an exemption to the quota system was provided to homeowners and resort owners (and their overnight guests), for day use and overnight trips on specific lakes named in the Act. “Each homeowner and his/her guests and each resort owner and his/her guests on a lake shall have access to that lake, and their use shall not be counted as part of that lake’s quota” (PL 95-495). This exemption can come in the form of a written guest permit from the Forest Service or with a boat “sticker” to identify homeowner or resort owned motorboats. In the past, exempt permits were issued to authorized researchers, volunteers or other work groups for specific projects. As of 2019, these groups are required to reserve BWCAW permits on [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) as visitors do. Other government agencies or researchers working in partnership with the Superior National Forest may be exempted from paddle and motor quotas on a case-by-case basis.

Cover Photo Credit: Ann Schwaller



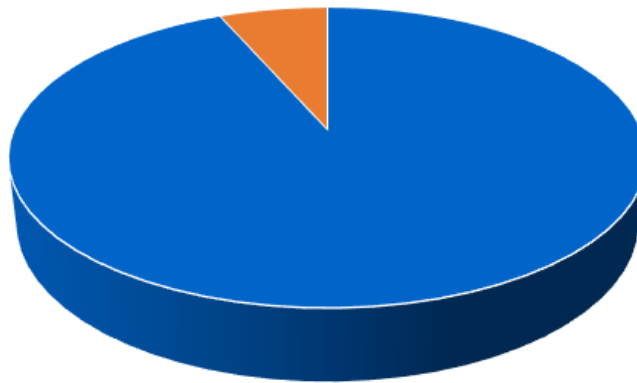
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BWCAW Annual Visitors

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Overnight Visitors Quota Season: May - September	86543	85187	83648	82989	96174
Day Use Motor Visitors Quota Season: May - September	18620	19501	19661	17107	20344
Day Use Non-Motor Visitors Quota Season: May - September	35409	32683	35671	34832	38101
Overnight & Day Use Visitors October - April	15039	15241	11734	8212	11299
Total Annual Visitors	155611	152612	150714	143140	165918

After weeks of lockdowns preceding the 2020 BWCAW season, covid19 brought a surge of visitors to the Wilderness. There was a 16% increase in annual visitors over the previous year.

2020 BWCAW Annual Visitors



■ May - September Visitors 93% ■ October - April Visitors 7%

In 2020, 93% of all BWCAW visitors traveled to the Wilderness between May 1 and September 30, only 7% of visitors traveled to the BWCAW from October 1 - April 30.

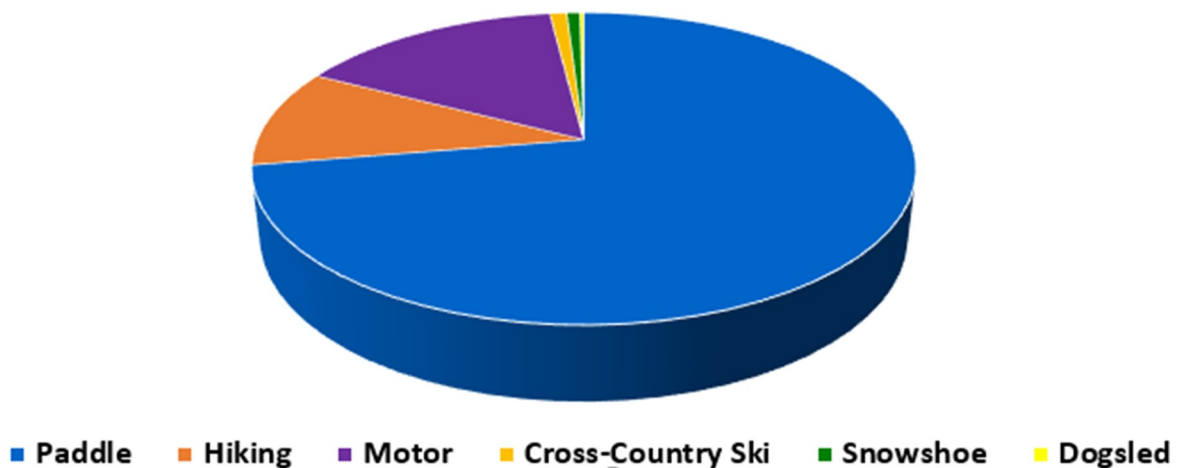


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BWCAW Annual Visitor Permits by Type of Use

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Overnight Paddle	19962	19730	19567	19679	24668
Overnight Hiking	355	339	357	389	722
Overnight Motor	1246	1229	1138	1078	1218
Day Use Motor	4335	4475	4569	4132	4940
Total Quota Permits May 1 - September 30	25898	25773	25631	25278	31548
Paddle	9328	8477	8469	8961	9753
Hiking	4475	4550	4544	4021	5895
Motor	1110	395	886	1007	1027
Cross-Country Ski	433	526	706	459	550
Snowshoe	249	314	350	353	307
Dogsled	235	234	207	107	128
Total Self Issued Permits January 1 - December 30	15830	14496	15162	14908	17660
Total Annual Permits	41728	40269	40793	40186	49208

2020 BWCAW Type of Use

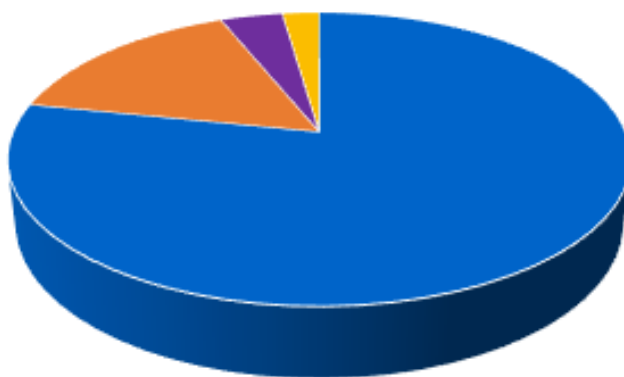


BWCAW Quota Permits May 1 – September 30

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Totals on this page display permits issued during the quota season only, from May 1 to September 30. See page 3 for a detailed explanation of BWCAW quota permits.

2020 BWCAW Quota Permits



■ Overnight Paddle
 ■ Day Use Motor
 ■ Overnight Motor
 ■ Overnight Hiking

After weeks of lockdowns preceding the 2020 BWCAW season, covid19 brought a surge of visitors to the Wilderness. There was a 25% increase in permits issued during the quota season from May 1 to September 30 over the previous year.



BWCAW Quota Permit Cancellations May 1 – September 30

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Overnight Paddle	3589	*	*	3563	6379
Overnight Hiking	60	*	*	68	122
Overnight Motor	424	444	402	335	322
Day Use Motor	810	850	702	689	810
Total Canceled	4883	4712	4489	4655	7633

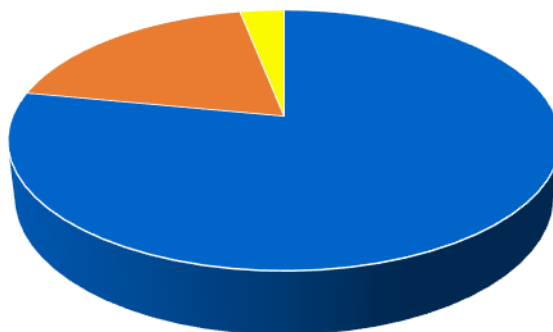
* Data not available

BWCAW Quota Permit No Shows May 1 – September 30

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Overnight Paddle	1058	*	*	1256	819
Overnight Hiking	27	*	*	23	31
Overnight Motor	120	144	132	134	78
Day Use Motor	712	604	528	866	317
Total No Show	1917	1832	1727	2279	1245

* Data not available

2020 BWCAW Cancellations & No Shows



■ Permits Issued 31,548 ■ Cancelled 7,633 (24%) ■ No Show 1,245 (4%)



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BWCAW Quota Permits Issued by Forest Service & Cooperators

May 1 – September 30

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Forest Service Offices	8965	8948	8451	6502	11011
Authorized Cooperators	16933	16825	17180	18765	20537
Total	25898	25773	25631	25267	31548

BWCAW Average Group Size

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Average Group Size May - September	4.06	4.06	4.03	3.96	3.05
Average Group Size October - April	3.32	3.27	3.10	2.92	2.79

BWCAW Visitor Use Demographics

May 1 – September 30

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Adult	65508	64374	62853	*	*
Youth 17 and Under	18845	18333	18365	*	*
Senior Pass 62 and Older	1782	2110	2042	*	*
Access Pass – Adult Persons with Disabilities	135	137	122	*	*
Access Pass – Youth Persons with Disabilities	4	18	11	*	*

* Data not available from Recreation.gov



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Property Owner Exempt Boat Sticker Day Use Motor Permits

	2016 - 2018	2019 - 2021
Clearwater Lake	54	36
East Bearskin Lake	26	24
Saganaga - Canadian Side	147	160
Saganaga - U.S. Side	51	51
Seagull Lake	82	82
Total East Zone	360	353
Moose Lake	152	149
Fall Lake	173	184
Snowbank Lake	59	59
South Farm	1	5
Total West Zone	385	397
Total	745	750

BWCAW Exempt Quota Permits May 1 – September 30

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Overnight Paddle	36	53	4	40	12
Overnight Hiking	0	0	0	0	18
Overnight Motor & Day Use Motor	28	0	13	15	2
Homeowner/Resort Guests - PL 95-495	400	258	146	274	210
Total	464	311	163	329	242



Why do the Wilderness data vary?

Data for BWCAW permits varies from year to year. Variances can be due to changes in weather, droughts, wildfires, the economy, public health crises such as covid19, and even insect hatch timing. In addition to environmental and economic impacts, reservation system processes are updated, contracts are renewed or contracted companies change through the years. So, system program algorithms and data collection methods, and therefore resulting data sets, may have subtle differences between decades. The latest version of Recreation.gov was launched by Booz Allen Hamilton on October 1, 2018. Data sets prior to 2018 may differ from current data.

Quota data obtained from reservations made through Recreation.gov are more accurate than Self Issued permit data. It is the visitor's responsibility to fill out the Self Issued Permit accurately to reflect the dates, location, and type of activity engaged in during a visit. However, Self Issued permits are not always filled out accurately or completely, which is why Self Issued permit data are not as accurate as quota data.

For More Information

For information about visitor use in the Superior National Forest outside the BWCAW, please review the [National Visitor Use Monitoring National Summary Report](#). For information on recreation fees raised through the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, or to learn more about the [Superior National Forest](#) or the [BWCAW](#), please contact the Superior National Forest at 218-626-4300.

BWCAW Trip Planning

If you are planning a trip to the BWCAW, the [Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness Trip Planning Guide](#) is the most current, comprehensive guide available on the internet. After reviewing the trip planning guide thoroughly, take the time to [Watch and Share – The BWCAW Video Series](#) with your group prior to entering the wilderness. Permit holders are responsible for ensuring everyone in their group abides by all laws, regulations and rules which apply to the [BWCA Wilderness](#). Test your knowledge by reviewing the fourteen essential [BWCAW Regulations and Rules](#) for safe and responsible wilderness travel with your group.



Photo Credit: Ann Schwaller

