



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Great Smoky Mountains
National Park

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Great Smoky Mountains News Release

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Park Announces 2021 Plan for Cades Cove Vehicle-Free Days

Great Smoky Mountains National Park officials are extending a pilot project in Cades Cove by continuing vehicle-free access on the Cades Cove Loop Road on Wednesdays from May 5 through September 1, 2021. Park managers implemented this weekly, full-day opportunity in 2020 in an effort to improve the visitor experience and to reduce congestion associated with vehicle-free mornings that were previously offered until 10:00 a.m. on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

The park received 47 comments through mail, email, phone, and comment cards regarding the vehicle-free day pilot project. More than 60% of these comments were extremely positive, however, some campers were still impacted by early morning parking congestion and some visitors were disappointed by the lack of vehicle access on Wednesdays. Overall, the full-day opportunity provided a more enjoyable and safe experience for the nearly 30,000 bicyclists and pedestrians who participated in the vehicle-free day opportunities. During the 2020 season, 25% more pedestrians and cyclists participated in vehicle-free access periods per week as compared to the 2019 season, with an average of 1,800 participants each Wednesday.

Park managers continue to be concerned about parking congestion and will monitor use levels, parking availability, visitor experience, and congestion throughout the second year of the pilot project. According to data collected in 2020, parking lots were full during 30% of the observation period and roadside shoulders along Laurel Creek Road were utilized for parking during 60% of the observation period. Staff and volunteers will implement some changes in parking access this season to ease pressure on campground and picnic area parking lots and to prevent roadside parking along Laurel Creek Road. Roadside parking damages shoulders and creates unsafe conditions for visitors walking from their car to their destination.

For more information about congestion monitoring in the park, please visit the park website at

<https://www.nps.gov/grsm/learn/management/ves.htm>.

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Background: For over 40 years, park managers implemented several vehicle-free opportunities for bicyclists and pedestrians in Cades Cove. In previous years, the road was closed to vehicles on Wednesday and Saturday mornings until 10:00 a.m. from May through September. Under the morning-only closure model, traffic leading to Cades Cove area was often gridlocked by a line of motorists waiting for the Loop Road to open to motor vehicles at 10:00 a.m. In addition, the entire developed area was congested with parked vehicles. After filling the parking near the bicycle rental store and day-use parking area, people utilized the campground, picnic area, and horseback riding stable areas for overflow parking. In 2020, park managers implemented a pilot project for a full-day vehicle-free period. The intent of the pilot project was to test whether use could be effectively spread throughout the day to address congestion, parking, and safety issues associated with the vehicle-free period and to provide improved access to multiple user groups. In 2021, the pilot project will be extended with a modified parking plan.