

2022-2023 California Winter Recreation Data Collection Program



Program Summary

Winter Wildlands Alliance (WWA) implemented a Winter Recreation Data Collection Program during the 2022-2023 snow season to inform National Forests' winter travel planning and implementation in California. Assisted by volunteers and non-profit partners, WWA collected winter recreation data across the Sierra Nevada and California Cascades from November 2022 through April 2023 using the Colorado Mountain Club's Recreation Impact Monitoring System (RIMS) mobile and desktop application. Data collection efforts were focused primarily on the Inyo, Stanislaus, Lassen, and Plumas National Forests. More limited data was collected on the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit as well as the Tahoe, Eldorado, and Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forests. In addition to the data summaries presented in this narrative, all of the data collected is included in appendices to this report. Please see Appendix 1-8 for datasets for each forest.

WWA worked with volunteers and nonprofit partners to collect winter recreation data. Friends of the Plumas Wilderness (FoPW), Friends of the Inyo (FOI), Snowlands Network, and Tahoe Backcountry Alliance participated in this effort. WWA provided grant funding to FOI to support data collection efforts. Grant funding was also provided to FoPW to support its 2023 Plumas and Lassen National Forest Snow Monitor Program, which included data collection. To implement this program, FoPW recruited four volunteers from Feather River College who collected winter recreation data in exchange for college credit and avalanche safety equipment and training. Four additional WWA volunteers were based on the Lassen National Forest and the Stanislaus National Forest.

WWA also retained two seasonal contractors to collect data: one who focused on the Stanislaus National Forest and a California Data Manager based in Mammoth Lakes. In addition to data collection, the California Data Manager coordinated data collection efforts by volunteers and nonprofit partners throughout California and monitored data quality using ArcGIS Online. Our Stanislaus-based contractor also recruited volunteers to collect winter use data, cultivated relationships with Forest Service staff, and made recommendations on how to improve winter trailheads and SNO-Parks on the Forest.

As an integral part of this effort, WWA piloted a new Backcountry Ambassador program in conjunction with the RIMS data collection efforts on the Stanislaus, Lassen, Plumas, and Inyo National Forests. WWA is developing this program to augment Forest Service efforts to implement new OSV plans. Backcountry Ambassadors promote positive interactions between winter recreationists and advance winter etiquette, safety, and conservation education in the areas where over-snow activities are concentrated. This pilot program was supported by Patagonia, which donated jackets for Backcountry Ambassador uniforms. In partnership with specific National Forest units and Region 5, WWA will expand the Backcountry Ambassador program next winter, which should result in improved visitor experience, a reduction in use impacts, and an even-more robust RIMS dataset.



Image 1 and 2. Backcountry Ambassadors promote positive interactions between winter recreationists and advance winter etiquette, safety, and conservation education in the areas where over-snow activities are concentrated.

2022-2023 Winter RIMS Assessments

A total of 363 RIMS Assessments were collected by 17 people at 75 locations (Figure 1). Some of these assessments were collected at trailheads, while others included on-trail and off-trail data. In the following summary we analyze the locations where RIMS data collection was most robust. Weather conditions during this record-breaking winter challenged volunteers by limiting trailhead access. The frequent, powerful winter storms made data collection especially difficult for volunteers who were not based in the mountains and greatly affected data collection efforts in the Tahoe region in particular. However, the program was able to provide a useful snapshot of recreational use patterns during a winter of exceptionally high snowfall.

RIMS Assessments and Reports - Winter '22-23

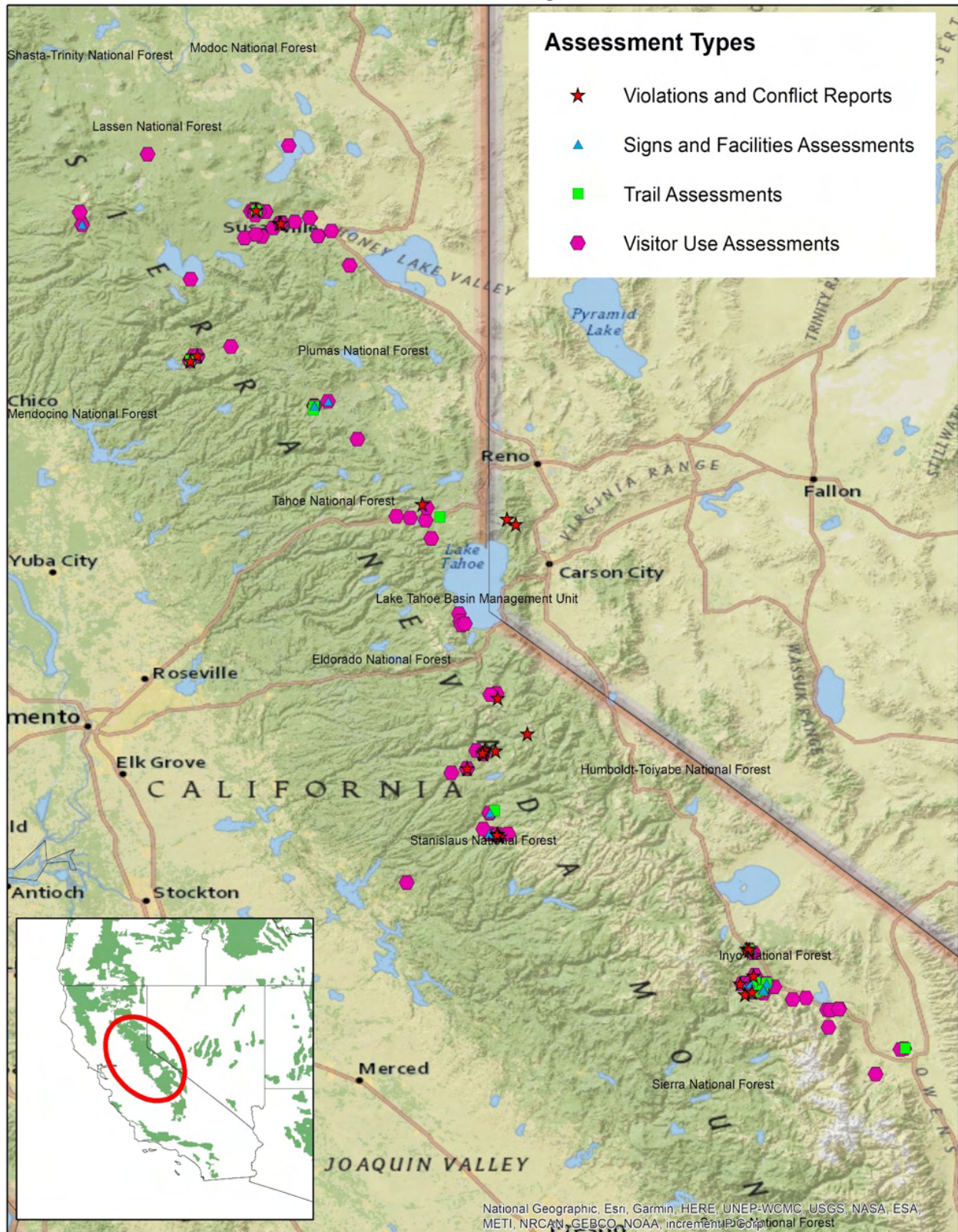


Figure 1. Out of the total number of RIMS Assessments, 280 were Visitor Use Assessments, 45 were Violations or Conflict Reports, 21 were Signs & Facilities, and 17 were Trail/Road Assessments.

RIMS Visitor Use Assessments are used to count the cars and OSV trailers in the trailhead parking lot, the number of people encountered and which winter activity they were participating in, and the number of dogs encountered on-leash and off-leash (Table 1).

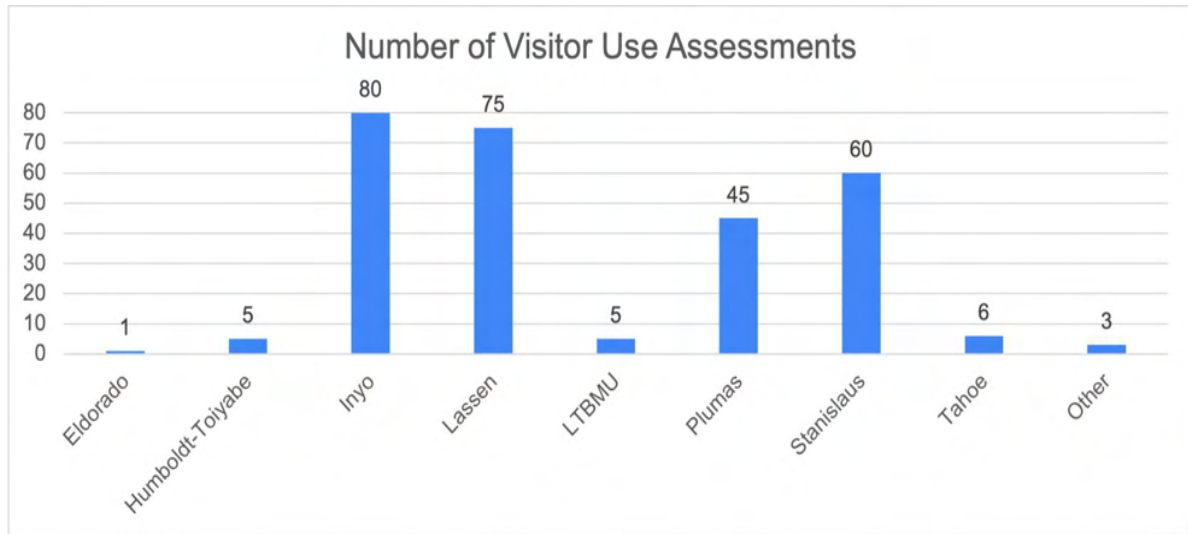


Table 1. The total number of Visitor Use Assessments collected on each National Forest.

RIMS Violation and Conflicts Reports are used to report OSV violations, parking violations, and use conflicts (Figure 2 and Figure 3). Violation and Conflicts reports are confidential reports, meaning they are not viewable by other app users.

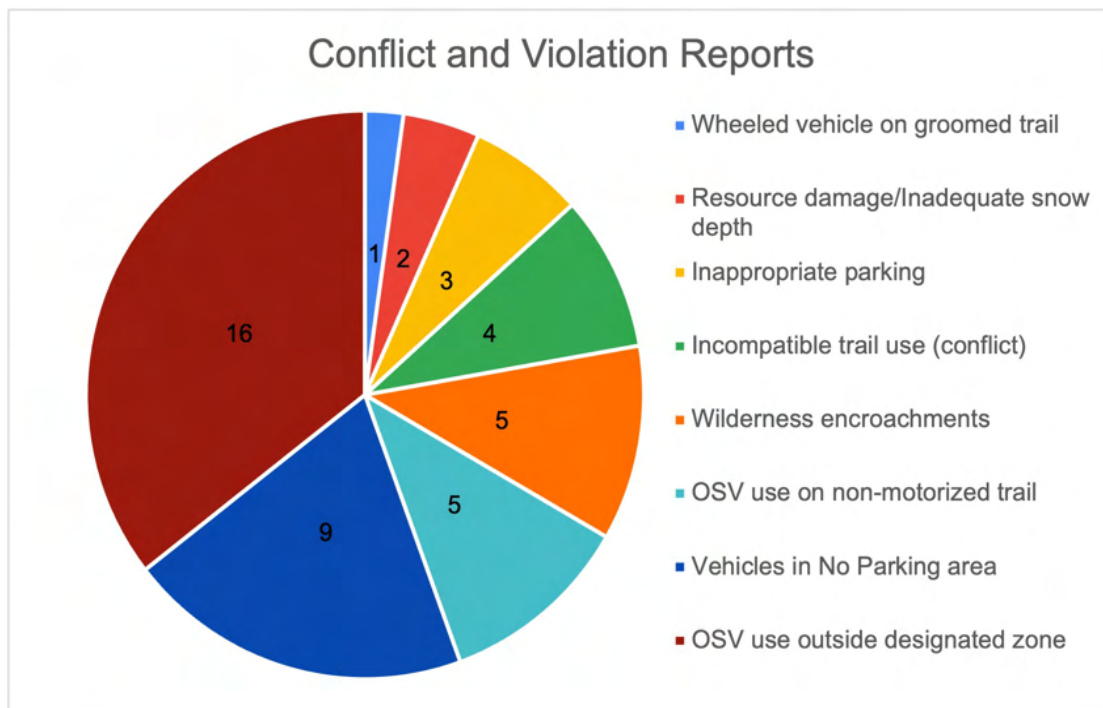


Table 2. The most recorded violation and conflict assessment was “OSV use outside designated zone”, followed by “Vehicles in a No Parking Area”.

RIMS Violations and Conflict Reports - Winter '22-23

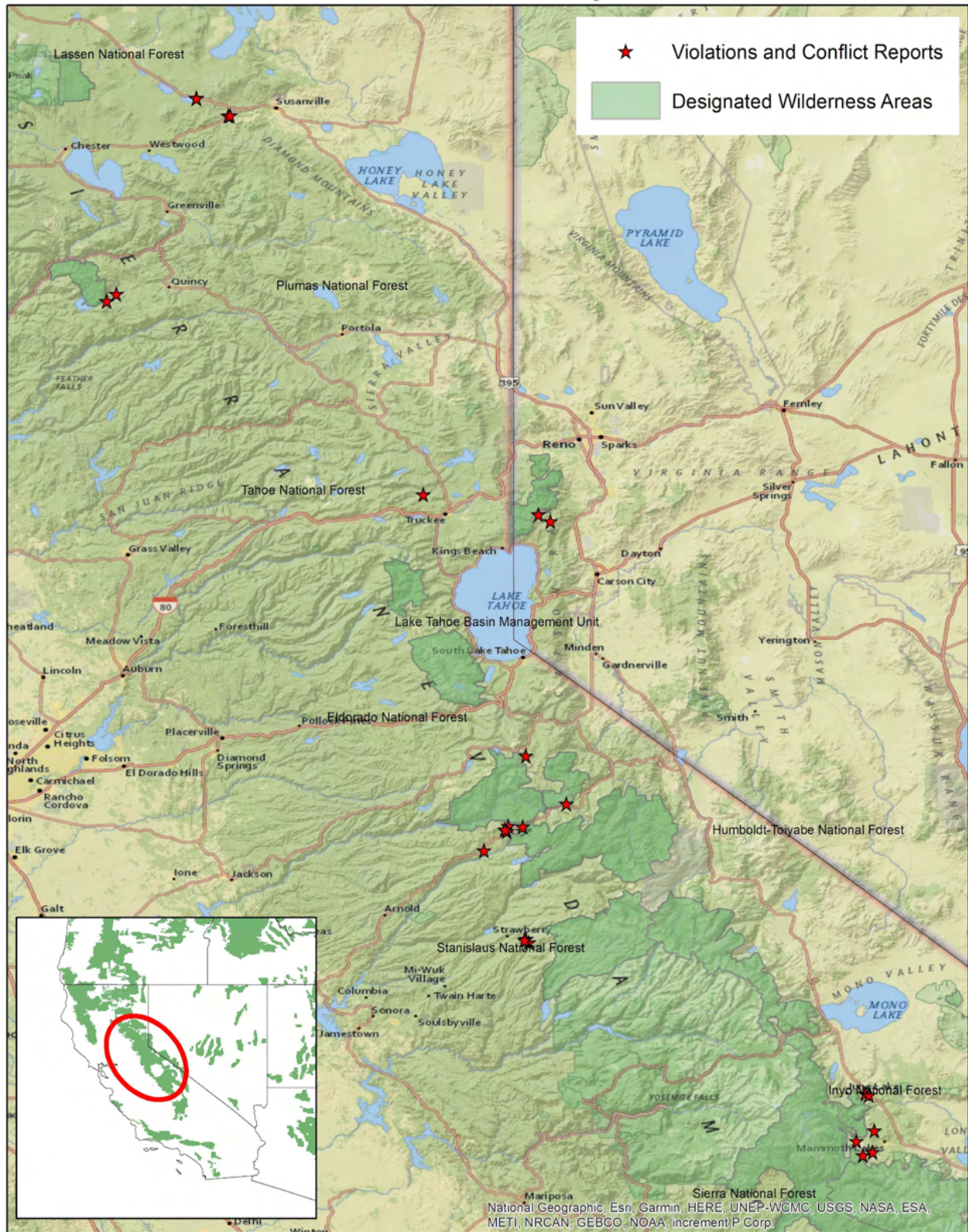


Figure 2. Violation and Conflict reports were clustered around Mammoth Lakes, the Highway 108 corridor, the Highway 4 corridor.

Signs and Facilities Assessments are used to report issues and successes with signage, waste containers, bathrooms and other facilities. Trail and Road Assessments are used to report on the condition of trails including downed trees, trash, and dog poop.

Plumas National Forest

Backcountry ambassadors and volunteers on the Plumas National Forest focused on three trailheads: Bucks Summit Staging Area (24 days), Gold Lake Staging Area (6 days), Big Creek (16 days) Staging Area, and Janesville Grade (1 day). Bucks Summit provides backcountry skiing access as well as recreational OSV access. OSVs reported included snowmobiles, tracked passenger vehicles, and tracked UTVs (Table 4). There was a clear increase in visitation on weekends at this trailhead (Table 3). Volunteers did not report any interactions with motorized recreationists and reported positive interactions with skiers at Bucks Summit Staging Area. Inappropriate parking and vehicles in no parking zones were reported four days this winter, sometimes affecting plowing (Image 3).



Image 3. Vehicles left for long periods of time in the Bucks Summit parking lot affected plowing. This photo was taken on January 18, 2023.



Table 3. Visitor use increased on the weekends and decreased on weekdays at Bucks Summit. Use was especially high close to the New Year and during Presidents Day weekend.

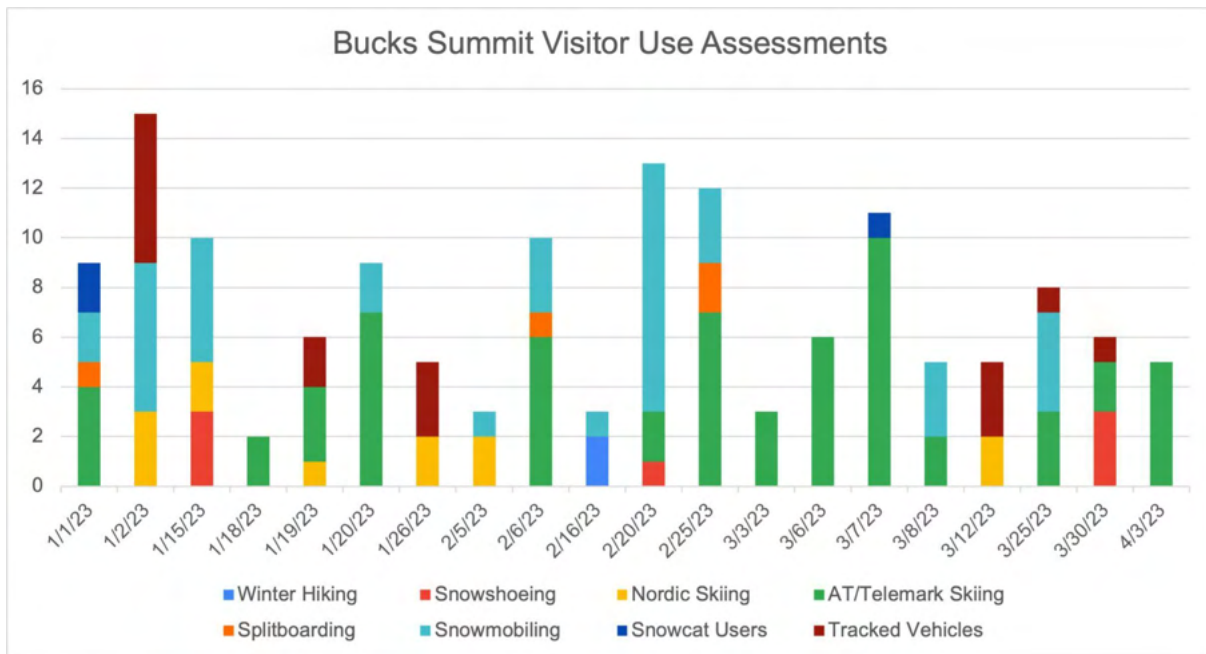


Table 4. Many different winter activities were reported at Bucks Summit including both motorized and non-motorized use.

Volunteers also collected data at Big Creek Staging Area, which provides access to Bucks Lake (Table 5 and Table 6).

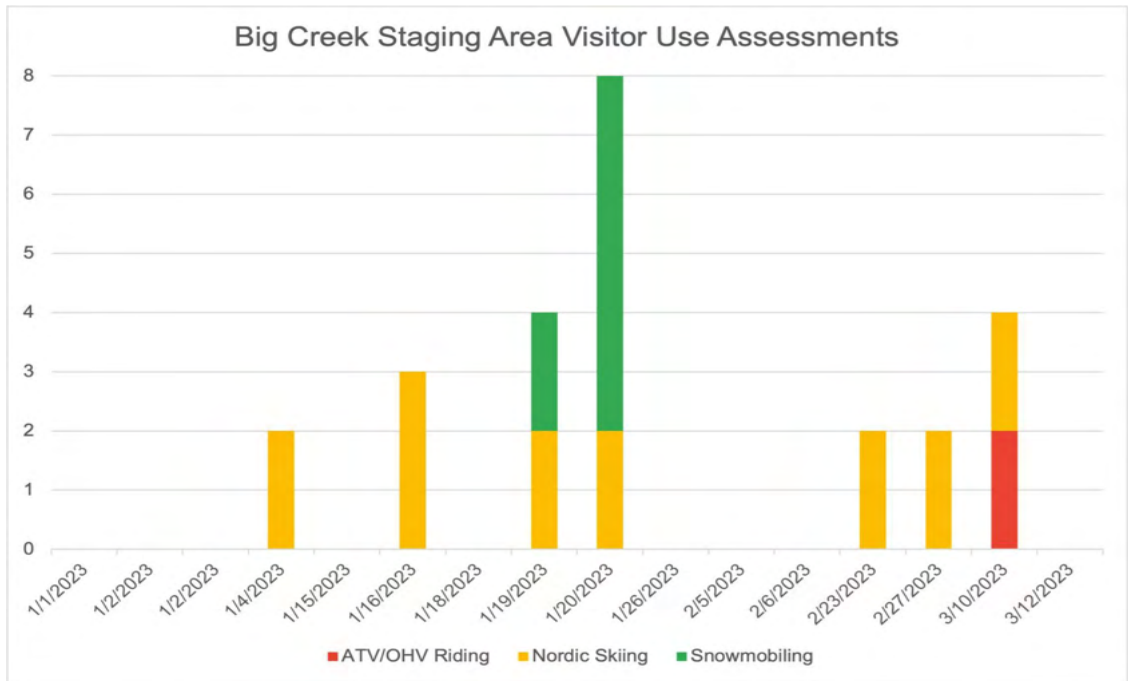


Table 5. Data from Big Creek Staging Area shows that this is another mixed-use trailhead. The most-counted winter activity was Nordic skiing, but volunteers also noted snowmobiling and ATV/OHV riding.

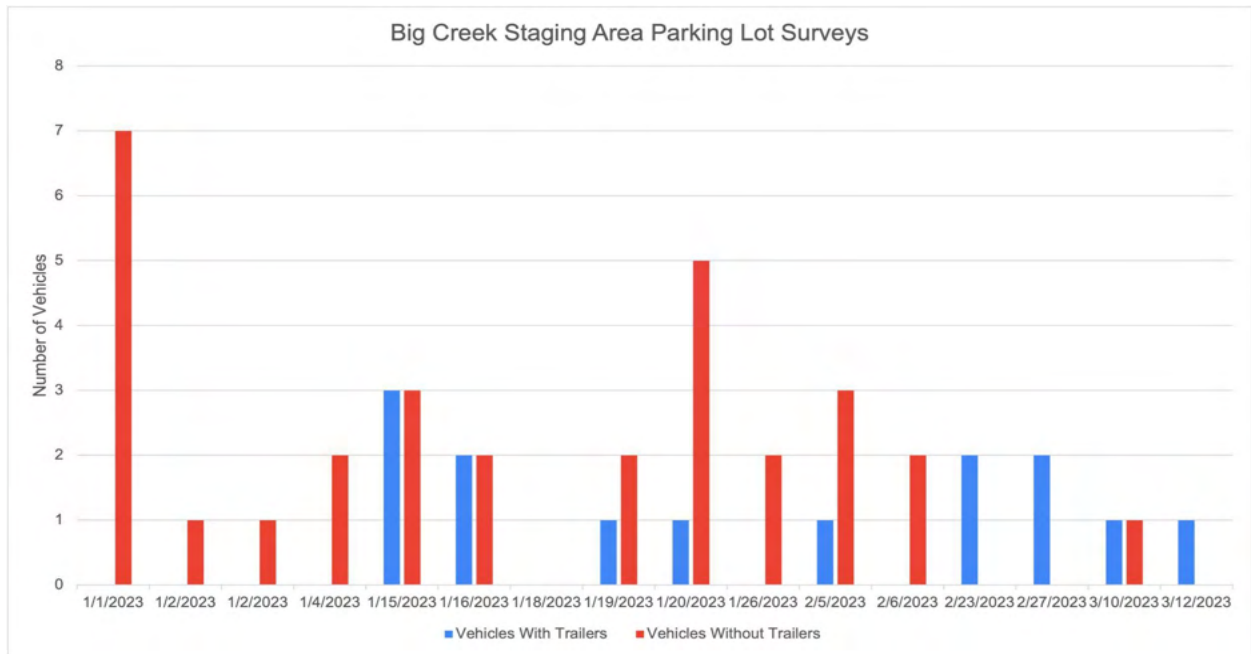


Table 6. The parking lot surveys at Big Creek Staging Area also show that it is a mixed-use trailhead. The majority of vehicles counted did not have trailers, suggesting more non-motorized use.

Gold Lake Staging Area is another mixed-use trailhead that provides OSV and non-motorized access. Backcountry Ambassadors observed vehicles with license plates from California, Nevada, Washington and Montana, and observed both vehicles with and without trailers (Table 7). Snowmobiles were the only OSVs observed and volunteers noted only positive interactions with all user groups (Table 8). Backcountry Ambassadors reported that the facilities at Gold

Lake Staging Area were in good condition and recommended better signage related to backcountry use and regulations. This may have been due to the record snowpack covering signs, but volunteers also noted some signs that were bent over and required maintenance.

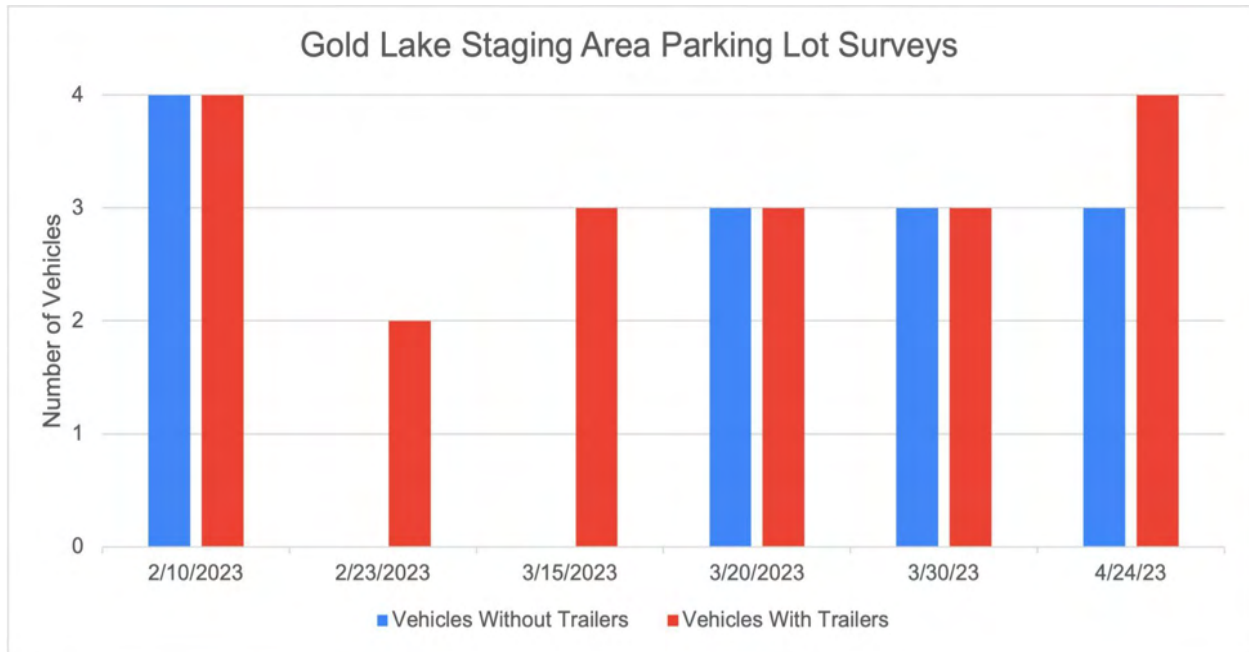


Table 7. Vehicles parked at the Gold Lake Staging Area over the winter season indicated that the trailhead is used for both motorized and non-motorized use.

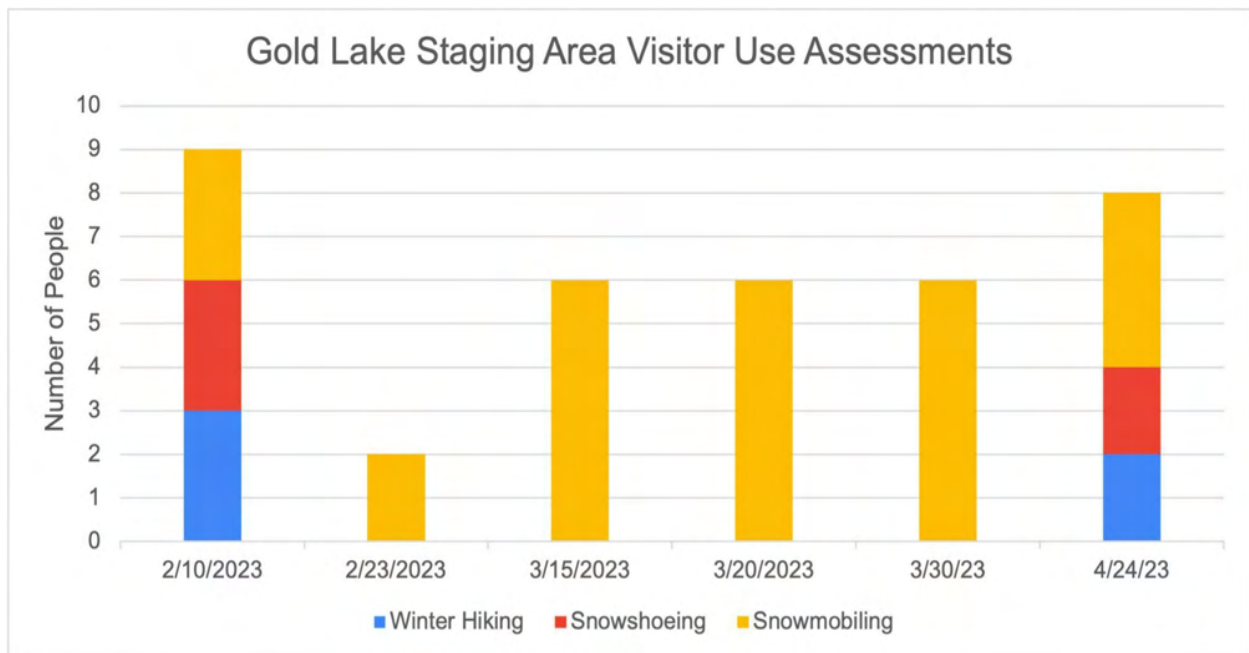


Table 8. Winter hiking, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling were reported at the Gold Lake Staging Area.

Lassen National Forest

The majority of RIMS data collected on the Lassen National Forest were collected at Hog Flat (49 days) and Goumaz Road at Hog Flat (6 days). Hog Flat is designated as a non-motorized area while Goumaz Road is groomed for snowmobiles. One volunteer noted that Goumaz Road is also great for Nordic skiing because the trail stays smooth due to low snowmobile use. Backcountry ambassadors and volunteers also collected more limited data at Bizz Johnson National Recreation Trailheads (5 days), the McGowan Lake Trailhead (2 days), Lake Almanor Trail (2 days), Fredonyer SNO-Park (3 days), Willard Hill Road (2 days), Big Springs along Highway 44 (3 days), and FS 29N05 (1 day). There were no negative interactions noted by the volunteers.



Image 4. The Backcountry Ambassador reported evidence of snowmobile use on Hog Flat two days in February. This photo was taken on February 17, 2023 (40.44319741, -120.8710573). The other violation occurred in the same area on February 1, 2023. The Backcountry Ambassador noted a lack of signage at the trailhead indicating the new non-motorized designation and reached out to the Forest Supervisor at Lassen National Forest about this concern. The Backcountry Ambassador noted that they did not see any new signage posted over the season.



Image 5. Backcountry Ambassadors reported that signs at the McGowan Lake Trailhead were in need of repair on February 10, 2023.



Image 6. The Backcountry Ambassador reported snowmobile use on the Bizz Johnson National Recreation Non-Motorized Trail near the Devils Corral Trailhead (40.39563765, -120.7836759) for almost a mile between mile markers 7 and 8 on February 2, 2023.



Image 7. This Backcountry Ambassador found that someone had walked in existing ski tracks on Hog Flat, Goumaz Road, and the Bizz Johnson Trail three days this season. This photo was taken on March 23, 2023 on Goumaz Road (40.44336798, -120.8710621). The Backcountry Ambassador suggested that the Lassen National Forest post information at the trailheads to educate recreationists about the etiquette of staying off of existing ski tracks.

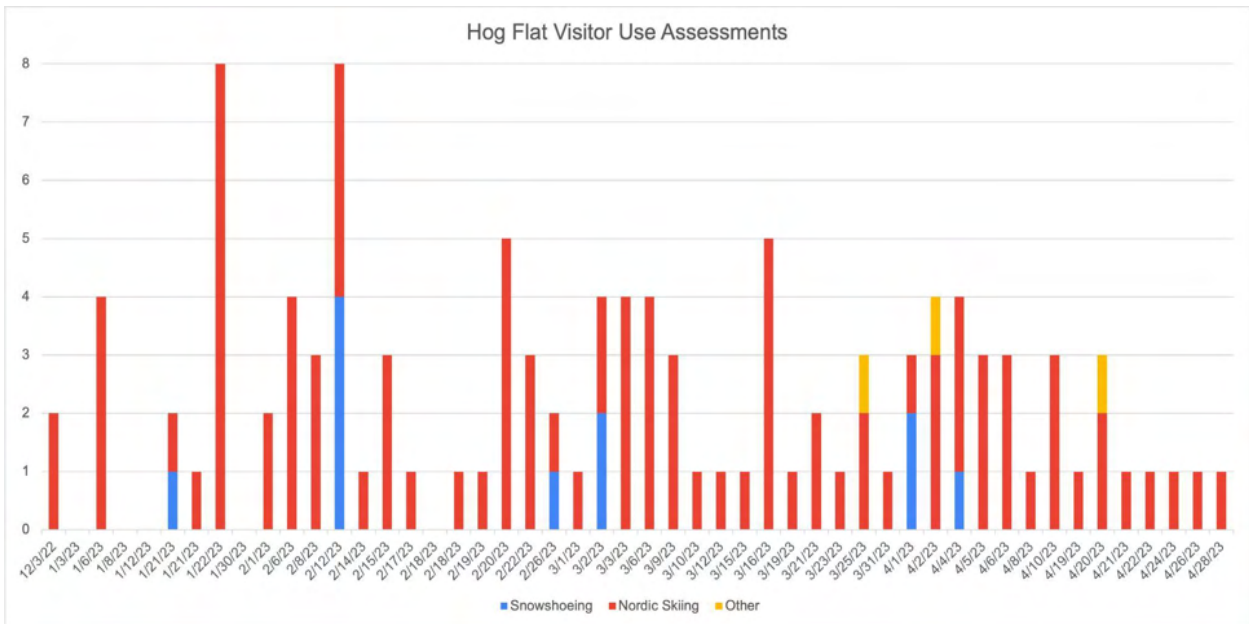


Table 7. Nordic skiing was the primary winter activity recorded at Hog Flat.

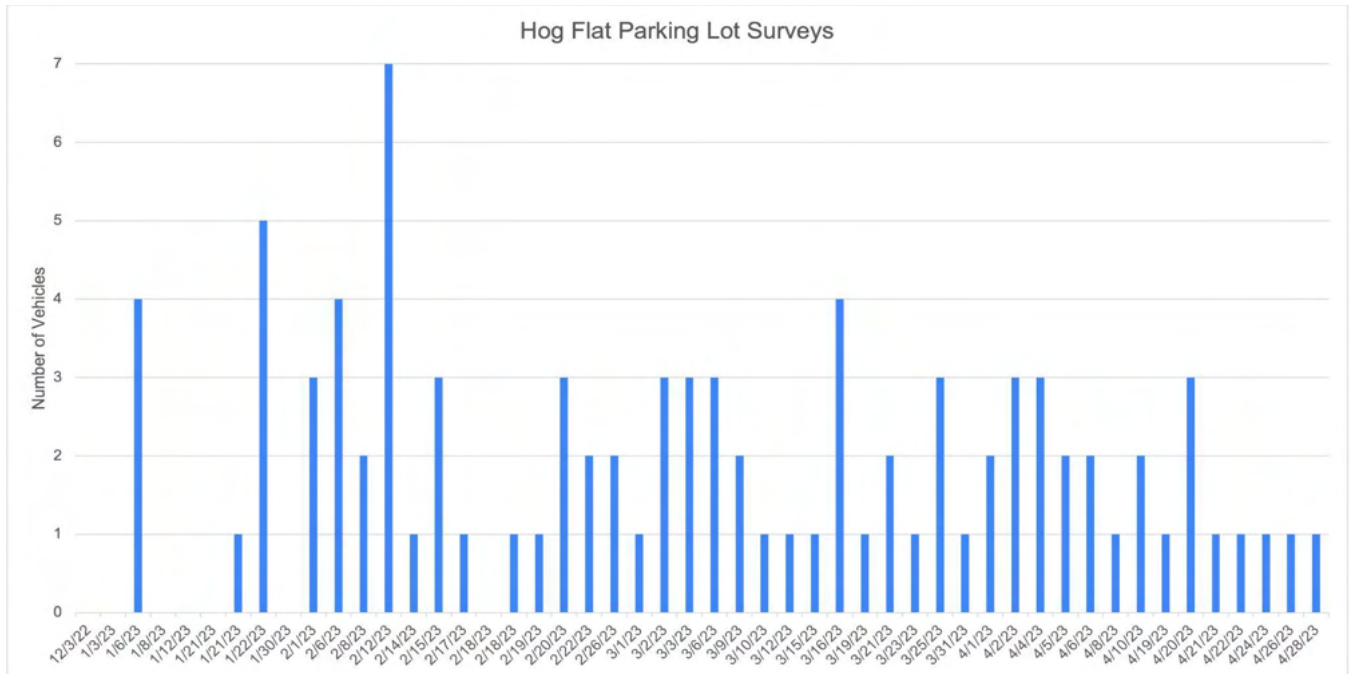


Table 8. Hog Flat had consistent, low to moderate use throughout the winter.

Stanislaus National Forest

Backcountry Ambassadors and volunteers monitored trailheads on the Highway 108 corridor including Pinecrest Winter Recreation Area (3 days), Dodge Ridge (1 day), Crabtree Nordic Trailhead (10 days), Gooseberry Road Trailhead (8 days), the Highway 108 SNO-Park (4 days), Leland Meadows Road, and Herring Creek Road (2 days). On the Highway 4 corridor, Backcountry Ambassadors and volunteers monitored Round Valley SNO-Park (11 days), Lake Alpine SNO-Park (15 days), and Spicer SNO-Park (7 days).

WWA’s Stanislaus-based seasonal contractor reported on her experiences and recommendations at the end of the season. She reported that USFS provided substantial education through interpretive events and signage on the Highway 108 corridor and recreation staff on the Highway 4 corridor. The most common issues on the Stanislaus National Forest this past season were due to illegal parking, pet waste, litter, and other conflicts coming from snowplay visitors. We recommend the USFS educate the public about the difference between snowplay areas and the SNO-Parks that are better suited for backcountry access. This would allow the public to continue to engage in snowplay and would provide better backcountry access for other types of winter activities. Our Stanislaus-based contractor suggested promoting Pinecrest Winter Recreation Area for snowplay.

She also reported that multiple OSV violations were documented during SledFest at Bear Valley Ski Resort (Image 7). Some of these violations occurred at the non-motorized Round Valley SNO-Park, where no prior violations had occurred during the season, as well as on Mount

Reba. We recommend that the Forest Service amend the Special Use Permit to include a requirement for more signage marking the boundaries of the ski resort and the Mokelumne Wilderness, as well as OSV designations near the resort and at adjacent SNO-Parks. We also recommend providing an OSVUM to all event attendees, amending the Special Use Permit to include funding for a USFS LEO to be on call, and including funding for a USFS ranger with over-snow capabilities to be present during the entire event. The WWA contractor also reported that some SledFest attendees rode snowmobiles through private property and were exceeding the speed limit on the groomed roads. Although there was an effort by event organizers to mark the official route to take through town, some attendees ignored this or may have been unaware of the route. To avoid this situation in the future, we recommend that the Special Use Permit lay out a clear plan for parking in the village, travel between the village and the resort, and adequate enforcement. As a final recommendation on SledFest, we suggest that the Stanislaus National Forest should consider whether the event and Special Use Permit warrant technical environmental review due to potentially significant impacts outside of normal ski area operations. These impacts included one snowmobile that needed to be removed by a helicopter from a designated non-motorized area outside of the ski area boundary.

After spending a winter testing out the Backcountry Ambassador concept, our seasonal contractor reported that making recommendations and assisting with placement of signs is the most important role a Backcountry Ambassador can fill on the Stanislaus National Forest. She also noted that a Backcountry Ambassador should monitor areas outside of the parking lot and groomed trails where the USFS staff primarily have a presence, utilizing a snowmobile and a backcountry ski or splitboard setup to travel longer distances from the trailhead. This is important for monitoring Wilderness boundaries and compliance with other remote OSV area boundaries, such as in Pacific Valley. The contractor suggested establishing a once a month outing with USFS staff to maintain positive communication. Backcountry Ambassadors can also assist by submitting snow and avalanche reports as forecasting for the Stanislaus is very limited, especially on the Highway 108 corridor.

Highway 4 Corridor

Lake Alpine SNO-Park is mostly used for motorized access, receiving traffic from Bear Valley village and Bear Valley Snowmobile Rentals, but it is also popular for snowplay (Table 9). Motorized use is prohibited north of the highway, but there are no boundary signs and no map at the SNO-Park. We recommend better signage in the immediate vicinity of the SNO-Park. WWA would be interested in working with the USFS and Bear Valley Snowmobile Rentals to provide maps and education. Because there is conflict stemming from motorized and non-motorized users sharing the narrow, groomed road, we recommend and would support efforts to re-establish a previously existing non-motorized winter trail that parallels the highway on the south side.

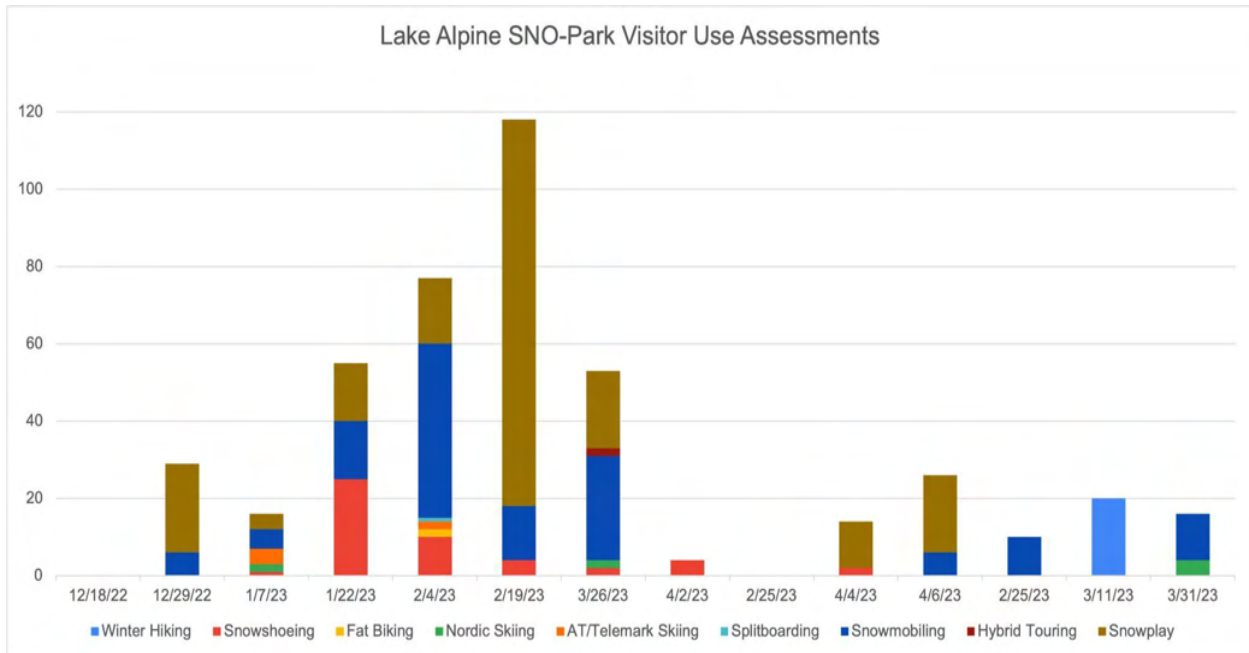


Table 9. The Lake Alpine SNO-Park is a mixed-use trailhead. The most-recorded winter activities were snowplay, snowmobiling, and snowshoeing. Although no winter activities were reported on December 18, 2022, the Backcountry Ambassador reported 47 vehicles without trailers and 13 vehicles with trailers.

Round Valley SNO-Park is a non-motorized trailhead that is heavily used for snowplay, but is also used for other winter activities including non-motorized overnight trips (Table 10). Illegal parking was reported several times and parking conflicts were reported between snowplayers and other non-motorized users. Appropriate parking was not obvious over the winter, which could be remedied by better signage. The only signage was inside the restrooms which were frequently blocked by plowing. Additionally the terrain rolls into a creek, providing one main path into and out of the parking lot. This can become a dangerous and difficult return to the parking lot for backcountry users when there are over fifty people sledding and engaging in other snowplay activities.

OSV violations occurred near Round Valley SNO-Park during SledFest (Image 8). The OSVUM was reported missing from the restroom on April 22, 2023, after CalTrans had begun to clear snow from Highway 4 and there was no visible signage indicating that this trailhead is designated for non-motorized use. We recommend increased monitoring and enforcement for a minimum of two weeks after CalTrans starts to clear snow from the highway in spring in addition to better signage throughout the winter and increased education and signage during SledFest.

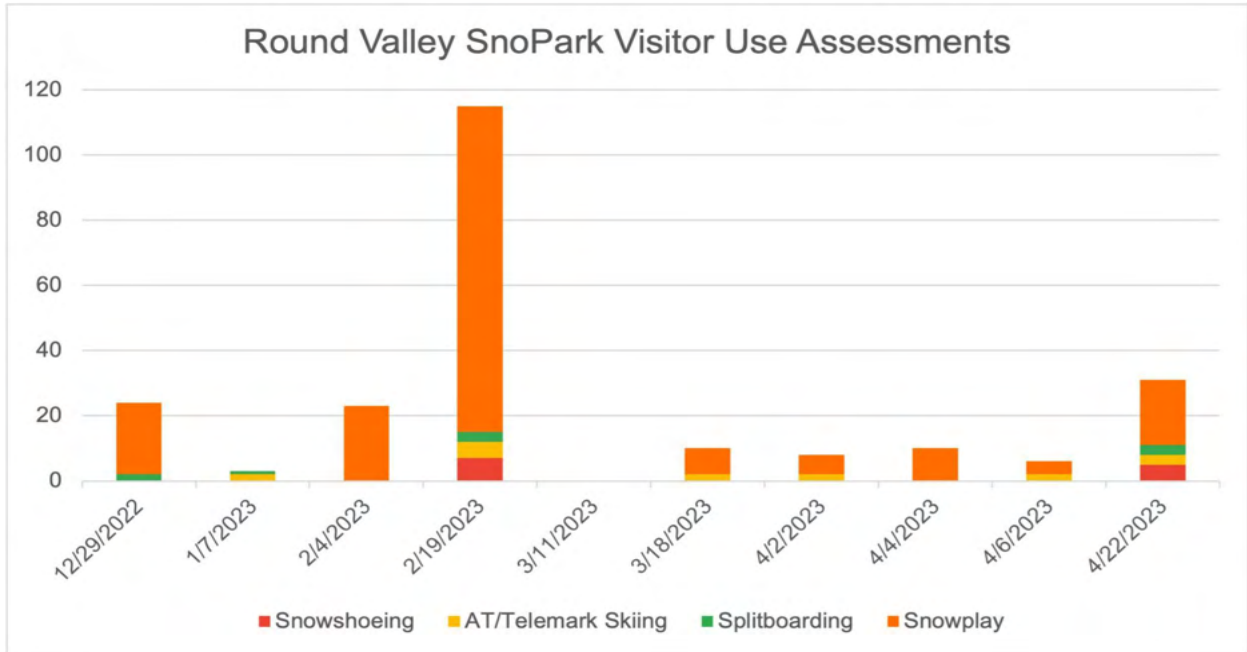


Table 10. Snowplay was the most-recorded type of winter activity at the Round Valley SnoPark on the Stanislaus National Forest.



Image 8. Snowmobile and timbersled tracks were reported in the Poison Canyon area near Round Valley SNO-Park on April 22, 2023 (38.49403, -120.0102834). The OSVs were seen by a backcountry skier in the area before SledFest. This area is closed to OSVs.

The Backcountry Ambassadors also visited Spicer SNO-Park, noting a strong USFS presence on the weekends. This trailhead is mostly used for snowplay and snowshoeing (Table 11). The seasonal contractor reported that the parking lot at Spicer SNO-Park could fit many additional vehicles if parking signs were more clear.

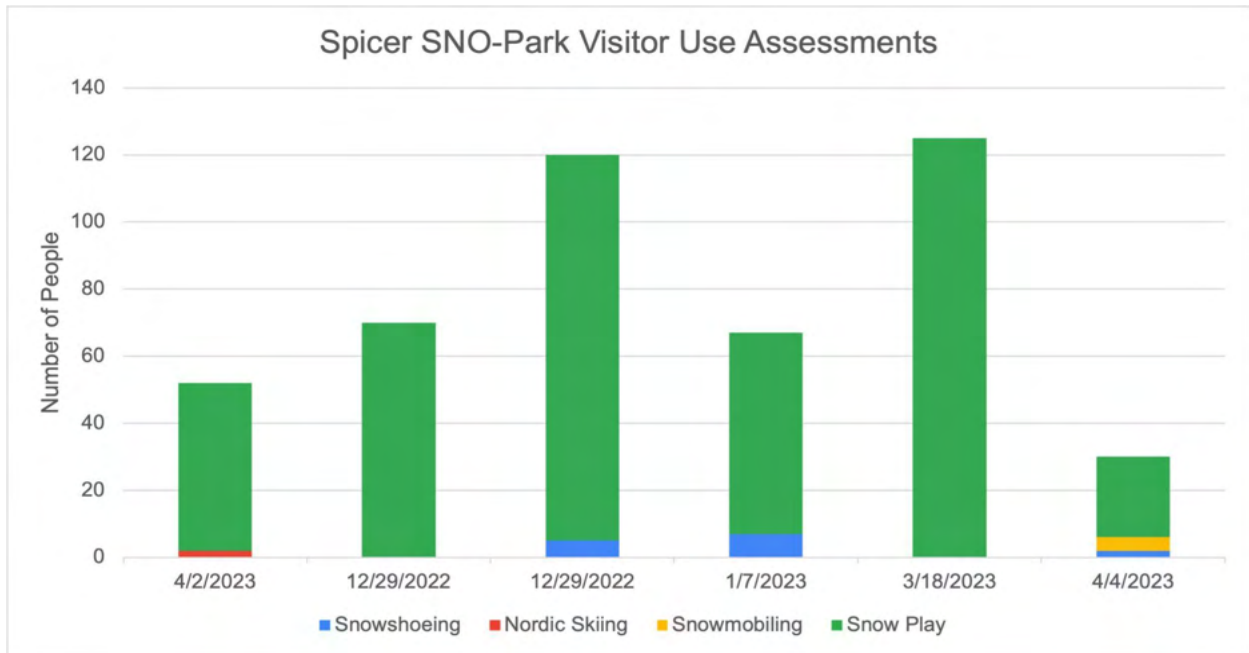


Table 11. The most reported type of winter recreation at Spicer SNO-Park was snowplay.

Highway 108 Corridor

The WWA contractor reported that Pinecrest Winter Recreation Area is an important trailhead for snowplay (Table 12). This trailhead does not offer much backcountry access, but when it is not open and accessible snowplayers are displaced to areas where they interfere with backcountry access. During this record snow year, there were weeks of only one open bathroom, limited parking, and insufficient trash service (Image 9). However, signage was exceptional.



Image 9. An overflowing waste receptacle at Pinecrest Recreation Area on January 30, 2023.



Table 12. Only three RIMS Visitor Use Assessments were taken at Pinecrest Winter Recreation Area. However, high use was reported during all three visits.

Crabtree Nordic Trailhead received light, but consistent non-motorized use over the winter (Table 13). On December 26, 2022, a diaper and dog poop were reported on the first thirty yards of trail. We recommend better signage about Leave no Trace and look forward to a functional bathroom once repairs are completed. A volunteer also reported motorized use on a non-motorized trail by one snowmobile on January 24, 2023.

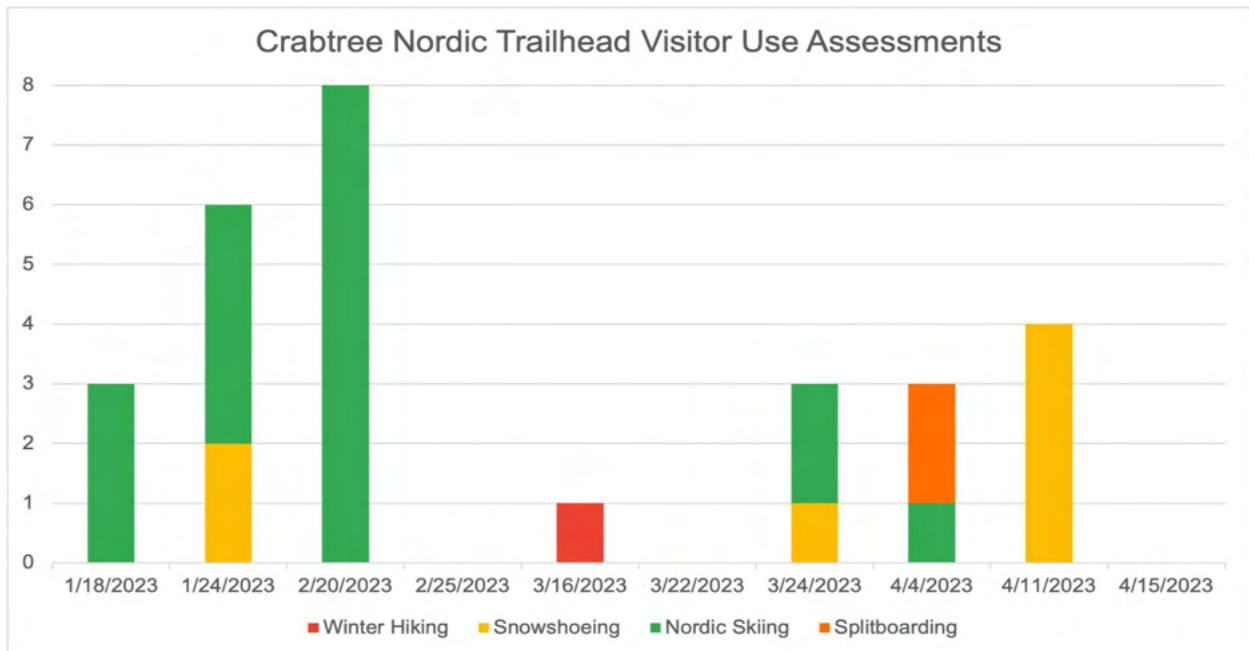


Table 13. Crabtree Nordic Trailhead was mostly used for Nordic skiing over the winter season. The entrance road and parking lot were not plowed on February 25, 2023. Four cars without trailers were reported on April 15, 2023, but there were no cars in the parking lot on March 22, 2023.

Gooseberry Road Trailhead primarily provides Nordic skiing access and is heavily affected by Dodge Ridge Ski Area parking. On February 25, 2023, approximately thirty vehicles were parked illegally in a No Parking Zone along a one lane road. These vehicles appeared to be parked for the ski resort as nobody was recorded recreating near the trailhead. We recommend better signage and enforcement as necessary to discourage illegal parking when the ski area is busy.

Herring Creek Road mainly offers snowmobile access and opportunity for snowplay because of the long distance to skiable terrain. An OSV violation was reported north of Herring Creek Road on January 25, 2023 (Image 10). Multiple snowmobile tracks were reported in an area closed to OSVs north of the road. We recommend better signage at the trailhead including an OSVUM.



Image 10. Snowmobile tracks were reported in an area closed to OSVs (38.22563, -119.972) north of Herring Creek Road on January 25, 2023.

The Highway 108 SNO-Park primarily offers snowmobile access and opportunity for snowplay due to its low elevation and distance to quality backcountry ski terrain. This SNO-Park provides great examples of helpful signage. Although some signs are fading and should be updated, there is a sign with the OSVUM for the immediate area and signs showing how to park correctly (Image 11 and Image 12).



Image 11. This helpful sign at the Highway 108 SNO-Park shows a zoomed-in OSVUM of the area.



Image 12. This is a great example of a helpful parking sign at the Highway 108 SNO-Park.

The final trailhead to discuss on the Stanislaus National Forest is Leland Meadows Road. The county plows this road to provide access to private condos and privately owned Leland High Sierra Snowplay. There is a small piece of USFS land next to the road. This is one of the highest elevation places that one can drive to in the winter on Highway 108, second only to Dodge Ridge Ski Area where a pass is required. However, there is no parking allowed along the road and the private residences block most reasonable access for human-powered recreation, while snowmobiles can access the area by Herring Creek Road. We are interested in working with the USFS and Leland Meadows Snow Park to establish a few public parking spots for access to this important area for human-powered backcountry access.

Inyo National Forest

Backcountry Ambassadors on the Inyo National Forest collected the majority of data at Rock Creek Road and SNO-Park (12 days), Obsidian Dome Road (18 days), and Sherwins Trailhead (18 days). Backcountry Ambassadors also collected data at the Mammoth Scenic Loop (7 days), Sherwins Mill City Access Trailhead (5 days), the Lake Mary Road winter closure (3 days), the Highway 203 Corridor near Mammoth Mountain (3 days), Cinder Shed (also known as USFS 3S89) (2 days), Inyo Craters Winter Trailhead (2 days), Shady Rest Park (2 days), Mammoth Pass (2 days), Minaret Vista (2 days), Crowley Lake Drive by Red Mountain (2 days), the intersection of Highway 395 and Highway 203 (1 day), the Sherwins Motocross Track (1 day), McGee Creek (1 day), Reds Meadow Hot Spring (1 day), USFS 210 (1 day), and Dry

Creek Nordic Trail (1 day). We did not monitor at Shady Rest in order to not duplicate monitoring efforts by the Town of Mammoth Lakes.

Rock Creek SNO-Park provides mostly non-motorized winter recreation access as the majority of Rock Creek Canyon is closed to OSVs. This winter, Rock Creek Road was often in poor condition or not plowed to the SNO-Park. The Backcountry Ambassador recorded consistent non-motorized use despite this (Table 14).

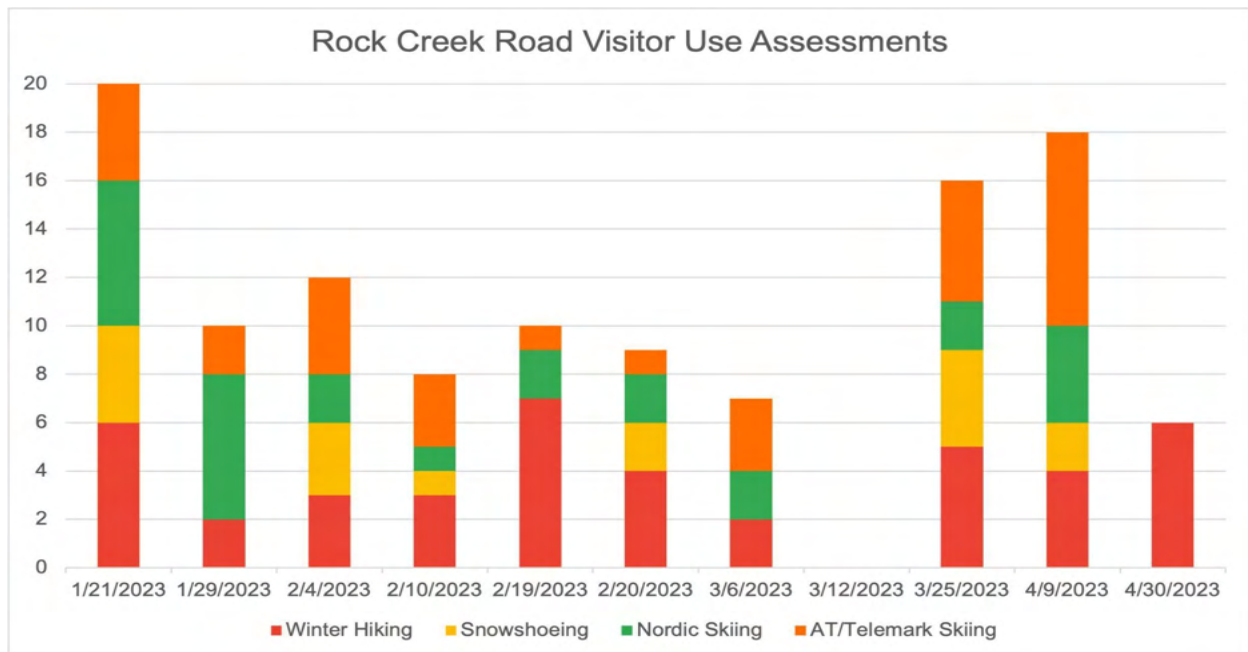


Table 14. Consistent non-motorized use was reported on weekends near Rock Creek Road and SNO-Park. The road was in bad condition on March 12, 2023, but the Backcountry Ambassador reported that twelve cars were parked at the Toms Place Store.

Obsidian Dome Road is another trailhead that primarily provides non-motorized access, although there is a groomed OSV trail that runs along the highway and connects to a network of OSV trails in the area. Most of the area to the west of the groomed OSV trail is designated for non-motorized use, but the area across Highway 395 is open to OSVs (Table 15). Although volunteers did not collect RIMS data at the trailhead across the highway, Backcountry Ambassadors often saw vehicles with trailers and snowmobiles being unloaded at that Snowmobile Trailhead. Consistent non-motorized use was recorded throughout the winter at the Obsidian Dome Road trailhead (Table 16).

Winter motorized use on a non-motorized trail was reported two times, winter motorized use outside of the designated zone was reported two times (Image 13, and a wheeled vehicle was reported on the groomed trail once (Image 14). Obsidian Dome has multiple regulatory signs and informational maps that these recreationists ignored (Image 13 and Image 14). On January 7, 2023, a Backcountry Ambassador reported several snowmobilers who came across the highway to look at the map and learn what was open to OSVs. These snowmobilers did not drive past the “No Snowmobiling” sign.

The Backcountry Ambassador reported that there was no USFS presence at this trailhead. We are interested in helping to educate the public at Obsidian Dome Road by maintaining a Backcountry Ambassador presence, which will hopefully decrease the number of OSV violations.



Image 13. OSV tracks were reported by Obsidian Dome Road on December 19, 2023 (37.77917792, -119.0246873). The tracks went by a sign indicating that the area is closed to OSVs.



Image 14. This photo documents an attempt to drive a wheeled vehicle onto groomed Obsidian Dome Road on December 22, 2023 (37.77382512, -119.0152022). A sign that reads "No Wheeled Vehicles" is visible to the right. The ruts from this vehicle made the entrance ramp onto the groomed trail more difficult to use.

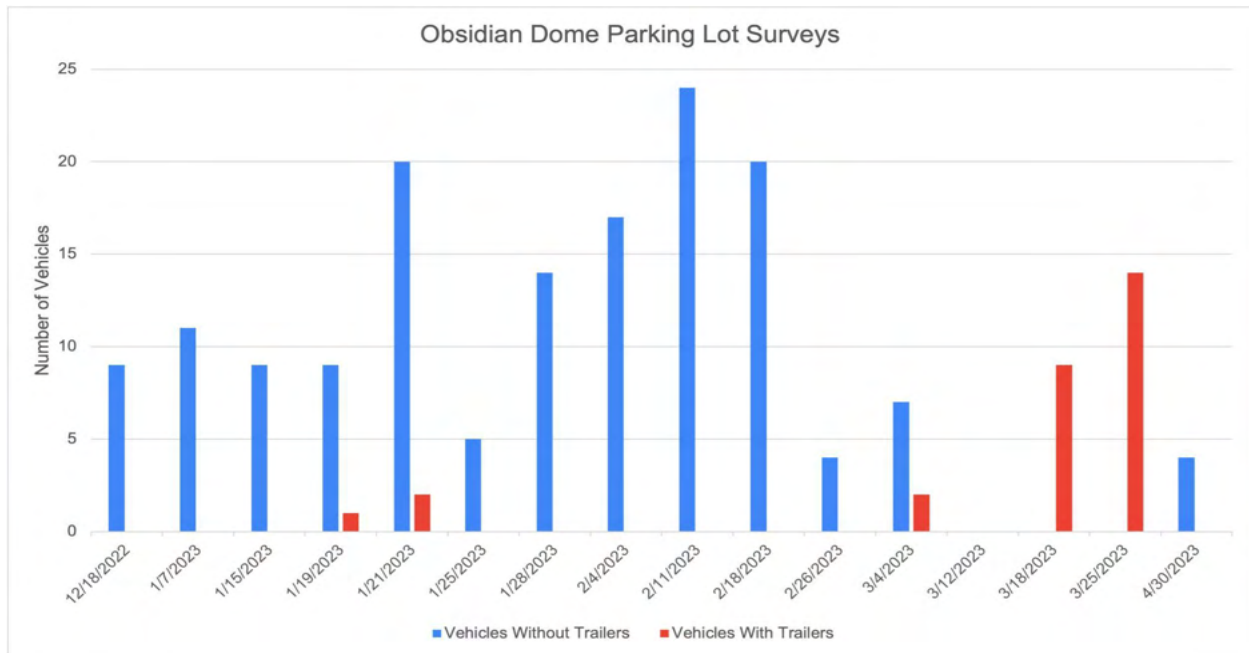


Table 15. The majority of vehicles counted at Obsidian Dome Road were without trailers. However, some recreationists may be using this trailhead to access the groomed OSV trail system.

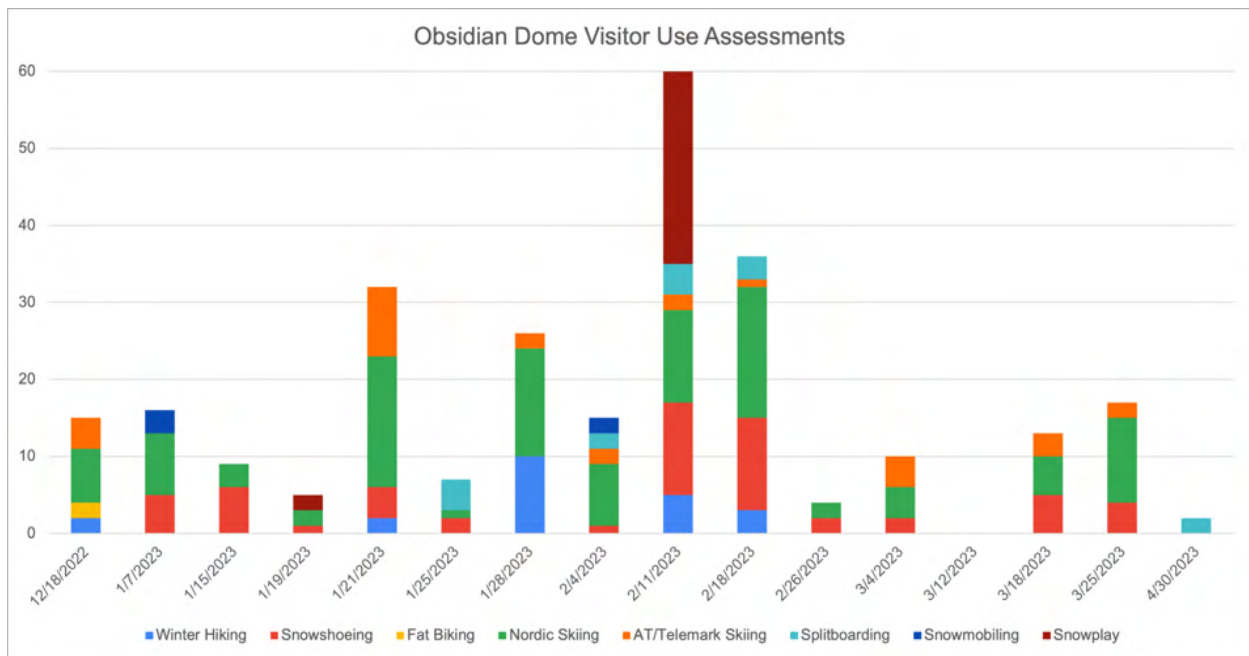


Table 16. Volunteers recorded consistent use by non-motorized winter recreationists at Obsidian Dome Road. March 12, 2023, the parking lot was not plowed and the trail was not groomed.

The Sherwins Trailhead is known for backcountry skiing and splitboarding access on Sherwin Ridge in close proximity to town. Many people also come to the Sherwins Trailhead to sled, play in the snow, and walk their dogs. Non-motorized recreation was reported more often than motorized recreation at this trailhead (Table 17). When snowmobiling did occur at this trailhead,

the California Data Manager was concerned about the excessive impacts to the non-motorized experience of the majority of users in that location, and that blind hills might block a non-motorized recreationist from view and potentially lead to an accident. Resource damage was also noted on the south-facing aspects of the knolls between the propane tanks and the motocross track, where even in a heavy snow year machines were noted to have traversed bare manzanita chaparral in order to directly access the area beyond the motocross track (rather than simply traveling around the knolls to the east over snow). To improve the experience for non-motorized users, and to minimize resource damage, we recommend closing the Sherwins Meadow and the knolls directly south and east of the parking area to OSVs while keeping the Sherwin Creek Road corridor and the less-crowded area beyond the Mammoth Motocross track open for access to snowmobiling farther out from where the majority of non-motorized activities occur. Improvements could be made for OSV staging on the east side of the parking area near the propane tanks.

The California Data Manager and Backcountry Ambassadors did not report any parking violations or conflicts during the winter season and noted that visitors parked efficiently, even on busy days (Table 18). However, dog poop and trash left on the snow were constant problems throughout the winter (Image 15, 16, 17). We recommend maintaining a Backcountry Ambassador presence at this trailhead to provide increased education about use etiquette and Leave No Trace messaging, as well as requiring owners to leash their dogs. This busy trailhead would also benefit from more frequent trash service, especially on busy weekends (Image 16).

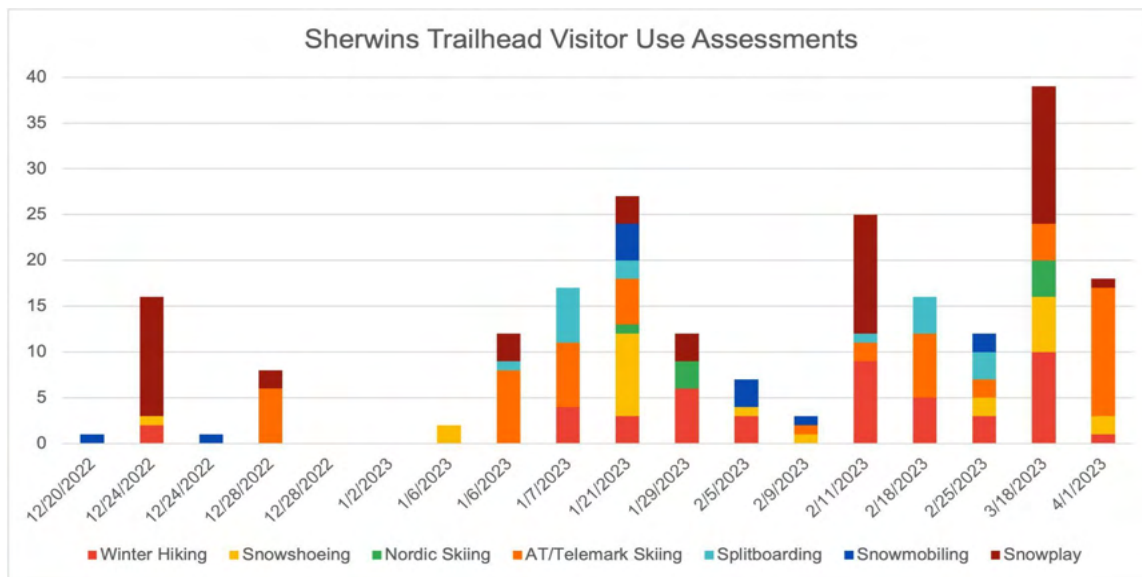


Table 17. The most-recorded winter activities were snowplay, backcountry skiing and splitboarding, winter hiking, and snowshoeing at the Sherwins Trailhead.

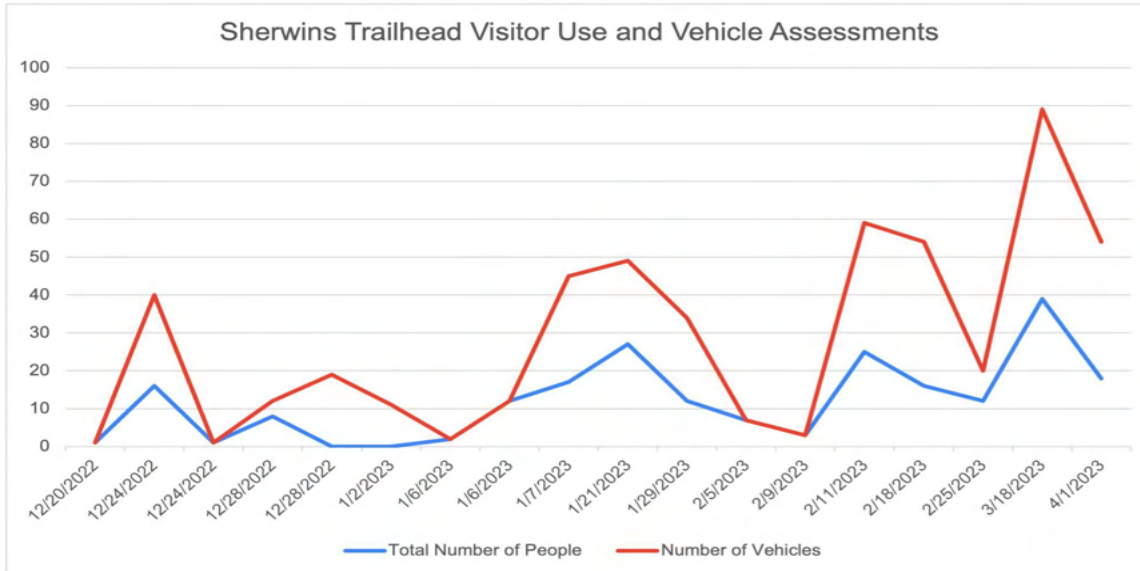


Table 18. Vehicles counted were consistently higher than people counted at the Sherwins Trailhead. Vehicle counts are useful for understanding how many people may be recreating near a trailhead on a given day, since people are often undercounted. People may be hidden from view by ridges, hills, trees, or distance.



Image 15. Despite having access to a pet station stocked with Wag Bags and a pet-waste specific trash receptacle, dog owners consistently neglected to pick up after their dogs. This photo, taken on February 18, 2023 (37.62835, -118.964) is just one example of the minefield of dog waste that the California Data Manager encountered at nearly every visit to the Sherwins Trailhead. The California Data Manager reported between one and five gallons of dog waste on the snow five times this winter. Many dogs were reported off leash at the Sherwins Trailhead, contributing to this problem.



Image 16. The trashcan at the Sherwins Trailhead was open and buried in snow for most of the winter. The California Data Manager reported trash left near the trash can several times.



Image 17. Visitors left trash out on the snow at the Sherwins Trailhead when the trash receptacles were not usable. This photo was taken on March 18, 2023.

To access Minaret Vista in the winter, recreationists currently park near Mammoth Mountain's Main Lodge and travel on closed and groomed Minaret Road. Parking is often full by 10:00 AM on a busy weekend at Main Lodge. Non-motorized recreationists must walk on the snow at the base of the resort to access Minaret Road, which becomes a maze of ski school closures on busy weekends. There are no signs about Minaret Vista or the groomed road until the junction where the road leaves the Lower Roadrunner ski trail. Getting to Minaret Road from the resort is a hassle: from parking on a busy day to finding the trail, it is not straightforward. However, this trail accesses backcountry terrain near Reds Meadow and provides the opportunity for a scenic hike or tour to Minaret Vista (Image 18). We recommend—especially as plans move forward for further commercial development in the Main Lodge area—designating public-access parking near the Main Lodge for people who want to use the groomed road to Minaret Vista and also recommend additional signage. The California Data Manager noted lots of snowmobile use on the groomed road as well as off-trail when collecting data at this trailhead.



Image 18. Minaret Road provides an opportunity for a world-class scenic hike or tour as well as backcountry access, but parking is difficult and finding the road is not obvious.

The Mammoth Scenic Loop provides access for a variety of winter activities including backcountry skiing and splitboarding, Nordic skiing, and snowplay. Many visitors also park on the side of Highway 203, also known as Minaret Road, to play in the snow and sled down the small hills. There is a clear need for a designated snowplay area with a bathroom and trash cans near the parking area along Mammoth Scenic Loop above Highway 203. Most of these recreationists are families with young children that would benefit from more infrastructure. The snow pack would also benefit, as that is currently the only place to use the restroom. A designated snowplay area would also improve safety. The California Data Manager reported eight vehicles parked on the shoulder of Highway 203 and people playing in the snow on the side of the road on Presidents' Day weekend. A group of children ran across the road, just seconds before fast-moving traffic came around the blind curve just above them. It was also difficult to pull out onto the highway from the shoulder, due to the blind curve and fast-moving traffic.

Another opportunity to improve winter recreation near the Highway 203 Corridor is the Caltrans cinder-shed trailhead for snowmobile Trail C that leads to the Inyo Craters (Image 19). Recreationists can park along Highway 203 by the entrance to the road. However, there is no parking allowed along the entrance road and no signs on Highway 203 that mark this trail (Images 19 and 20). This trailhead provides an opportunity for snowmobile access away from areas commonly used for snowplay and human-powered recreation, but it is currently unmarked and lacks parking.



Image 19. USFS 3S89 at the Cal Trans Cinder Shed provides access to a groomed trail near Highway 203 but there is no signage or parking.



Image 20. No parking allowed along USFS 3S89 off Highway 203 near the Cal Trans Cinder Shed.

Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit

Volunteers collected four Visitor Use Assessments on the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU) this winter at Bayview Trailhead (1 day), Hidden Peak Trailhead (1 day), Jakes South Emerald Bay Gate Closure (1 day), and Emerald Bay State Park (1 day). One OSV violation was reported at the base Houghton Peak in the Mount Rose Wilderness on January 28, 2023 (Image 21).



Image 21. Snowmobile tracks were reported in the Mount Rose Wilderness on January 28, 2023 (39.32872, -119.927).

Tahoe National Forest

Volunteers collected seven Visitor Use Assessments on the Tahoe National Forest at Deep Creek Trailhead (2 days), Carpenter Valley Road (1 day), Donner Pass SNO-Park (1 day), Donner Pass State Park (1 day), Yuba Pass SNO-Park (1 day), and Johnson Canyon Trailhead (1 day).

Eldorado National Forest

One volunteer collected a Visitor Use Assessment on the Eldorado National Forest at Carson Pass SNO-Park (1 day) .

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest

Volunteers collected six Visitor Use Assessments during the winter at Incline Lake (2 days), Forestdale Creek Road (1 day), Tamarack Peak Parking Lot (2 days), and Tahoe Meadows (2 days). OSV violations were reported once in an area closed to OSVs near Tahoe Meadows on February 19, 2023 (Image 21), and once at the base of Houghton Peak in the Mount Rose Wilderness on January 28, 2023.

One OSV violation was reported on and near Forestdale Creek Road on March 24, 2023, when the road was closed to all vehicles. The volunteer reported that he had a friendly encounter with snowmobilers who mistakenly believed that the Forestdale corridor always remains open for OSV access, although not via Red Lake. These snowmobilers had staged at the Hope Valley SNO-Park. The volunteer who encountered this OSV violation suggests that the USFS post better signage at Red Lake, along Blue Lakes Road, and along the eastern margin of the Forestdale Road corridor when there is an OSV closure in place.



Image 22. A volunteer reported snowmobile violations on and near Forestdale Creek Road on March 24, 2023 (38.68855, -119.96075).

Conclusion

This past winter marked WWA's second season of data collection and monitoring in Region 5. Our increased investments yielded a more robust dataset that demonstrates the value of RIMS-facilitated data collection and the valuable role that Backcountry Ambassadors can play in data collection and visitor education. Although even a single data point provides some information, consistently collecting data at specific places reveals visitor use patterns that can inform winter

travel planning and implementation. Assessments of signs and facilities are also useful for ensuring that Forest Service winter facilities are serving the public as intended, and that educational resources are present where needed. Next season we also aspire to better coordination with other entities who are also collecting similar data, such as the Town of Mammoth Lakes. As we continue to grow this program – including with a more fully developed Backcountry Ambassador corps – we hope that it will prove to be a useful resource for National Forests and also enhance on-the-ground capacity for visitor interaction and winter recreation management.

Full data appendices by Forest Service unit available upon request. For more information, contact Hilary Eisen: heisen@winterwildlands.org