

## **With boom in visitation comes safety concerns for recreators at Horsetooth Reservoir** **Kevin Duggan**

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<https://www.coloradoan.com/story/news/2020/07/03/colorado-fort-collins-horsetooth-reservoir-rise-visitation-boaters-camping/3254523001/>

Fans of Horsetooth Reservoir have taken to heart the message that it's OK to enjoy the great outdoors during the coronavirus pandemic.

Crowds flocked to the reservoir west of Fort Collins as well as other sites managed by Larimer County Natural Resources as they reopened in spring to boating, camping and hiking. The surge in visitation has carried over to summer.

And with the people have come problems with safety and parking, county officials say.

Parking issues in the Horsetooth area came to a head in mid-June as hundreds of vehicles pulled over along sections of Centennial Drive and county roads 38E and 23 during weekends because the reservoir's parking lots were full.

Any spot that wasn't signed "no parking" had a parked car, said Senior Ranger Luke Brough during a recent meeting with the county commissioners.

Vehicles lined both sides of the narrow-shouldered roads, and cars sped through even as cyclists rode along and paddleboarders and kayakers hauled gear across the roads to reach the water.

Given the dangerous circumstances, Brough said "it was a miracle" no one was seriously injured.

"It was a blessing at the end of the day to say no one got ran over," he said.

Placing 40 temporary no-parking signs along the county roads plus stepped up traffic enforcement by Larimer County sheriff's deputies and the Colorado State Patrol helped calm the situation.

But the crowding is a sign of things to come as the region grows and more people seek outdoor recreation spots.

## Visitation is booming



Cars fill a pullout along Centennial Drive near Horsetooth Reservoir over Memorial Day weekend in Fort Collins, Colo. on Saturday, May 23, 2020. *Bethany Baker / The Coloradoan*

A visitor count conducted two years ago found 1.2 million people visited the Horsetooth area, which covers the reservoir and Horsetooth Mountain Open Space, said Mark Caughlan, manager of the Horsetooth District, in an interview.

“That’s a tremendous amount of people to run through a fairly small park area,” Caughlan said.

The number seems to have increased. As of mid-June, visitation to the reservoir and open space was up 40% from a year ago, Caughlan said.

On weekends, parking lots at the reservoir are full by 9 a.m. Latecomers might have to wait in line more than an hour to launch their boats. Some weekdays can be as busy as Saturdays and Sundays.



A sign that reads "No Parking" is located along Shore Access Road beside Horsetooth Reservoir in Fort Collins, Colo. on Wednesday, July 1, 2020. *Bethany Baker / The Coloradoan*

Through mid-June, boat inspectors checking for invasive aquatic species had conducted 8,300 inspections. By that time a year ago, they had done 3,500 inspections.

About half of the visitors have come from outside the county, Caughlan said. Many visitors come from Weld County.

Carter Lake near Loveland has seen a similar boom in visitation, as have other recreation facilities along the Front Range.

At Boyd Lake State Park in Loveland, waits to get in the park and launch a boat can exceed two hours, Park Manager Eric Grey told the commissioners.

The park has 1,200 parking spaces. When those spaces fill, traffic is stacked at entry points, where variable message boards advise drivers on the potential lengths of wait times.

Traffic coming in from the south backs up along Boise Avenue toward McKee Medical Center. The backup can hamper emergency vehicle access and the ability of residents to park in front of their houses.

“In the past four years, we only had that happen five times,” Grey said. “We had it happen six times this spring.”

#### **Safety issues a concern**

In anticipation of the crowding, Larimer County Natural Resources hired its full contingent of 15 seasonal rangers even though the potential impact of the pandemic was not clear. The department has four year-round rangers.

Caughlan said he’s grateful to have the help. On busy days, rangers run from service call to service call, often focusing on traffic mitigation rather than “doing real ranger work.”

“We’re doing the best job we can to address public safety, to address visitor needs, to make sure to protect the resources,” he said. “As you can imagine, it’s difficult at best with these visitation numbers to manage those.”

During major events, such as a June 20 medical emergency at Satanka Bay in which a 36-year-old man suffered a heart attack and died, park resources get spread thin, Brough told the commissioners.

Without rangers keeping track of things, parking lots, boat ramps and other facilities at the reservoir can become chaotic.

“Once that bottle is open, it’s a continuous flow and we can’t contain it,” he said.

Water safety is a major concern at the reservoir, Caughlan said.

Visitors should heed regulations limit swimming to designated areas. Inflatable tubes, mattresses and other toys are not allowed outside swim areas.

In 2019, a record 18 people drowned in Colorado lakes. This year, the state has already seen 15 drownings, he said.

“We just want people to make good decisions and wear life jackets,” he said.

Cliff diving is prohibited at Horsetooth Reservoir, but it still happens. People risk serious injuries from hitting rocks hidden beneath the surface.

The reservoir’s elevation can go down 6 inches in a day as water is pulled from the reservoir for irrigation. People may not realize that a location where they dived before might be 3 to 4 feet shallower a week later, Caughlan said.

### **Options for crowd management**



Satanka Bay at Horsetooth Reservoir is crowded with boats and paddleboards in mid-June 2020. *Mark Caughlan*

With so many people vying to get on the water at Horsetooth Reservoir, officials are looking into options for managing crowds. That could include hiring additional rangers.

Potential remedies include setting up a reservation system for boat launching for entering the park.

“Imagine what it’s going to be like 10 years from now,” Caughlan said. “We’re going to have to start implementing some of the entry processes other agencies are trying.”

Caughlan said Horsetooth hit its capacity about 10 years ago. There is little room for expansion.

Officials plan to “harden” the park’s infrastructure, such as paving roads and parking facilities, to keep up with the impact of having so many visitors.

At the same time, they want to preserve the area’s natural resources to provide good visitor experiences.

The demand for recreational facilities has been growing for several years, Grey told the commissioners. The surge this spring and summer continues that trend.

“I think this is kind of a wake-up call,” Grey said. “Our population is not shrinking, and if we don’t have places to send people, we’re going to be seeing these problems moving forward in the next several years.”

## Larimer County to study e-bike impacts on unpaved trails

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<https://www.coloradoan.com/story/news/2020/07/06/larimer-county-study-e-bike-impacts-unpaved-trails/3286246001/>

Larimer County is gearing up to study the impacts of electric bikes on natural surface trails by issuing permits to a limited number of riders.

The project is a first for the Larimer County Natural Resources Department, which does not allow e-bikes or any other type of motorized vehicle on its unpaved trails.

The study will examine how people feel about having electric-assist bikes on trails rather than e-bikes themselves, said Meegan Flenniken, land conservation, planning and resources program manager with Natural Resources.

Other entities, including Jefferson County and the city of Fort Collins, have studied e-bike impacts such as speed and safety, she said.

“This study will be more focused on public perception ... of expanding the type of uses we allow on our trails to include motorized uses,” Flenniken said.



Mountain bikers race down the Hidden Valley Trail at Devil's Backbone Open Space, one of several trails covered in the special permit that Larimer County issued to 30 ebike riders as part of an impact study in Loveland, Colo. on Monday, July 6, 2020. The project is a first for the Larimer County Natural Resources Department, which does not allow e-bikes or any other type of motorized vehicle on its unpaved trails. *Bethany Baker / The Coloradoan*

The study will be conducted July 15 to Feb. 15 on trails that already allow bikes at Devil's Backbone Open Space west of Loveland. Some trails at the popular open space are designated for hiking only.

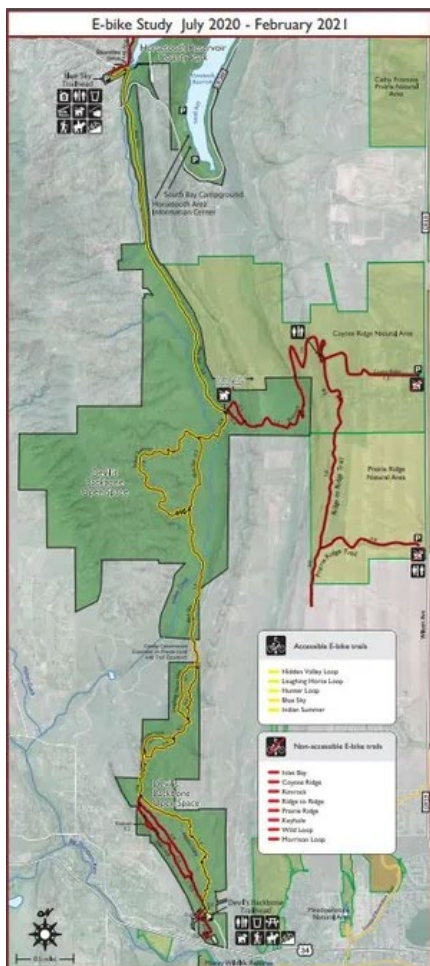
Permitted bikes will be limited to two-wheeled Class 1 e-bikes, which provide power assistance when pedaled up to 20 mph.

Class 1 and 2 e-bikes are allowed on paved trails managed by Larimer County, but not on natural surface trails. The regulations for trails managed by Loveland and Fort Collins are the same.

Larimer County will conduct a study on e-bike impacts on selected trails in Devil's Backbone Open Space. Class 2 e-bikes offer the same assistance plus throttle systems. Class 3 bikes are pedal-assistance only bikes up to 28 mph.

The county will issue permits to 30 riders out of a pool of about 65 people who showed interest. Those receiving permits will be randomly selected.

Riders, other trail users and members of the public will be surveyed during the trial period as part of the project.



Data collected through the study will be incorporated into a broader survey of how e-bikes and other technologies fit with regional transportation systems. That study is expected to be done in 2021, when the county expects to update its regulations.

Flenniken said there are an estimated 950 miles of trails in Larimer County, including those managed by municipalities, the county, the U.S. Forest Service and Rocky Mountain National Park.

A "no e-bikes" sign is displayed at Maxwell Natural Area in Fort Collins, Colo. on Monday, July 6, 2020. Larimer County Natural Resources Department does not currently allow e-bikes or any other type of motorized vehicle on its unpaved trails.

Every trail cannot meet the needs of all types of users, Flenniken said. The question becomes what does the public expect to experience when using a trail on open spaces or other locations, she said.

"We can create a spectrum of opportunities for different users, but where are those uses most appropriate?" she said. "I think that is an interesting question."

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