

State parks blaze trails for wireless Internet service

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

Outdoor enthusiasts may dislike the idea of a laptop in every tent, but the number of state parks with wireless Internet service is growing rapidly.

State officials say park users want Wi-Fi, so parks are installing it in campgrounds, lodges and visitors centers. Some states, including Tennessee and Kansas, plan to equip every park with it.

"There is a growing need for many of our visitors to be able to stay in touch with friends, family members and co-workers while they are away," says Roy Stearns, a spokesman for California State Parks, which has more parks equipped with Wi-Fi than any other state.

Three years ago, none of California's 278 parks had Wi-Fi. Now 50 are so equipped, including state beaches at Malibu, San Clemente and Half Moon Bay.

According to a USA TODAY survey, 28 states have at least one park with wireless Internet service. Officials who were surveyed say that of 3,208 state parks, 194, or 6%, have either free or pay-per-use Wi-Fi. Often it is at a single location, such as a campground or a lodge lobby.

More states are either considering it or about to install it. Minnesota, for example, will introduce free connections at Itasca, north of Park Rapids, in the next month or two. The service will be tested until the end of the year, and it is being considered at other parks, says Patricia Arndt of the state's Department of Natural Resources.

Kentucky and Ohio have the second-highest number of state parks equipped with Wi-Fi. Kentucky first tested Wi-Fi at Rough River State Resort Park in fall 2004. It proved popular with parkgoers, and all 17 of the state's resort parks, which means they have lodges, installed it in 2006.

"We felt this was a good way to increase occupancy and offer a popular service to our guests," says Gil Lawson, a spokesman for the Kentucky Commerce Cabinet. "The complaints I have heard involve guests who couldn't connect from a particular location at a park, or guests that wanted a faster connection."

Two of Vermont's 50 state parks have Wi-Fi, and more parks probably will receive it in the next few years.

"Wi-Fi is pretty unobtrusive, and it potentially allows working adults or students to stay longer in the parks or keep a child entertained on a rainy day," says Vermont State Parks spokeswoman Rochelle Skinner. It also helps people better plan their activities because they have instant access to information on weather and local events, she says.

Reaction among parkgoers is mixed.

Lora Simning of Hopkinsville, Ky., says she has visited state parks about 25 times in the past two years and doesn't mind if wireless Internet is available. "It's unobtrusive, and you can choose to use it or not."

Charles Spitz of Wall Township, N.J., doesn't believe Wi-Fi belongs in parks. "A park is neither the time nor the place for being connected to the Internet," says Spitz, who has visited two state parks since January 2007. "If you are that much of an Internet junkie, stay home or stay in your hotel room."

Both attitudes emerged when Michigan's Holland State Park became equipped with Wi-Fi in

September 2004. Some park users said, " 'Wow, this is cool,' " says Harold Herta of Michigan's Parks and Recreation Division. But others said: " 'What's the idea? People go to parks to escape this kind of stuff.' "

Unlike many other state park officials, Herta does not see a bright future for Wi-Fi. Though five of Michigan's 98 parks have it, "it has not been a rousing success because people have to pay for it," and free Wi-Fi is available at many locations outside the parks, he says.

Idaho is installing Wi-Fi at two parks this month, Ponderosa and Bruneau Dunes, says Kevin Zauha of the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

The decision to provide it free was made after an Internet survey of potential parkgoers. Of 211 people who responded, 64% favored the installation. More than half who wanted Wi-Fi said they would be more likely to visit a state park if it were available.

Wi-Fi may not coming anytime soon to Alaska, where many of the 22 state parks are in remote areas. Says John Cotenias of the Department of Natural Resources: "We do not have running water and still use outhouses."

Going wireless

A 50-state USA TODAY survey found that 28 states have installed Wi-Fi in at least one of their parks.

State Number of parks/ Number of parks with Wi-Fi/ Parks with Wi-Fi

Alabama 22 11 Blue Springs, Buck's Pocket, Cheaha, DeSoto, Frank Jackson, Gulf, Lake Guntersville, Lakepoint, Monte Sano, Oak Mountain, Joe Wheeler

Alaska 22 0

Arizona 30 0

Arkansas 52 6 Bull Shoals, Crowley's Ridge, DeGray Lake, Lake Dardanelle, Mount Magazine, Queen Wilhelmina

California 278 50 see: parks.ca.gov/default.asp?page_id=23780

Colorado 42 2 Chatfield, Cherry Creek

Connecticut 106 0

Delaware 15 0

Florida 161 0

Georgia 45 13 Amicalola Falls, General Coffee, George L. Smith, George T. Bagby, Gordonia-Alatamaha, Indian Springs, John Tanner, Little Ocmulgee, Sapelo Island, Red Top Mountain, Skidaway Island, Smithgall Woods, Unicoi

Hawaii 54 0

Idaho 20 2 Bruneau Dunes, Ponderosa

Illinois 44 5 Giant City, Pere Marquette, Starved Rock, Wayne Fitzgerald, White Pines

Indiana 24 7 Brown County, Clifty Falls, Fort Harrison, McCormick's Creek, Pokagon, Spring Mill, Turkey Run

Iowa 48 0

Kansas 24 2 Elk City, Tuttle Creek

Kentucky 53 17 Barren River Lake, Blue Licks Battlefield, Buckhorn Lake, Carter Caves, Cumberland Falls, Dale Hollow Lake, General Butler, Greenbo Lake, Jenny Wiley, Kenlake, Kentucky Dam Village, Lake Barkley, Lake Cumberland, Natural Bridge, Pennyryle Forest, Pine Mountain, Rough River Dam

Louisiana 20 4 Bayou Segnette, Fairview-Riverside, Fontainebleau, Poverty Point Reservoir

Maine 32 0

Maryland 49 0

Massachusetts 338 0

Michigan 98 5 Holland, Grand Haven, Ludington, Mears, Traverse City

Minnesota 66 0

Mississippi 25 0

Missouri 84 2 Bennett Spring, Roaring River

Montana 50 0

Nebraska 8 1 Eugene T. Mahoney

Nevada 12 0

New Hampshire 72 0

New Jersey 42 0

New Mexico 34 0

New York 178 0

North Carolina 32 1 Haw River

North Dakota 15 2 Fort Abraham Lincoln, Lewis & Clark

Ohio 74 17 Alum Creek, Burr Oak, Deer Creek, Dillon, East Harbor, Geneva, Grand Lake St. Marys, Hueston Woods, Jackson Lake, Maumee Bay, Mohican, Mosquito Lake, Punderson, Pymatuning, Rocky Fork, Salt Fork, Shawnee

Oklahoma 50 1 Sequoyah

Oregon 236 3 Harris Beach, South Beach, Valley of the Rogue

Pennsylvania 117 0

Rhode Island 10 0

South Carolina 39 4 Devils Fork, Hickory Knob, Myrtle Beach, Table Rock

South Dakota 12 0*

Tennessee 54 6 Fall Creek Falls, Henry Horton, Montgomery Bell, Natchez Trace, Paris Landing, Pickwick Landing

Texas 84 16 Balmorhea, Bastrop, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley, Big Bend Ranch, Blanco, Cedar Hill, Davis Mountains, Galveston Island, Goose Island, Government Canyon, Hueco Tanks, Inks Lake, McKinney Falls, Ray Roberts Lake, Seminole Canyon, Tyler, Washington-on-the-Brazos

Utah 42 1 Willard Bay

Vermont 52 2 Burton Island, Seyon Lodge

Virginia 34 3 Hungry Mother, Claytor Lake, Douthat

Washington 120 1 Fort Worden

West Virginia 35 10 Blackwater Falls, Cacapon, Canaan Valley, Chief Logan, Hawks Nest, North Bend, Pipestem, Stonewall, Twin Falls, Tygart Lake

Wisconsin 41 0

Wyoming 13 0