

SOUTH NATION  
CONSERVATION  
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## Conservation Area Monitoring Program Report 2020

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## **Introduction**

South Nation Conservation (SNC) owns and manages 165 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.

In 2020, SNC experienced an unprecedented increase in park usage at its day-use areas due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. With increased restrictions on travel and indoor activities, recreational users sought out local amenities, which promoted safe outdoor spaces for recreational use. As an essential service, SNC opened and maintained its Conservation Areas in accordance with Provincial Emergency Orders and with guidance from local Health Units.

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

The COVID-19 Pandemic brought increased visitor usage, as well as increased challenges for park and natural spaces maintenance. 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 accurate 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.

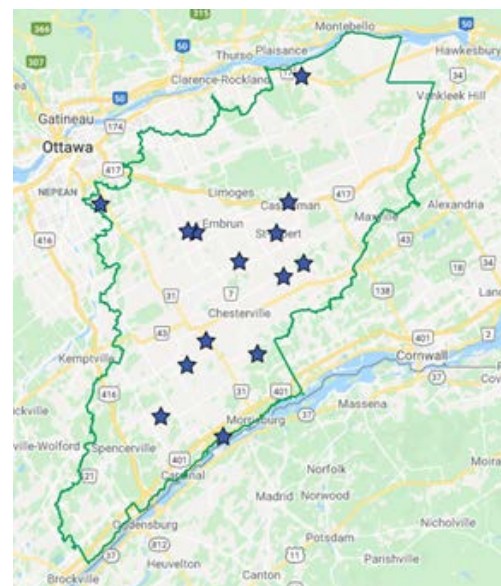
## Overview: Conservation Areas Monitoring Program

### Data Collection

SNC began its monitoring program in 2013 with the implementation of one vehicle counter and one trail counter. Counter deployment corresponds with park opening dates and trail conditions.

Counters are serviced monthly to download data (car counters) and manually record results (trail counters).

In 2016, SNC purchased additional trail and car counters to increase its coverage to include all CAs (see Figure 1). The new counters allow for collection year-round where CA's remain open. The counters also allow for extended deployment periods, effectively limiting maintenance requirements and improving monitoring results.



**Figure 1.** Locations of car and trail counters at SNC Conservation Areas.

### Conservation Area Network

To maintain an overall understanding of recreational use of CAs, counters are installed at each CA corresponding with their opening. 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.

Trail counters were placed in strategic locations to ensure concealment and effectiveness.

**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
Leitrim Boardwalk	Oak Valley Pioneer Park
Reveler	
Warwick Forest	

## 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 2013-2020.

**Table 2.** Recreation Trail Usage Recorded at SNC Conservation Areas (2013-2019).

Conservation Area (CA)	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
J. Henry Tweed		9,173	9,389	22,461	20,592	21,503	19,866	45,490
W.E Burton				14,664	16,461	16,090	17,658	40,149
Two Creeks Forest	1,494	3,780	3,897	2,273	2,631	3,711	3,084	8,460
Robert Graham Forest				1,417	497	410	694	1,114
Findlay Creek		17,734	18,288	5,763	7,375	12,037	8,090	6,993
Warwick Forest				1,213	1,303	960	1,448	4,946
Reveler				608	300	380	424	2,854
Oschmann Forest						302	3,070	

## Picnic & River Access Conservation Areas

SNC maintains picnic and river access at 6 CAs throughout its jurisdiction. These CA's operate seasonally between May and November annually. Of these 6 CA's, 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 2013-2020.

**Table 3.** Recreational Picnic and River Usage Recorded at SNC Conservation Areas (2013-2020).

Conservation Area (CA)	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Jessup's Falls		7,884	8,153	16,824	13,060	11,387	14,018	25,564
High Falls & Doran Park		13,406	13,825	17,906	12, 292	9,291	14,801	22,448
St. Albert				5,222	2,687	3,235	3,023	3,367
Cass Bridge				10,314	8,229	6,366	8,209	11,887
Oak Valley Pioneer Park				1,014	341	405	525	284
McIntosh Park				4,194	1,743	1,816	1,662	368

## New Conservation Area Development

Since 2013, SNC has collected information relating to Conservation Area 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 Conservation Area network:

- First in 2014 with the opening of the Reveler CA in North Stormont 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.
- Followed in 2019 with the opening of the Oschmann Forest CA in North Dundas 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.
- Soon to be followed by the future opening of the Mill Run Conservation Area in Augusta which features a small trail, picnic area and river access site on a 9-acre property which will provide recreational access to the South Nation River.
  - Property donated to SNC in 2020 by the Township of Augusta.

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

No municipal agreements have been established for the three most recent park that have been opened to the public. Agreements should be negotiated after a maintenance baseline is established to determine the required level of effort to manage public sites.

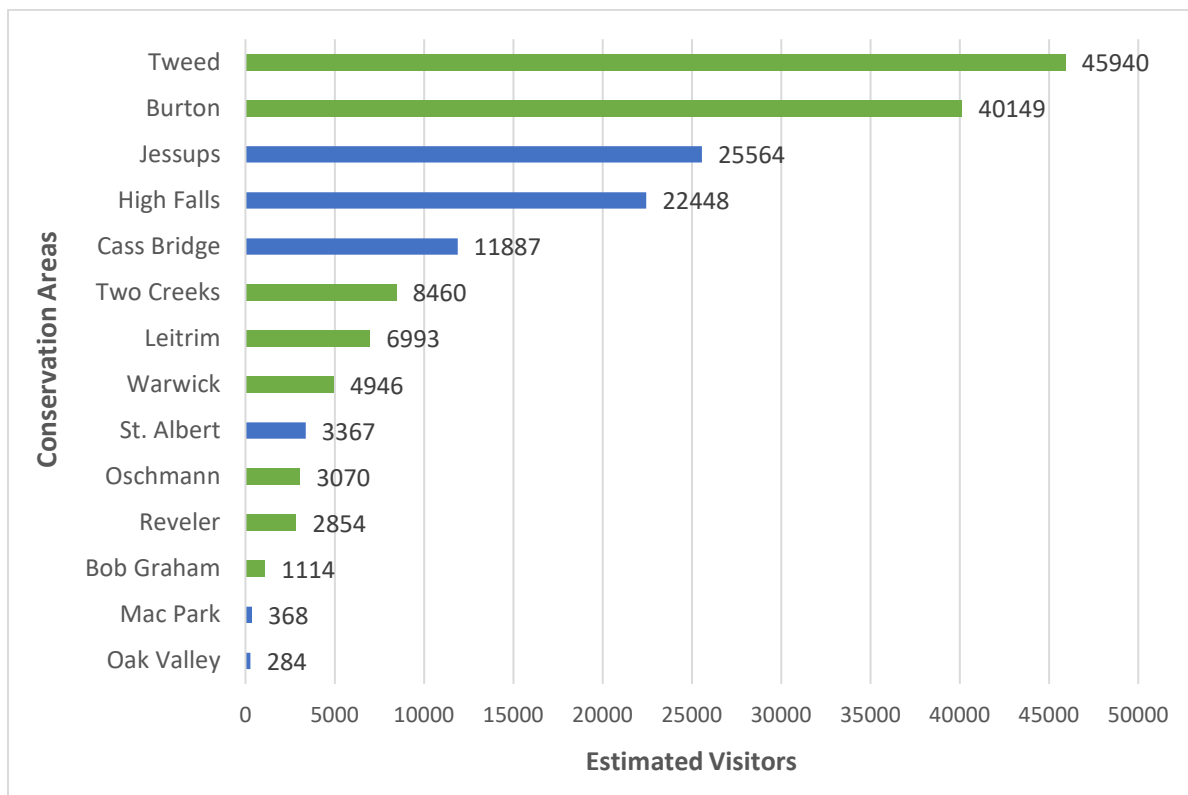
## Conservation Areas Usage Summary

Outlined below is an overview of the annual monitored usage between 2013-2020 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.

J. Henry Tweed is consistently the most visited recreational trail with an average of 21,100 visitors annually between 2016 and 2019. In 2020, this recreational trail saw an estimated 45,490 visitors pass through the park. This CA connects to the Russell Recreational trail and acts as a travel corridor for many subdivisions to the downtown core of the village.

Jessup's Falls experiences the highest use for river access parks, with an average visitation of 13,800 users annually between 2016 and 2019. In 2020, this park experienced and estimated 25,564 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.



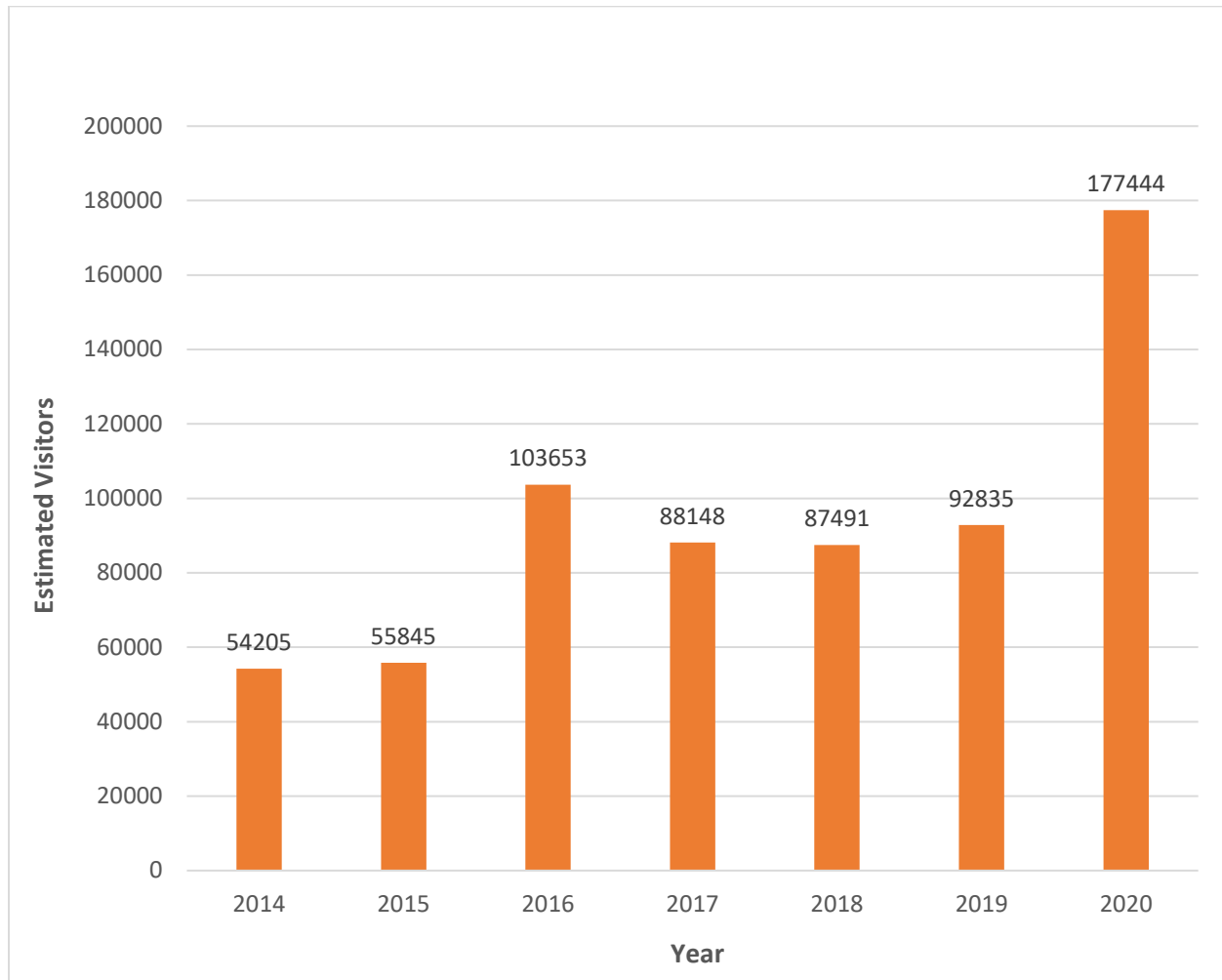
**Figure 2.** Annual Monitored SNC Conservation Areas Visitation in 2020.



Between 2014 and 2019, SNC recorded, on average, 80,363 visitors at Conservation Areas.

In 2020, SNC welcomed an estimated 177,444 visitors to its Conservation Areas, marking a 221% increase in average annual visitation.

The following figure shows the recorded use from 2014-2020.



**Figure 3.** Annual Monitored SNC Conservation Area Visitation (2014-2020).

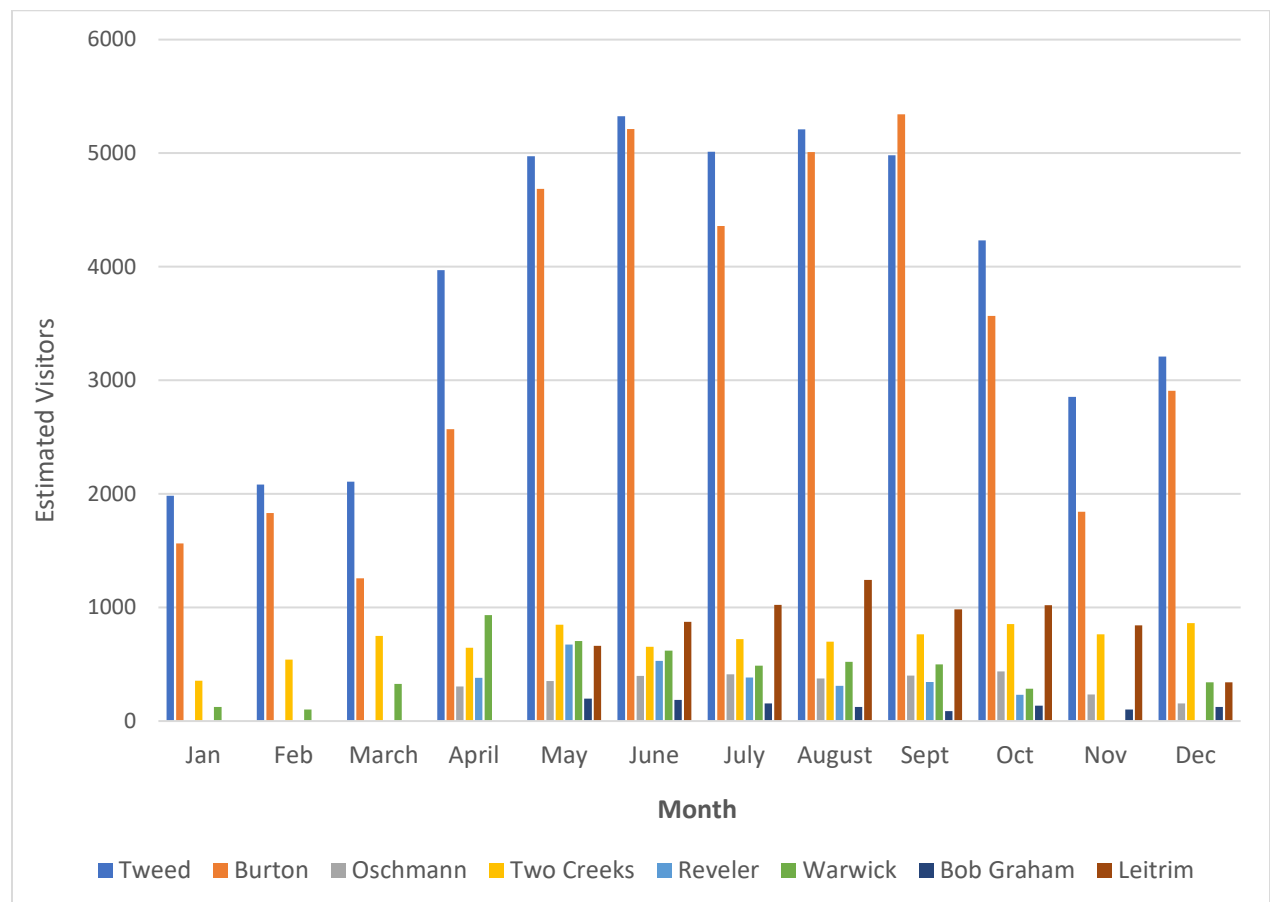
Understanding annual and monthly visitor trends help inform visitor behaviour and appropriate resource needs to manage visitation and maintenance requirements. Data also supports park opening and closing dates through municipal agreements and can inform whether an area should be designated as a public Conservation Area.

Visitation records indicate an increase in recreational trail use beginning in April 2020, which differed from previous years where winter and spring visitation often remained low.

Several CAs not traditionally open until later in May also experienced an increase in visitation in April, including the Oschmann Forest CA and Reveler CA.

Visitation remained consistent at most CA's throughout the summer and though there was a slight decline in the Fall and into the Winter there was still visitation during peak COVID-19 infection rates and Provincial Stay-at-Home Orders.

J. Henry Tweed and W.E Burton experienced the highest use of all SNC's recreational trails.



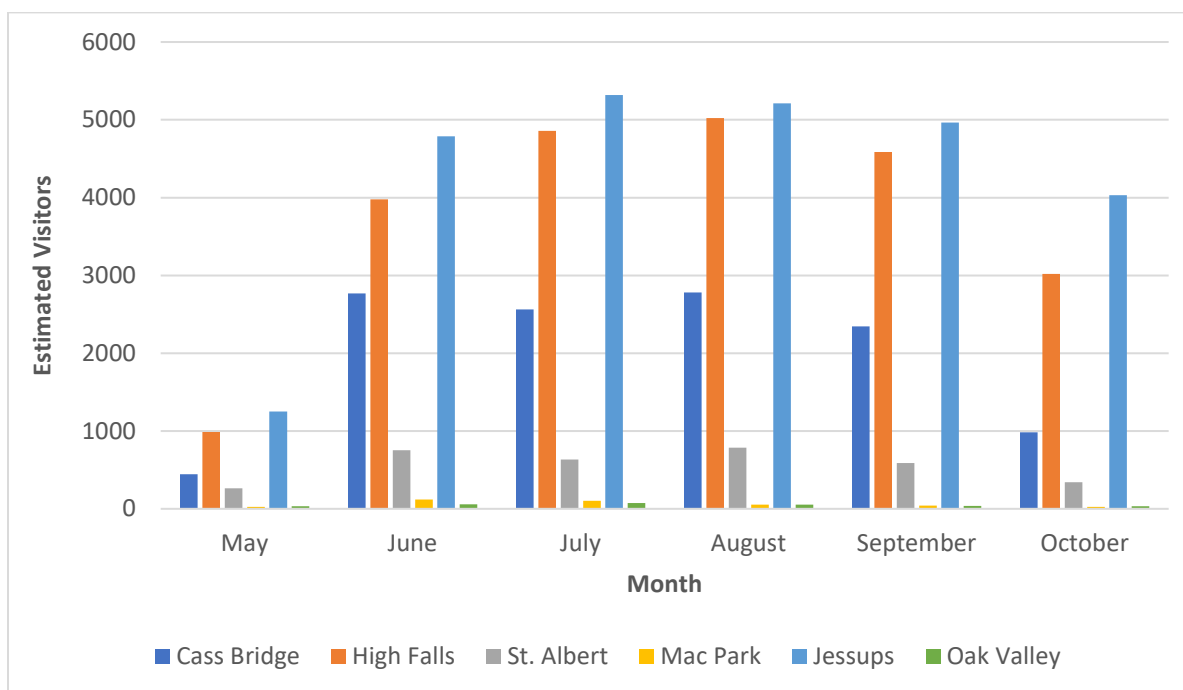
**Figure 4.** Monthly Monitored Recreational Trail Use at SNC Conservation Areas (2020).

Sites that support picnic and river access often do not contain recreation trails and are only open and maintained seasonally by SNC between May and October.

These sites experienced increased trespassing and property damage in March and April before official May opening dates in 2020 as a result of people trying to access local recreational spaces during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Sites were all passively opened in April, almost a month earlier than planned, however, local health authorities advised that dock installation and river access be restricted until updated orders from the Province were issued later in May. Due to this delay, counters were not deployed until later in May at seasonally closed CAs and May visitation counts are lower than previous years between 2014 and 2019.

While counters were removed at the end of October, these CAs were also left open well into November to accommodate increased use of CAs. Passive closures began early in November and were completed by early December, in part due to the warm weather experienced.



**Figure 5.** Monthly Monitored Picnic and River Access Use at SNC Conservation Areas (2020).

## Summary of Observations

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

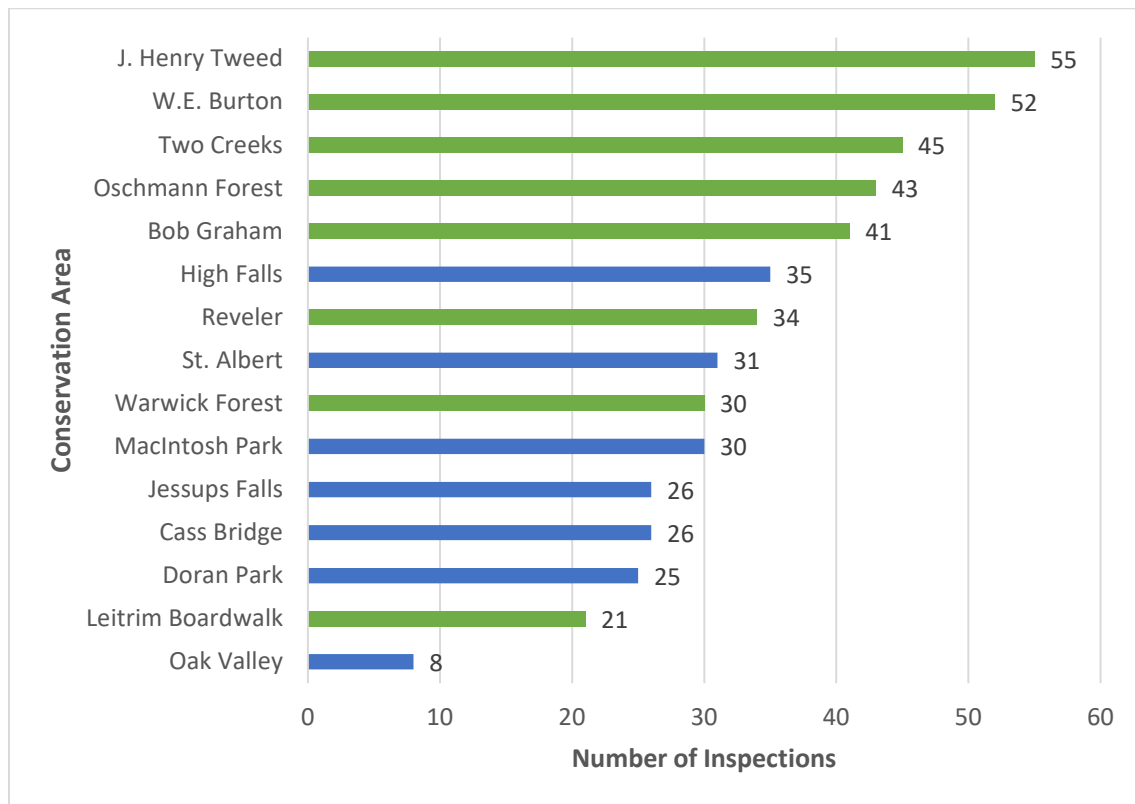
In 2018, SNC began documenting inspection records through a Survey 123 application. This smartphone app has allowed staff to document site conditions digitally, enabling quick retrieval of information and effective response to recreational user concerns or comments.

In 2020, a total of 502 inspections were completed, compared to an approximate previous annual average of 300 inspections.

SNC plans to expand the app to track maintenance records, specific to work completed at each CA. Inspections require an in-depth assessment of each CA to evaluate general condition and mitigate any 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 2020 and early 2021.

- 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 during COVID-19 Stay-At-Home Orders.
- 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 inspections throughout summer months to address general maintenance requirements.
- Damage to trail surfaces 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.
- Decreased use of shared surfaces.
- Requirement for washroom facilities to be available at River Access CAs. SNC did not install portable washroom facilities at recreational trail sites in 2020.
- Increased use of non-designated trails. Some temporary trails were also created by visitors.
- Increased public input on maintenance and CA deficiencies. Increased volume of inquiries on CA management.
- Increased dumping of household garbage.
- Animal-proof waste collections bins had limited use. Need to install additional waste bins.
- Usage of Conservation Areas during seasonal closures. Increase in trespassing.
- Requirement for increased signage, trailhead maps, and COVID-19 precaution signs.



**Figure 6.** Logged Inspection Reports at SNC Conservation Areas in 2020.

## 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 public use of specific infrastructure (i.e. unofficial trail usage, bridge and boardwalk usage, etc.).
- Continue monitoring all Conservation Areas during open season; consider installing counters during seasonally closed sites to monitor use, when feasible.

### **Objective 2 - Guide Conservation Area Improvements**

- Develop a Master Plan for all SNC Conservation Areas.
- Develop property maintenance standards for public Conservation Areas.
- 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 Conservation Areas.
- Use vitiation monitoring to guide future development and improvements.
- Use information in funding applications to secure investments in Conservation Area 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.