



SOUTH NATION  
CONSERVATION  
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# Conservation Areas Monitoring 2023 Annual Report

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## 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.

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

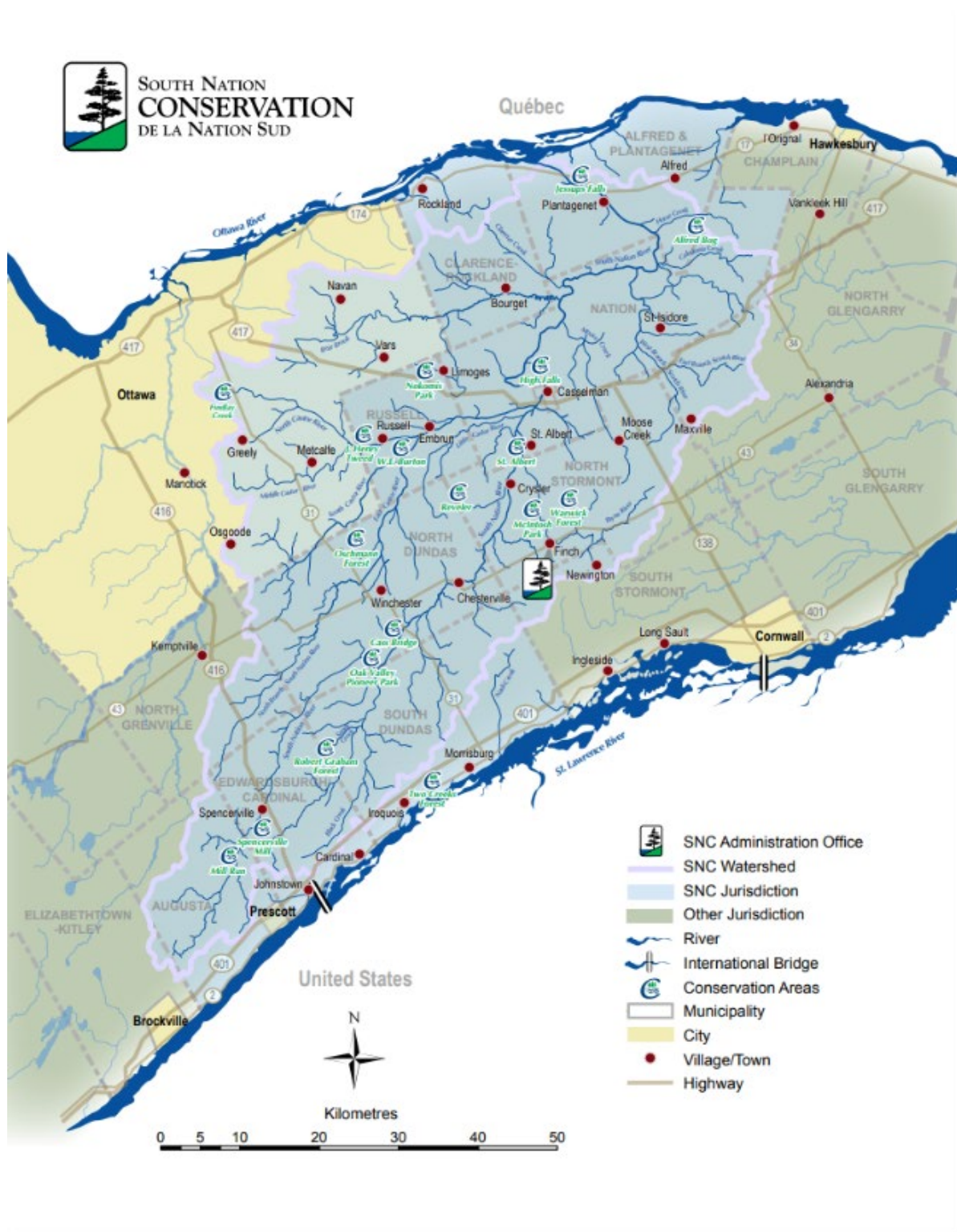


Figure 1. Conservation Area locations in SNC’s jurisdiction in Eastern Ontario.

## 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. 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 2013-2023 (Table 2).

**Table 2. Recreation Trail Usage Recorded at SNC Conservation Areas (2013-2023).**

Year	J. Henry Tweed	W. E. Burton	Two Creeks	Robert Graham	Findlay Creek	Warwick	Reveler	Oschmann Forest
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 these 7 CAs, 4 are river access locations 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 2013-2023 (Table 2).

**Table 3. Recreational Picnic and River Usage Recorded at SNC Conservation Areas (2014-2023).**

Year	Jessup's Falls	High Falls and Doran Park	St. Albert	Cass Bridge	Oak Valley Pioneer Park	McIntosh Park
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, 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 are being established in 2024 to coincide with updates to the *Conservation Authorities Act* and the development of SNC's Conservation Areas Strategy. Agreements can be established after the resource and maintenance needs are determined and informed by 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, and severe storms – ice storms, high winds, derecho, etc).

The following management activities are expected to have an impact on 2023 visitation:

- The Findlay Creek Boardwalk Extension was completed in Fall 2023 which extended the boardwalk to include a second trail entrance and a 1-km looped pathway. Visitation has declined since the site was originally opened in 2012, in part due to the deteriorating condition of the boardwalk. Visitation has doubled since the boardwalk reopening and is expected to experience sustained traffic now that there is a longer, looped trail system.
- Jessup's Falls has been exclusively a picnic and water recreation site since the closure of its nature trail in 2019. Following damage from the Emerald Ash Borer and the 2021 Derecho Storm, the forest and trail was closed due to public safety concerns. Recent work to restore the forest and reopen the trail system are now complete and visitation is expected to increase for the 2024 season.
- Two Creeks Forest was significantly impacted by the Emerald Ash Borer and increased seasonal flooding which limited visitation opportunities and resulted in partial closures. Recent work has restored portions of the trail system, and a new 1-km trail is being constructed on the south side of Parlow Creek to provide visitors an undisrupted place to walk in the forest while the trail north of Parlow Creek is restored in 2024-25.
- Warwick Forest has seen 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.

## Conservation Areas Usage Summary

Outlined below is an overview of the annual monitored usage between 2013-2023 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.

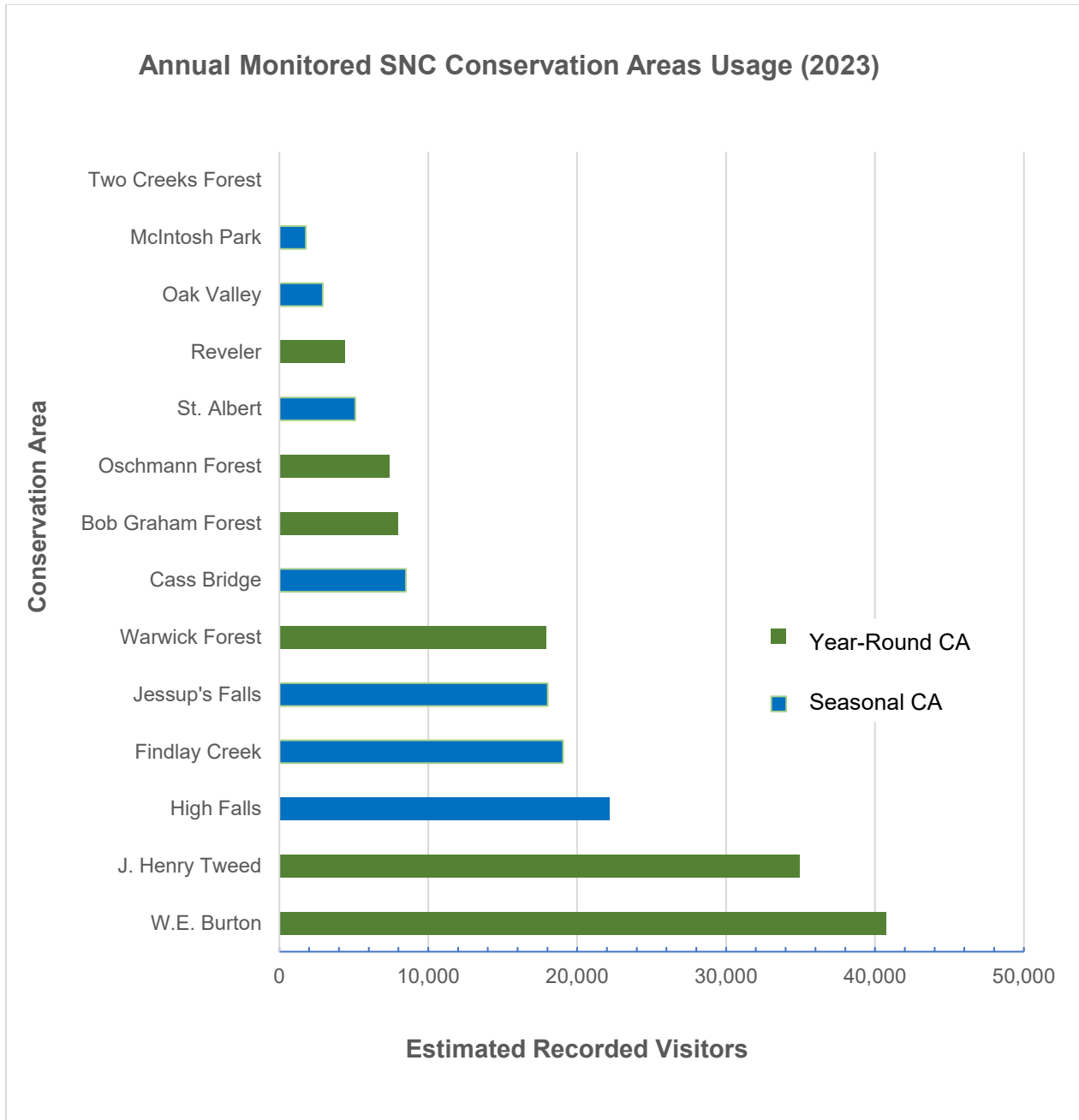
W. E. Burton is consistently the most visited recreational trail with an average of 38,880 visitors annually between 2018 and 2023. In 2023, this recreational trail saw an estimated 40,755 visitors pass through the park. This CA borders the Castor River and neighborhood in Russell and is near St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic High School.

Jessup's Falls experiences the highest five-year use for river access parks, with an average visitation of 26,700 users annually between 2018 and 2023. In 2023, this park experienced and estimated 18,022 visitors. This park features a boat launch, mature trees, forested areas and trails, picnic shelter, barbeques, washroom facility, and access to 600 meters of shoreline fishing opportunities.

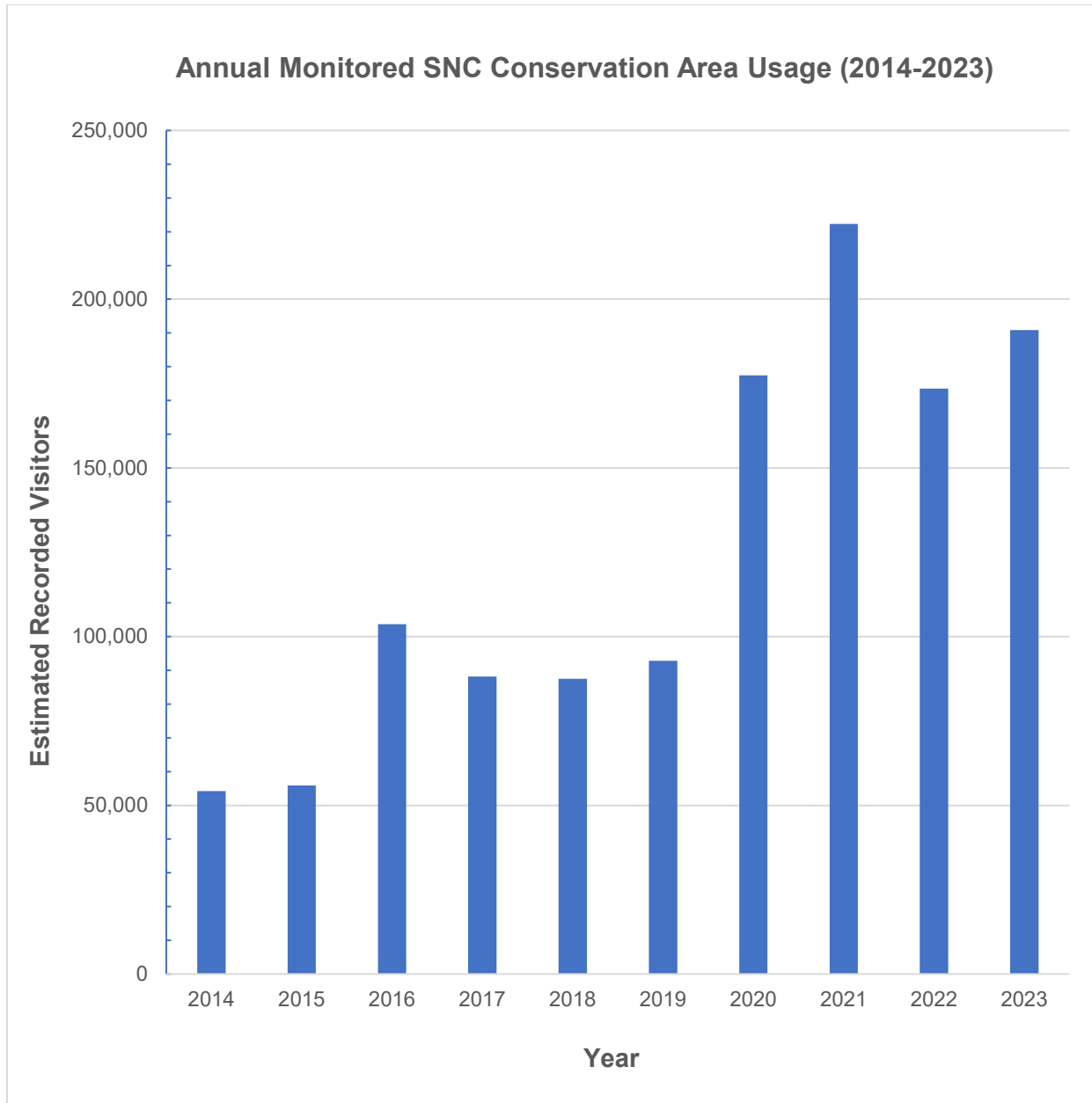
SNC welcomed the following recorded visitors in recent years:

- 80,363 average annual visitors (2014-2019)
- 174,600 average annual visitors (2020-2023)
- 190,874 annual visitors (2023)

The following figure shows the recorded use in 2023 (Figure 2) and through 2014-2023 (Figure 3).



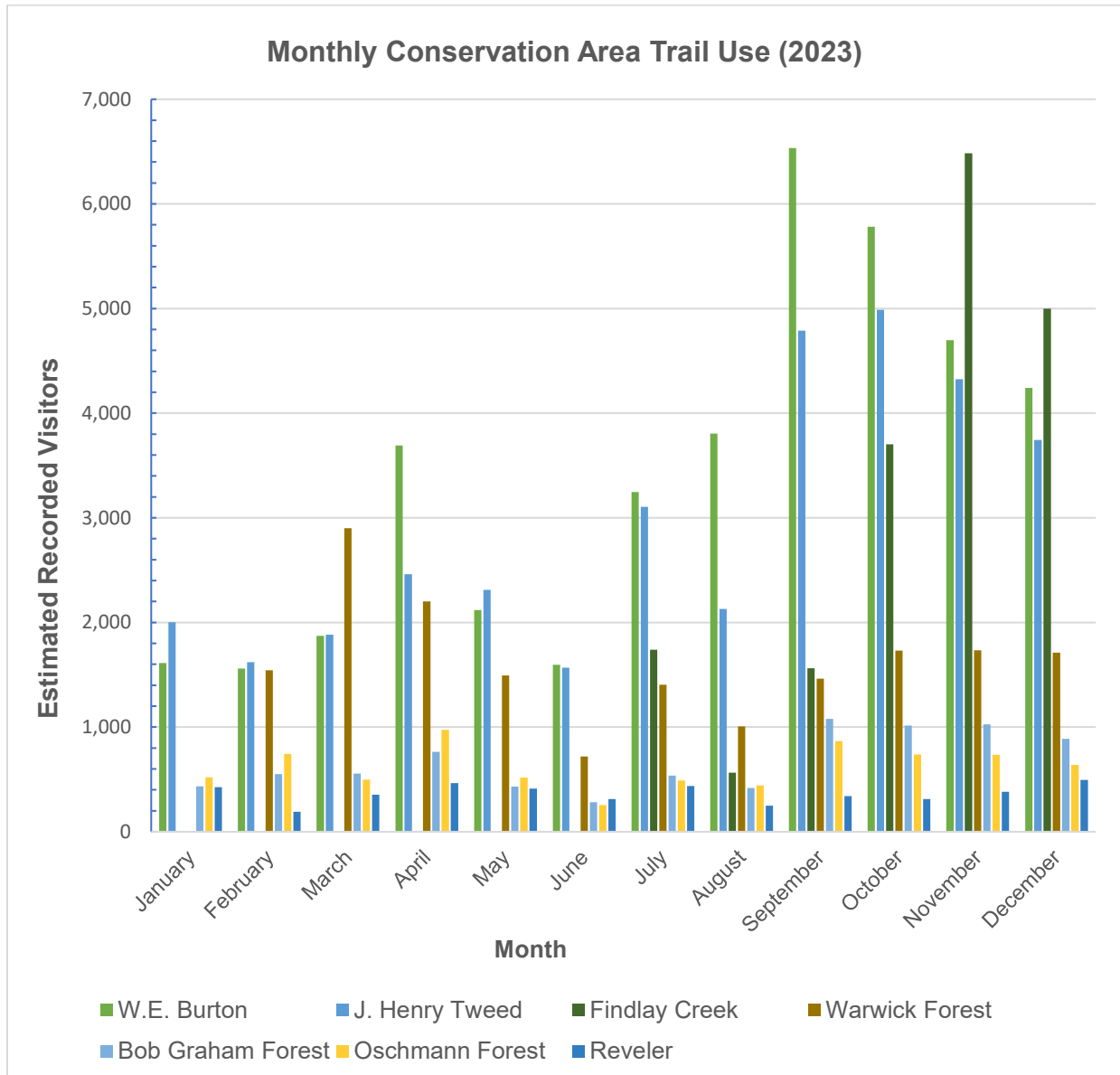
**Figure 2.** Annual Monitored SNC Conservation Areas Usage in 2023.



**Figure 3.** Annual Monitored SNC Conservation Area Usage (2014-2023).

Monthly visitation records indicate an increase in recreational trail usage beginning in July 2023. Visitation remained consistent at most CAs throughout the summer months, and slightly declined in the fall.

J Henry Tweed and W.E Burton experienced the highest use of all SNC’s recreational trails. Warwick Forest and Findlay Creek experienced the highest increase in monthly visitation when compared to previous years.

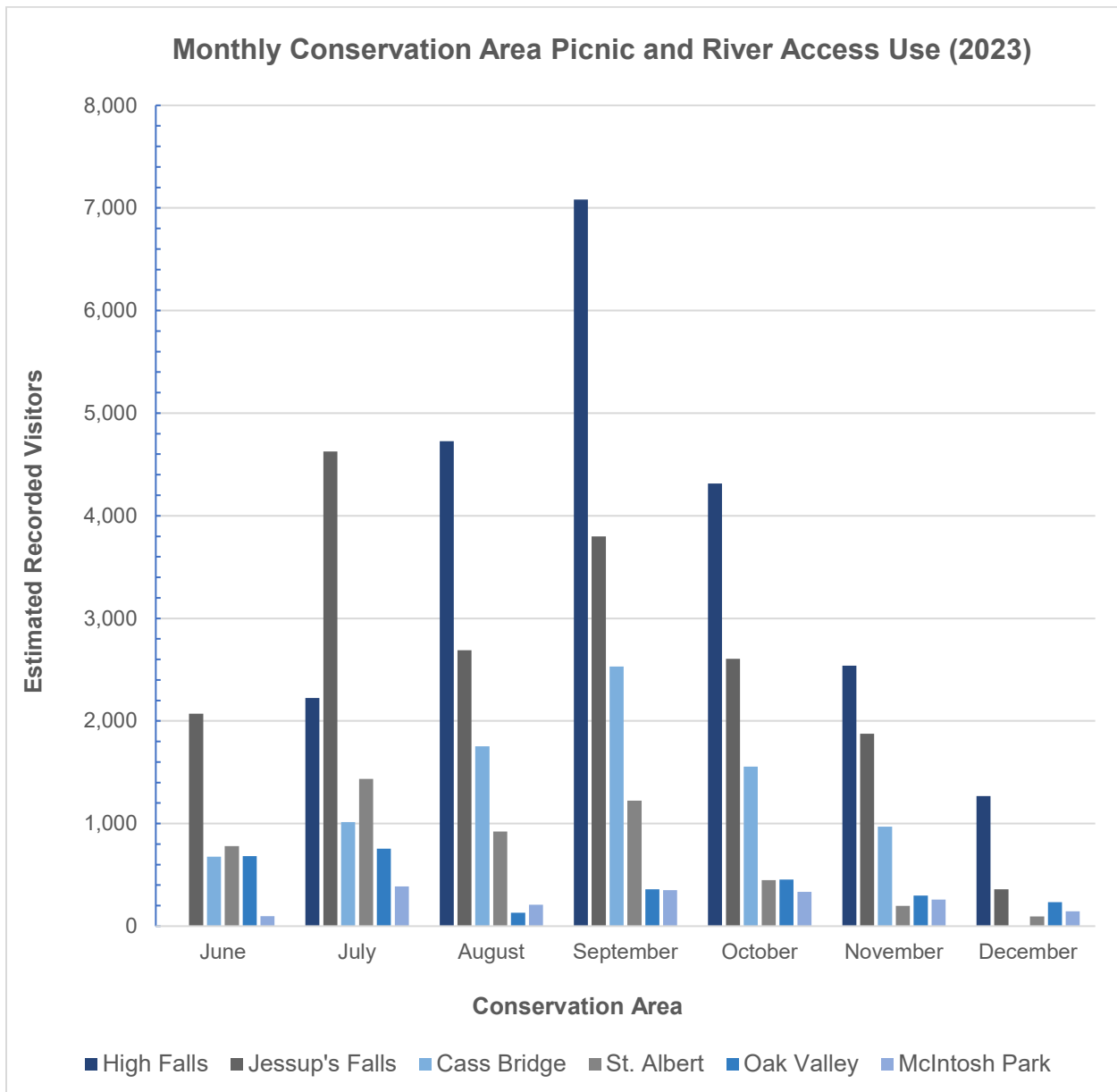


**Figure 4. Monthly Conservation Area Recreational Trail Usage in 2023.**

Monthly visitation records showed consistent usage for seasonal CAs, with Jessup’s Falls experiencing high visitation in July and High Falls experiencing high visitation in September.

Visitation was lower than normal for all sites in June, compared to previous years, and were not all deployed in May, due to delayed opening in certain sites.

Counters were maintained in certain locations longer than previous years due to unseasonably warmer temperatures.



**Figure 5. Monthly Conservation Area Picnic and River Access Usage in 2023.**

## 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 2023, a total of 978 inspections were completed, compared to 2022's 735 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 2023.

- 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.
- 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.
- Increased usage at previously low-use CAs.
- Increased vehicle traffic at urban CA's which traditionally experienced local foot traffic.
- Accessible portable washrooms installed in new locations to complete coverage.
- Increased use of non-designated trails. Some temporary trails were also created by visitors.
- Increased public input on maintenance and deficiencies. Increased volume of inquiries on management activity and park use.
- Dumping of household garbage is 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 through feeding.
- Increased potential conflict between users obtaining park permits and those who do not.
- 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, Mill Run, 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**

- Develop a Conservation Areas Strategy in 2024, consistent with CA Act requirements.
- Use the Conservation Areas 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.