



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Superior National Forest | August 25, 2022

Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Superior National Forest Permit & Visitor Use Report 2017-2021



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. BWCAW permits are not transferable. Once a reservation is made, the permit holder, alternate permit holders, entry date, and entry point may not be changed. Permits may only be picked up on the entry date or one day prior. Quota permits are issued at USDA Forest Service offices and cooperating businesses. For more information, please visit the BWCAW webpage on [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 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 on the permit.

What is a quota?

A quota limits the number of groups entering the BWCAW each day by limiting the number of permits available for each entry point from May 1 to September 30.

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 Wilderness as designed by Law and policy.

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 on the entry date or one day prior at any permit issue station. Most quota permits are reserved in advance.

BWCAW Non-Quota Permits

At this time, quota permits are not required in the fall, winter, and early spring. However, Self Issued Permits are required for all overnight visitors entering the BWCA Wilderness 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 BWCA Wilderness outfitter rents or delivers to the Wilderness, any motorboat, canoe, camping gear or similar supplies or equipment. A BWCA Wilderness guide operates via a Forest Service Special Use Permit and provides services or assistance in the Wilderness (such as education, interpretation, training, packing, touring, food or transporting people) for monetary or other gains. Currently, there are (108) 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 use that is exempted from the quota system on specific lakes. In the BWCAW Act of 1978, an exemption to the quota was provided to homeowners and resort owners (and their overnight guests), for day use motor access to the lake on which they reside. “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 comes from the Forest Service in the form of a written guest permit or a boat sticker which is used 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



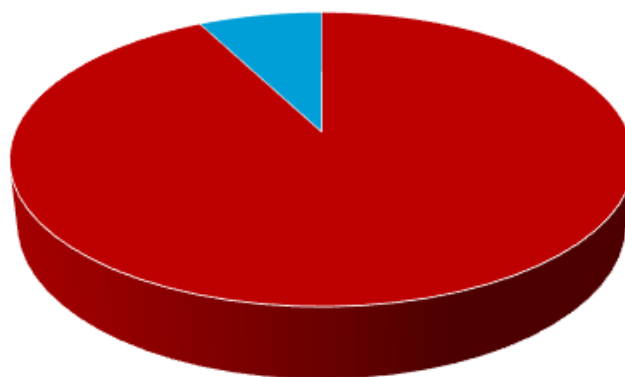
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BWCAW Annual Visitors

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
Quota Season	Overnight Visitors May - September	85187	83648	82989	96174	100089
	Day Use Motor Visitors May - September	19501	19661	17107	20344	18963
	Day Use Non-Motor Visitors May - September	32683	35671	34832	38101	34593
	Overnight & Day Use Visitors October - April	15241	11734	8212	11299	12729
	Total Annual Visitors	152612	150714	143140	165918	166374

After weeks of covid19 lockdowns preceding the 2020 quota permit season, visitors flocked to the BWCA Wilderness resulting in a 16% increase in visitation over the previous year. The surge in visitor use continued through 2021 with 166,374 annual visitors traveling to the BWCAW, while Quetico Provincial Park and the Canadian border remained closed to U.S. travelers for all of 2021.

2021 BWCAW Annual Visitors



■ **May - September Visitors 94%** ■ **October - April Visitors 6%**

In 2021, 94% of all visitors traveled to the Wilderness between May 1 and September 30 during quota season. Only 6% of visitors traveled to the BWCAW from October 1 - April 30.

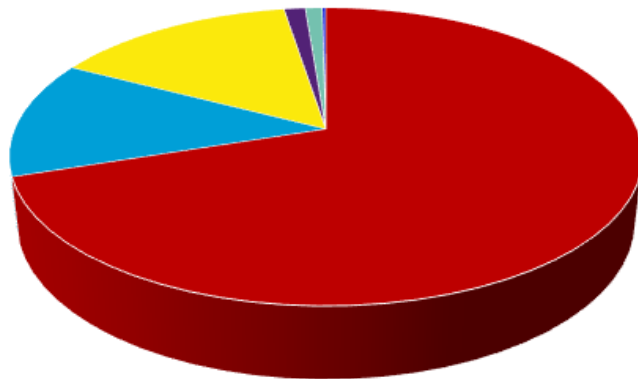


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BWCAW Annual Visitor Permits by Type of Use

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Overnight Paddle	19730	19567	19679	24668	23982
Overnight Hiking	339	357	389	722	459
Overnight Motor	1229	1138	1078	1218	1259
Day Use Motor	4475	4569	4132	4940	4364
Total Quota Permits May 1 - September 30	25773	25631	25278	31548	30064
Paddle	8477	8469	8961	9753	9211
Hiking	4550	4544	4021	5895	5587
Motor	395	886	1007	1027	1393
Cross-Country Ski	526	706	459	550	618
Snowshoe	314	350	353	307	489
Dogsled	234	207	107	128	104
Total Self Issued Permits January 1 - December 30	14496	15162	14908	17660	17402
Total Annual Permits	40269	40793	40186	49208	47466

2021 BWCAW Type of Use



■ Paddle
 ■ Hiking
 ■ Motor
 ■ Cross-Country Ski
 ■ Snowshow
 ■ Dogsled



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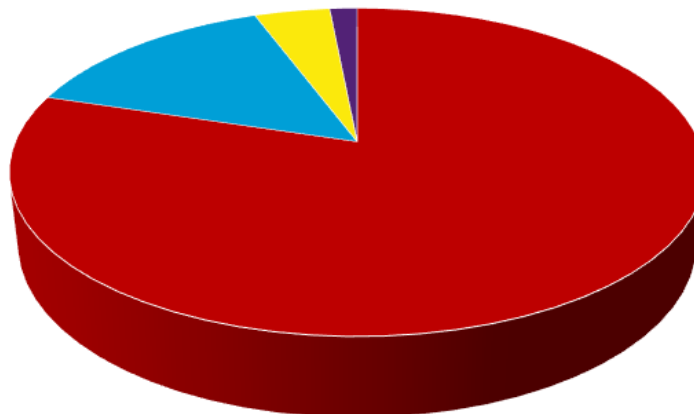
BWCAW Quota Permits May 1 – September 30

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**includes 4,493 permits refunded due to wildfires*

Data on this page reflects permits issued during the quota permit season only. Quota permits are required for groups entering the BWCAW from May 1 to September 30. See page 2 for a detailed explanation of BWCAW quota permits.

2021 BWCAW Quota Permits



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

The record breaking visitation seen in 2020 due to the pandemic continued throughout the 2021 quota permit season. The Canadian border remained closed for all of 2021. Visitation slowed only slightly when 4,493 trips were interrupted by wildfires and the closure of wilderness entry points for public and partner safety.



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BWCAW Quota Permit Cancellations

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
May—September	Overnight Paddle	*	*	3563	6379	8190
	Overnight Hiking	*	*	68	122	101
	Overnight Motor	444	402	335	322	447
	Day Use Motor	850	702	689	810	934
	Total Canceled	4712	4489	4655	7633	9672

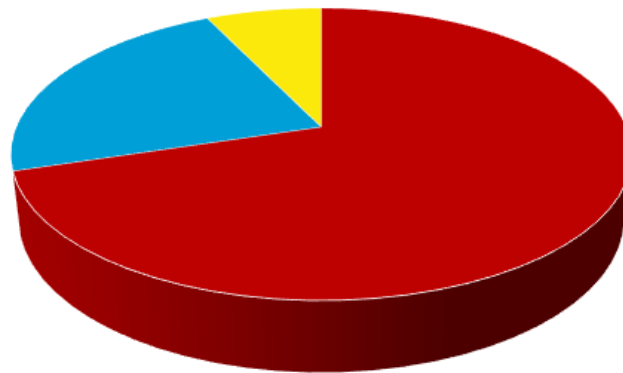
* Data not available

BWCAW Quota Permit No Show

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
May—September	Overnight Paddle	*	*	1256	819	1794
	Overnight Hiking	*	*	23	31	54
	Overnight Motor	144	132	134	78	203
	Day Use Motor	604	528	866	317	1025
	Total No Show	1832	1727	2279	1245	3076

* Data not available

2021 BWCAW Cancellations & No Show



■ Permits Issued ■ Permits Cancelled ■ No Show

As wildfires raged in the Superior National Forest during the 2021 quota season, entry points closed and reopened as conditions changed. Visitors rerouted to alternate destinations both inside and outside of the BWCAW. Others cancelled their trips, resulting in an increase to the Cancellation and No Show rates in 2021.



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BWCAW Quota Permits Issued by Forest Service & Cooperators May 1 – September 30

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Forest Service Offices	8948	8451	6502	11011	8723
Authorized Cooperators	16825	17180	18765	20537	21341
Total	25773	25631	25267	31548	30064*

**includes 4493 permits refunded due to wildfires*

BWCAW Average Group Size

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Average Group Size May - September	4.06	4.03	3.96	3.05	3.96
Average Group Size October - April	3.27	3.10	2.92	2.79	2.73

BWCAW Visitor Use Demographics May 1 – September 30

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Adult	64374	62853	80398	97599	96469
Youth 17 and Under	18333	18365	17811	17369	20767
<u>Senior Pass</u> 62 and Older	2110	2042	1789	1360	1655
<u>Access Pass – Adult</u> Persons with Disabilities	137	122	125	153	140
<u>Access Pass – Youth</u> Persons with Disabilities	18	11	6	29	9



Day Use Motor Permits Exempted from Quota - Property Owner Boat Stickers -

	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

Total Permits Exempted from Quota May 1 – September 30

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Overnight Paddle	53	4	40	12	9
Overnight Hiking	0	0	0	18	9
Overnight Motor & Day Use Motor	0	13	15	2	1
Homeowner/Resort Guests (PL 95-495)	258	146	274	210	751
Total	311	163	329	242	770



Why does the Wilderness data vary?

Data for BWCAW permits varies from year to year. Variances can be due to changes in weather, drought, floods, blowdown, wildfires, the economy, public health crises such as covid19, Canadian border closures, and even the timing of insects hatching. In addition to environmental and economic impacts, reservation system processes are updated, contracts are renewed, and 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 is 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 to the Wilderness. However, Self Issued permits are not always filled out accurately or completely, which is why Self Issued permit data is not as accurate as quota permit 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 [BWCA Wilderness](#), 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 online. After reviewing the trip planning guide thoroughly, please 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



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