



MONTANA OUTDOORS

SUMMER CAMPING OUTLOOK STRONG



KOA, COURTESY PHOTOS

Kampgrounds of America was founded in Billings in 1962, where the original campground is still operational.

Camping in Montana remains budget-friendly option despite high gas prices, KOA reports

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Despite predictions of fewer Canadian visitors to the U.S. and high gas prices, Kampgrounds of America predicts a strong summer season of travel in its recently released report.

“Our research shows that camping remains one of the most affordable ways to travel, with 35% of campers calling it their best budget-friendly travel option,” said Toby O’Rourke, KOA’s president and CEO, in a statement. “We typically see adjustments in camping behavior when gas prices increase, such as traveling shorter distances and camping closer to home, rather than cancellations.”

Founded in 1962 in Billings, KOA now oversees 500 franchised campgrounds across North America. O’Rourke noted that within a two-hour drive from its national headquarters in Montana there are eight KOAs offering everything from showers and cooking shelters to swimming pools and cabin rentals.

Gas price gloom

Montana gas prices have jumped almost 75 cents compared to a year ago, which is low compared to states like Washington where prices are more than \$5 a gallon.

Melissa Weddell, director and research professor at the Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research in Missoula, said 2008 was the last time travelers faced such high fuel prices. In that year, visitation to Montana fell 4% but dropped even more — 7% — during the peak summer season.

“The parallels to 2008 are hard to ignore,” Weddell wrote in an email. “Prices are approaching the psychological \$4 threshold that ITRR identified as the tipping point for changed travel behavior, and they’re rising fast in spring — exactly the pattern seen in 2008.”

There are, however, a few contextual differences between 2008 and 2026 that Weddell highlighted, including:

Visitors are now wealthier on average and more committed to visit Montana.

“The record 13.8 million visitors in 2024 suggest Montana’s draw — Glacier, Yellowstone, and the broader outdoor experience — is resilient,” Weddell noted.

Even before gas prices rose, 2024 data showed travelers were spending less, she said.

“If prices continue climbing toward \$4.25–\$4.50 by July, 2008-style behavior is the likely playbook: shorter stays, fewer side trips, reduced retail and guide spending and tighter daily budgets,” Weddell said.

Fuel is consistently the top expense for Montana visitors, she added, meaning



Kampgrounds of America, which is headquartered in Billings, is predicting another strong season of camping, based on its annual analysis.

when gas prices rise other tourism spending declines, everything from trips with outfitters to dining out and shopping.

Fewer Canadians

Another factor that KOA is predicting could affect travel to Montana and the rest of the nation this summer is an estimated 50% decline in Canadian tourists due to political and economic uncertainty.

The Flathead Valley traditionally sees a strong influx of Canadians, attracted by amenities like Glacier National Park. But this year foreign travelers will face higher park entrance fees for the first time under a new pay structure enacted by the Trump administration.

Annual park passes have climbed from \$80 to \$250 per carload for international travelers this year while per person costs are \$100.

Considering the millions of visitors every year to national parks, tourists might not notice any decline, especially in the busiest month of July.

And with concerns voiced about crowding on trails, at campsites and rivers, a drop in visitation could ease some of the crush.

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Sheehy approves Boundary Waters Waters resolution

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A congressional resolution to roll back mining restrictions in Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness passed the U.S. Senate last week with the help of a hesitant native of that state, Montana Sen. Tim Sheehy.

By a tally of 50-49, the Senate passed a resolution that reversed a Biden-era moratorium on mining over 225,000 acres of the Boundary Waters area under the Superior National Forest. The measure was sponsored by Republican U.S. Rep. Pete Stauber of Minnesota and saw widespread opposition from conservation groups still riding the energy of last year’s public-lands selloff battle.



Sheehy

The resolution is expected to be signed by President Donald Trump and open the door for a Chilean mining company to begin the process toward establishing a copper and nickel mine. The area is believed to hold one of the largest untapped mineral deposits in the world.

In a statement on Thursday, Sheehy appeared reluctant in voting for the measure. The Republican freshman last year co-founded the Senate Stewardship Caucus, a public lands contingent, with New Mexico Democrat Martin Heinrich, who voted against the resolution.

“As someone who grew up canoeing the Boundary Waters and is an avid public lands user, advocate and defender, I spent ample time engaging

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Agencies clash over Board of Outfitters audit

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Two state agencies clashed recently over whether a state board should seek legislation to conduct name- or fingerprint-based background checks of hunting and fishing outfitters and guides.

The Board of Outfitters, along with 24 similar professional licensing panels, is administered by the Montana Department of Labor & Industry. To conduct the checks would require an administrative rule change.

In 2024, a Legislative Audit Division report recommended the board work with the department to “pursue a background check requirement for at least some new applicants and renewals” to determine how they might be funded, such as application or renewal fees.

Follow-up fight

In an April 9 follow-up report regarding the original audit, Audit Division management and program analyst Tina Chamberlain told the Legislative Audit Committee the recommendation, along with two others, had not been implemented.

“We asked the board to work with the department to change administrative rule requiring name-based or fingerprint-based background checks for some new applicants and renewal applicants,” she said. “We also recommended the board decide whether fees for background checks should be paid by the board or as part of the application process. The board relies on applicants to self-report citations and criminal history when applying or renewing a license.”

To see if the background checks might prove useful, the audit division

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