



SOUTH NATION
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Conservation Areas Monitoring 2025 Annual Report

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Objectives of the Conservation Areas Monitoring Program.....	3
Overview: Conservation Areas Monitoring Program	3
Data Collection	3
Conservation Area Network.....	5
Conservation Area Usage Results	6
Recreational Trails.....	6
Picnic & River Access Conservation Areas	7
New Conservation Area Development.....	8
Conservation Area Management Impacts on Visitor Trends.....	9
Conservation Areas Usage Summary.....	10
Summary of Inspections and Observations.....	14
Recommendations	16

Introduction

South Nation Conservation (SNC) owns and manages 183 properties throughout its jurisdiction in Eastern Ontario, constituting approximately 13,000 acres of land. Of these, 15 properties are designated as day-use Conservation Areas (CAs).

SNC manages and maintains these areas to offer year-round recreational opportunities for residents and visitors including birding, boating/canoeing/paddling, fishing, geocaching, hiking/walking, picnicking and horseback riding. Other forested properties offer passive recreation opportunities including, hunting, trapping, sustainable harvesting, and lease opportunities.

SNC manages its Conservation Areas with support of municipal and county partners, all publicly accessible Conservation Areas require management agreements with municipal partners.

SNC greatly appreciates feedback from all recreational users, as well as the continued support from the public, Board and Committees, volunteers, municipalities, and funding partners.

Objectives of the Conservation Areas Monitoring Program

Beginning in 2013, SNC began collecting weekly data from car and trail counters. To date, SNC has installed counters in all its day-use Conservation Areas. Car counters record each vehicle as it enters the CA entrance (counters assume that there are two visitors per vehicle, on average). Trail counters record individual visitors as they pass by a designated location along the trail. This data provides insight on visitation and trail use at monitored locations.

Objectives of the Conservation Area Monitoring Program:

1. Gauge public use of SNC Conservation Areas;
2. Guide improvements to CA infrastructure based on usage; and
3. Communicate and build support for SNC's Conservation Areas.

Overview: Conservation Areas Monitoring Program

Data Collection

SNC began its monitoring program in 2013 with the implementation of one vehicle counter and one trail counter. Full coverage of actively maintained Conservation Areas began in 2016.

Counter deployment corresponds with park opening dates and trail conditions. Visitation is not monitored outside of seasonal operation. Counters are serviced monthly to download data.

Trail counters are placed in strategic locations to ensure concealment and effectiveness. Car counters are used at all recreational picnic and river usage Conservation Areas to count vehicles that enter the property. Trail counters are used at recreational trails and count individual users of the trail.

Interpretation of visitations from counters assumes an average of two people per vehicle, and 0.5 people per pass of the trail counter. A single visitor will pass a trail counter twice on a visit, so the total tally is divided by two. Vehicles also pass the car counters twice, so tallies remain unchanged and unaltered.

As counters are damaged beyond repair or fail at end of expected life span, they are replaced with new TrafX counters.

Conservation Area Network

To maintain an overall understanding of recreational use of CAs, counters are installed at each CA corresponding with their opening and closing dates. Data helps SNC understand trends and peaks in visitation and informs seasonal maintenance needs.

The CAs are organized into two main categories to inform the type of counter needed and timing of deployment: recreational trails and picnic & river access locations (Table 1). SNC’s jurisdictional map includes icons for year-round and seasonally maintained CAs (Figure 1).

Currently, municipal boat launches and parks that are maintained by SNC are not monitored, and additional counters are needed to understand how these areas are being used.

Table 1. SNC Conservation Area designation to support monitoring efforts.

Recreational Trails	Picnic & River Access CA
J. Henry Tweed	Cass Bridge
W. E Burton	St. Albert
Robert Graham Forest	High Falls & Doran Park
Two Creeks Forest	Jessup’s Falls
Oschmann Forest	McIntosh Park
Findlay Creek Boardwalk	Oak Valley Pioneer Park
Reveler	Mill Run
Warwick Forest	Embrun Boat Launch*
Nokomis Park*	Crysler Boat Launch*
	Chesterville Boat Launch*
	Chesterville Waterfront Docks*
	Spencerville Boat Launch*
	Thompson Subdivision Dock*

*Areas not currently monitored by SNC.

Conservation Area Usage Results

Recreational Trails

SNC maintains approximately 25 km of trails at 8 CAs throughout its jurisdiction. Usage varies amongst the recreational trails, due to location, trail features, user groups and interests, and seasonal trail conditions.

SNC performs weekly inspections on its recreational trails to ensure safe and enjoyable access for its users. Routine maintenance occurs annually, with planned replacements occurring when assets approaches end of life cycle. Data collected allows SNC to assess the amount of traffic trail systems experience throughout different seasons and years.

The following table outlines recorded visitor totals for recreational trails monitored between 2013-2025 (Table 2).

Table 2. Recreation Trail Usage Recorded at SNC Conservation Areas (2013-2025).

Year	J. Henry Tweed	W. E. Burton	Two Creeks	Robert Graham	Findlay Creek	Warwick	Reveler	Oschmann Forest
2025	42,034	49,514	10,677	8,849	40,011	27,716	1,828	10,775
2024	37,619	47,898	2,517*	9,172	31,916*	15,633	4,669	8,867
2023	34,926	40,755	N/A*	7,972	19,052*	17,909	4,373	7,416
2022	28,050	36,284	3,071	6,294	3,209*	14,481	7,006	5,392*
2021	39,281	43,489	9,819	6,331	7,591	9,574	3,824	10,445
2020	45,490	40,149	8,460	1,114	6,993*	4,946*	2,854	3,520*
2019	19,866	17,658	3,084	694	8,090	1,448	424	3,070
2018	21,503	16,090	3,711	410	12,037	960	380	302
2017	20,592	16,461	2,631	497	7,375	1,303	300	
2016	22,461	14,664	2,273	1,417	5,763	1,213	608	
2015	9,389		3,897		18,288			
2014	9,713		3,780		17,734			
2013			1,494					

*Data not available for the full year either due to damaged counters, closures, or redeployment.

Picnic & River Access Conservation Areas

SNC maintains picnic and river access at 7 CAs and 6 municipal boat launches throughout its jurisdiction. These CAs operate seasonally between May and November annually. Of the 7 recreational CAs, 4 offer river access complete with boat launches, docks, and trailer parking.

Usage varies due to location, amenities available, user groups, and interests. SNC performs weekly inspections of its picnic and river access CAs during the operating season to ensure safe and enjoyable access for its users.

The following table outlines recorded visitor totals for picnic and river access areas monitored between 2013-2025 (Table 2).

Table 3. Recreational Picnic and River Usage Recorded at SNC Conservation Areas (2014-2025).

Year	Jessup's Falls	High Falls and Doran Park	St. Albert	Cass Bridge	Oak Valley Pioneer Park	McIntosh Park	Mill Run
2025	28,554	27,997	1,841	12,603	2,008	12,601	3,048
2024	18,761	26,323	2,836	8,154	2,023	1,909	1,839
2023	18,022	22,150	5,102	8,501	2,916	1,780	
2022	30,197	16,917	6,292	11,730	2,244	2,346	
2021	34,722	31,606	5,521	18,641	681	741	
2020	25,564	22,448	3,367	11,887	284	368	
2019	14,018	14,801	3,023	8,209	525	1,662	
2018	11,387	9,291	3,235	6,366	405	1,816	
2017	13,060	12,292	2,687	8,229	341	1,743	
2016	16,824	17,906	5,222	10,314	1,014	4,194	
2015	8,153	13,825					
2014	7,884	13,406					

New Conservation Area Development

Since 2013, SNC has collected information relating to CA visitor usage to help guide the management of these public spaces and to help determine the level of effort required to manage newly opened spaces.

Recent property donations have allowed SNC to expand its CA network:

- The Reveler CA in North Stormont was opened in 2014 which features 3 km of walking trails through a 99-acre natural grassland and hardwood forest.
 - Property donated to SNC in 2012 by Ray Reveler.
- The Oschmann Forest CA in North Dundas was opened in 2019 which features a 1.2 km walking trail through an 18-acre woodlot which is now the home of SNC's Maple Education Program.
 - Property donated to SNC in 2017 by George Oschmann.
- The Mill Run Conservation Area in Augusta was opened in 2023 and features a small trail, pollinator meadow, edible fruiting shrubs and trees, a picnic area and river access site on a 9-acre property which provides recreational access to the Spencerville Mill along the South Nation River.
 - Property donated to SNC in 2020 by the Township of Augusta.

Monitoring visitation trends at new sites helps inform maintenance and future management.

While SNC adds hundreds of acres of land to its inventory on an annual basis through its Conservation Lands Securement Program, not all donated properties are developed into CAs. Development is contingent on securing external funding, community investment and through Memorandums of Understanding with municipal partners.

Updated municipal agreements were established in 2024 to coincide with updates to the *Conservation Authorities Act* and the development of SNC's Conservation Areas Strategy. Agreements are established after the resource and maintenance needs are determined and informed by the collected visitation data.

Conservation Area Management Impacts on Visitor Trends

Visitation is impacted by a variety of factors, including location, amenities, user groups, environmental conditions, property conditions, and management activities.

Management and maintenance activities are planned based on usage, life cycle, and in response to significant environmental impacts (ie, invasive species – emerald ash borer, glossy buckthorn, etc, and severe storms – ice storms, high winds, derecho, etc).

The following management activities are expected to have an impact on 2025 visitation:

- Jessup's Falls has historically been prone to ice damage during the spring freshet. In spring 2025, large ice chunks were pushed onto the shoreline at Jessup's Falls, damaging newly planted trees, tearing up turf grass, and leaving debris across the site. Contractors were hired to remove debris and clean up damaged trees and shrubs along the shoreline, which delayed the seasonal re-opening of the Conservation Area.
- Two Creeks Forest was significantly impacted by the Emerald Ash Borer, and seasonal flooding has limited visitor access during the spring and summer months. Targeted restoration work carried out during the winter of 2024–2025 required temporary closures but helped improve year-round accessibility and enhance visitor opportunities. Additional temporary closures occurred during work along utility corridors; however, a new 1-km recreational trail was developed to maintain uninterrupted access to the property while the work was underway.
- Warwick Forest continues to see considerable increases in visitor traffic over the past decade. It is a popular destination for dog walkers, horse riders, and joggers. This CA has been identified as a priority location to build out its trail network. Part of Warwick Forests trail was closed through December and into January of 2026 due to planned forestry operations.
- Cutting and clearing operations were completed on the first 4 acres of Robert Graham Forest to control the invasive shrub Buckthorn and thin red pine trees that were beginning to show signs of failure (dead tops, leaning, and debarking). Follow-up herbicide treatments and recutting were carried out to suppress buckthorn regrowth. These activities required temporary closure of the recreational trail.
- J. Henry Tweed received shoreline restoration work along the northern portion of the creek that runs through the park. SNC completed erosion control and bank stabilization on a 60-metre section to help slow water flow and protect the creek banks. Trail closures were intermittent over a three-week period in the fall of 2025.

Conservation Areas Usage Summary

Outlined below is an overview of the annual monitored usage between 2016-2025 and some notes on data collection.

Information collected throughout 2013-2015 varied and was collected from May-November at select parks. In 2016, SNC deployed counters at all CAs to ensure full coverage.

W. E. Burton is consistently the most visited recreational trail with an average of 43,588 estimated visitations annually between 2021 and 2025. In 2025, this recreational trail saw an estimated 49,514 estimated visitations pass through this park. This CA borders the Castor River and neighborhood in Russell and is near St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic High School.

Jessup's Falls experiences the highest five-year use for river access parks, with an average estimated visitation of 26,000 annually between 2021 and 2025. In 2025, this CA saw an estimated 28,554 visitations. This park features a boat launch, mature trees, forested areas and trails, picnic shelter, washroom facility, and access to 600 meters of shoreline fishing opportunities.

SNC welcomed the following recorded visitors in recent years:

- 110,000 average estimated annual visitations (2016-2020)
- 217,000 average estimated annual visitations (2021-2025)
- 280,056 estimated annual visitations (2025)

The following figure shows the recorded use in 2025(Figure 2) and through 2016-2025 (Figure 3).

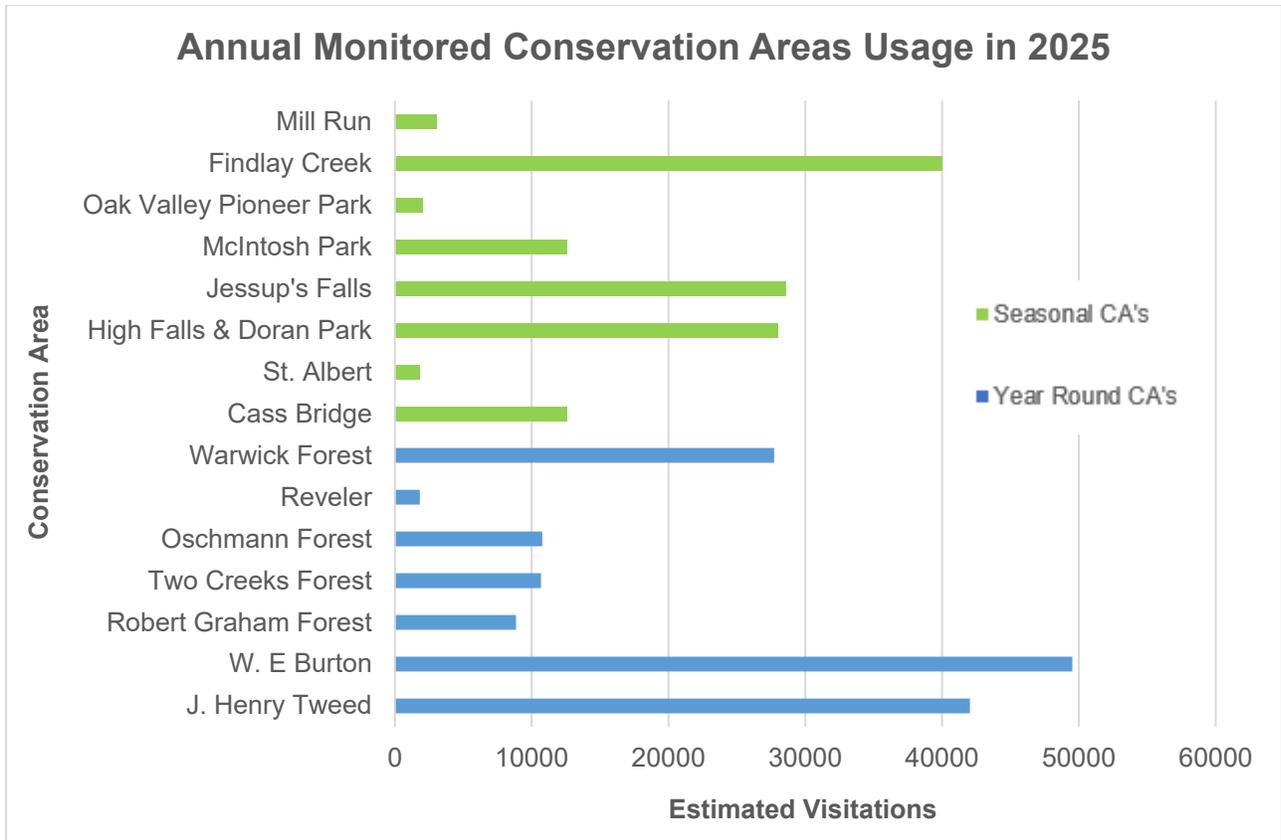


Figure 2. Annual Monitored SNC Conservation Areas Usage in 2025.

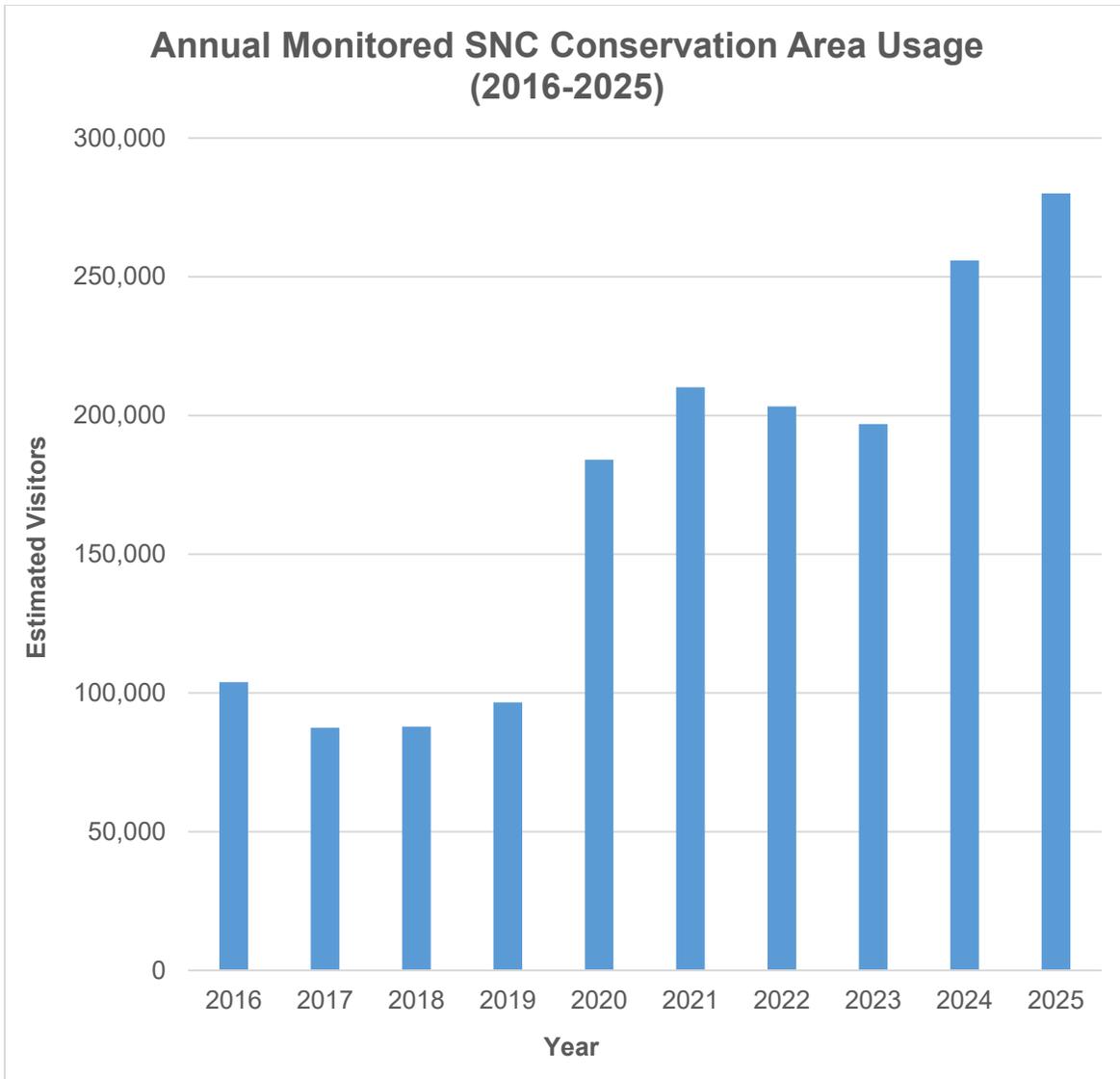


Figure 3. Annual Monitored SNC Conservation Area Usage (2016-2025).

Monthly visitation records indicate an increase in recreational trail usage beginning in April of 2025. Visitation declined slightly in July compared to neighboring months. Overall, recreational trails see lots of traffic through the summer months and received their highest numbers going into the fall. J Henry Tweed and W.E Burton experienced the highest use of all SNC’s recreational trails.

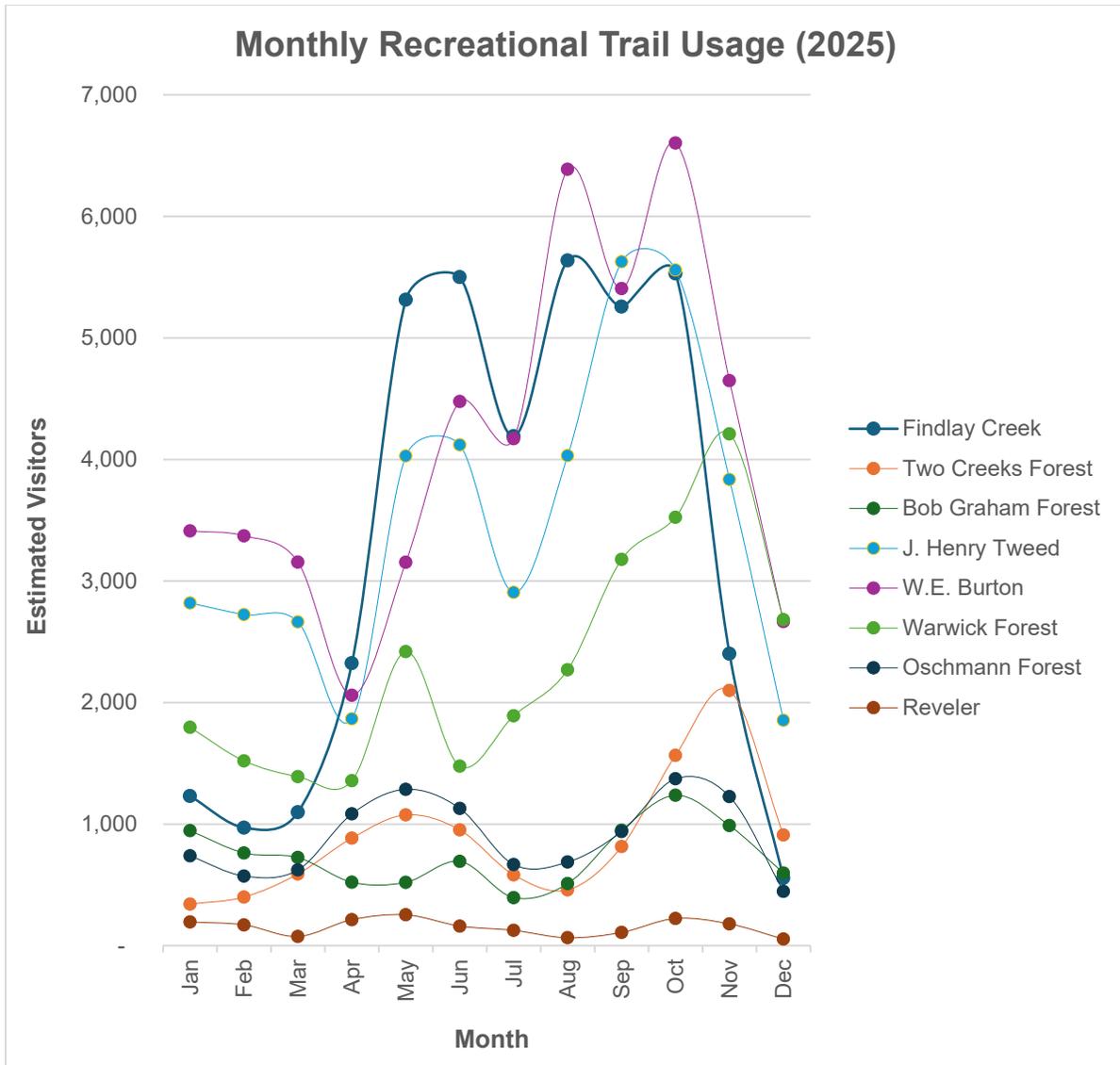


Figure 4. Monthly Conservation Area Recreational Trail Usage in 2025.

Monthly visitation records show peak usage for picnic and river access CA’s occurs in August.

Visitation began to spike in June, coinciding with longer days and nicer weather.

Counters were maintained in certain locations longer than previous years to track usage until the gates were closed.

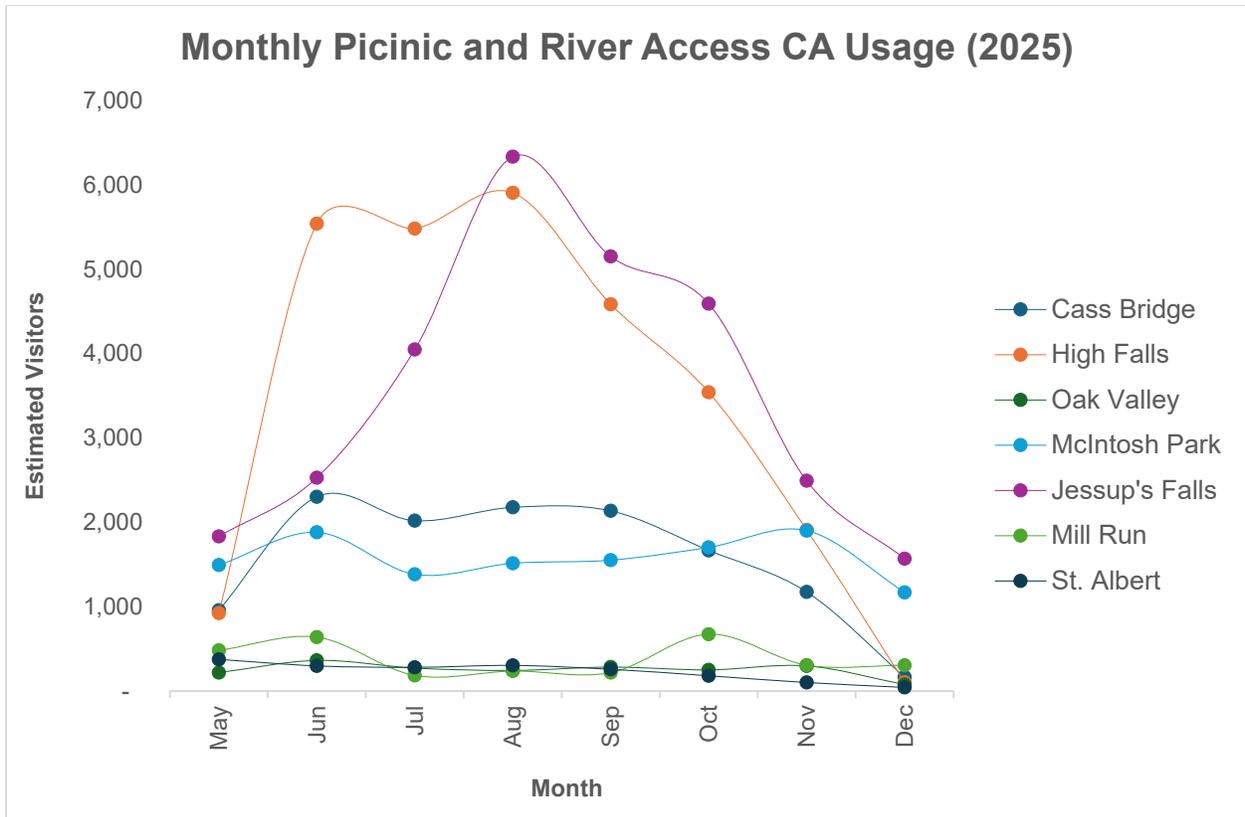


Figure 5. Monthly Conservation Area Picnic and River Access Usage in 2025.

Summary of Inspections and Observations

SNC completes weekly inspections at all Conservation Areas while facilities are open to the public.

In 2018, SNC began documenting inspection records through a Survey 123 application. This smartphone app has allowed staff to document site conditions digitally, enabling quick retrieval of information and effective response to recreational user concerns or comments.

In 2025, a total of 909 inspections were completed, compared to 2024's 918 total inspections.

SNC plans to expand the app to track maintenance records, specific to work completed at each CA. Inspections require in-depth assessments to evaluate general conditions and mitigate safety concerns. It should be noted that some inspection reports were not completed at areas while maintenance work was being completed and staff were on site. Future planned app updates will help address this.

General staff observations are summarized below from site inspections in 2025.

- Recreational usage increased at most CAs, especially at sites with recreational trails. Sites with picnic areas and no trails experienced a small decrease in visitation.
- Impacts to infrastructure and natural ecological features noted at some CAs, requiring partial closure of trail networks, and restriction of public access to natural areas.
- Water pooling on sections of trail and on turf at picnic areas.
- Signs, infrastructure, and trails reaching end of life cycle and needing to be repaired/replaced.
- Spring freshet caused flooding resulted in some minor damage to CA assets such as trees, turf, and roads.
- Picnic tables are reaching end of life and will need to be replaced.
- Young and newly planted park trees were distressed by lack of water during the drought and pest activities such as by Japanese beetles
- Requirement for increased park maintenance throughout summer months.
- Damage to trail surfaces and increased wear in highly visited areas.
- Parking capacity concerns at some CAs with limited parking.
- Accessible portable washrooms installed in new locations to complete coverage.
- Visitors using closed and unmaintained trails.
- Increased public input on maintenance and deficiencies. Increased volume of inquiries on management activity and park use.
- Dumping of household garbage is an ongoing issue.
- Suspected increased use of CAs outside seasonal closures, unable to accurately document visitations when parks are closed.
- Requirement for increased signage and trailhead maps, signage updates are needed, consistent with SNC's Signage Strategy.
- Dog and horse excrement not being picked up in some CA locations.
- Dogs are not properly leashed at some recreational trail locations.
- Nokomis is not being monitored, but there has been an increase in usage of the recreational trail because of new urban development in the area.
- Increase in human-wildlife interaction due to bird feeding.
- Visitors leaving personal belongings in parks as decorations and for special activities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to support the monitoring program objectives:

Objective 1 - Gauge Public Use of Conservation Areas

- Purchase additional counters to evaluate use at Nokomis and municipal river access sites managed by SNC. Consider targeted placement to evaluate use of specific infrastructure (i.e. unofficial trail usage, bridge and boardwalk usage, etc.).
- Continue monitoring all CAs during open season; consider installing counters during seasonally closures to monitor use, when feasible.

Objective 2 - Guide Conservation Area Improvements

- Use the Conservation Lands Strategy to inform the development of CA Master Plans.
- Update Lands Inventory and establish a Property Lands Classification to inform property maintenance standards.
- Compare annual equipment rental costs with future equipment needs to evaluate the need for equipment purchases to continue maintaining parking lots, trails, and to aid in tree removals and maintenance requirements.
- Work with municipal by-law officials to support increasing enforcement needs.
- Promote sustainable and responsible stewardship of SNC natural spaces and CAs
- Use visitation monitoring to guide future development and improvements.
- Use information in funding applications and partnerships with municipalities to secure investments in CA maintenance and improvements.

Objective 3 - Communicate and Build Support for SNC Conservation Areas:

- Support updates to Memorandum of Understandings with municipal partners.
- Distribute collected information through municipal workplans or direct reporting.
- Communicate results to Board members and SNC staff monthly.
- Deliver presentations to municipalities on CA use and management.
- Collaborate with municipal partners to jointly plan and fund capital projects in CAs.