

# OUTDOOR LEARNING AND VERMONT STATE PARKS

## *An Education and Recreation Opportunity Guide*

Vermont's State Parks are great places for studying nature, history, Vermont geology and for having fun as a group. With diverse natural resources, abundant trails, clean restrooms and spacious campsites and shelters, state parks are the perfect outdoor classrooms. To help schools and other educational groups plan enjoyable outings to Vermont State Parks, here are a few basic guidelines and some valuable tips.

**Schedule Your Visit**-One common disappointment for group users is the presence of other large groups who may already be on-site using limited facilities including toilets and trails. Call the park (year round contact information is on the VT State Parks website at [www.vtstateparks.com](http://www.vtstateparks.com)). Tell us the date you'd like to visit and we'll get you a "Group Use Application" form. Leave us a message and phone number if we are outside working.

Ask if there are other activities planned for the day you want to come. A park may turn away groups if the staff feels visitor safety or park resources are threatened by too many people in the park. You can also find out about other conditions in the parks, such as construction and trail closures that might be important for your experience. By pre-registering you may also be eligible for a fee waiver or reduction for your group (see back page).

**Interpreted Visits**-Vermont State Parks have a limited number of interpreters who can help you explore natural and cultural history in the parks. In all cases, groups need to contact the park to schedule an interpreter if one is available. If one is not, schools are certainly welcome to bring along their own volunteer experts.

**Chaperones**-The number of chaperones needed for outdoor experiences varies with the group and their activities, but a good rule of thumb is one adult for every 9 student above the age of 11. More for younger kids. Chaperones need to be with their group even if they are attending an interpreted program. Interpreters expect chaperones to handle discipline and assist students for personal needs. Groups that appear at the park without an adequate number of adults may be turned away.

**Picnic Shelters**-Picnic shelters can be rented for a reasonable fee in over twenty parks. They provide covered or indoor space with picnic tables for work and eating convenience. Please call the park in advance to reserve.

**Group Camping**-Seven parks around the state offer group camping facilities. These are conveniently clustered lean-to and/or tent sites. Users are assessed a fee based on the number of campers. Some of these are available year-round. Other campgrounds accommodate groups on a space-available basis, but fees are based on the number of sites rather than the number of campers.

**Community Service**-State Parks are community resources. If your group is looking for an opportunity for a community service project in a state park, please contact the Park where you would like to work



## Responsible Visitors are our favorite visitors....

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**Outdoor Ethics**-In today's fast-paced electronic world, it's sometimes hard to slow down and enjoy the moment (one of the reasons we have parks is to relax!). Teach students to appreciate nature. Encourage them to take photos, draw pictures and take notes. *Leave nature where you find it.* There shouldn't be much need to collect plants, animals or rocks. (If there is, contact the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation before your visit about special collection permits. ) Respect park buildings, benches and tables as well.

**Group Size**-While it might seem nice to bring your whole school to a state park for a day, you might discover that parking, picnic shelters and rest rooms might not easily accommodate your party. Plan your group to fit the facility. This is especially important when you are planning hiking trips. Large groups often have difficulty keeping track of everyone. The noise and crowding they cause can reduce the experience for all hikers. Large groups also increase trail wear/damage. We generally recommend you split into groups of 20 or fewer and leave at 15-20 minute intervals with adequate chaperones to minimize the impacts on the trails and on other hikers. Be sure to check with the park staff prior to your arrival about group sizes. Group size on sensitive high-elevation trails such as those at Underhill State Park should be ten or less.

**Litter**- "*Pack It In-Pack It Out,*" is great hiking mantra, but it is also the rule on trails and in recreation areas. Let students know they are responsible for their own litter. If your class is learning about recycling and reducing waste, here is a great opportunity to help them plan a "no-waste" lunch or snack!

**Wildlife**-State Parks host a variety of wild creatures and plants. Remember *you* are visiting *their* home. Enjoy watching wildlife from a distance. For their safety and yours, don't touch, feed or disturb wildlife. This includes dead or injured animals or young animals that appear to be abandoned. Report what you see to the park ranger. If you are scratched, bitten or bothered by an animal in the park, please report it to a park staff person immediately.

**Other Safety Issues**- Emphasize that students need to wear appropriate outdoor gear for the planned activities. Long pants and sleeves, and sturdy shoes discourage biting insects and protect against poison ivy, stinging nettles and thorny bushes. Everyone should carry personal water bottles and fill only from restroom taps or water stands (unless advised not to). Drinking from lakes, ponds and streams is never recommended. When boating, personal flotation devices are supplied with rental boats and canoes in the park. Please be sure that they are used properly and that every person in a water craft has one for themselves.

Hikers should know that mountain temperatures are several degrees cooler than base elevation, and weather conditions can change rapidly. Bring a jacket, rain gear or poncho.

*While first aid kits are available at park contact stations, bringing a small kit for your group is a smart move that may save time and frustration.*



# Enjoy State Parks in Every Season

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**Spring Outings**-Most Vermont parks are open by mid-May. Early in the season, the park staff is cleaning and preparing for opening. There may be fewer people to help you, and rest rooms and other facilities may not be opened, or may be undergoing repairs or construction, so be sure to call ahead.

This is a good time of year to ask if there are community service projects in the parks like trail maintenance or litter clean-up. Educational opportunities in the parks may include observation of spring ephemeral plants, bird watching, locating vernal pools, exploring cultural resources and *low elevation* hiking and walking. Hikers are asked to protect our mountain trails, by staying off them until they dry out.

Streams, lakes and ponds are very cold and are at their highest seasonal levels, so stream crossings may be difficult..

Closer to Memorial Day, hiking opportunities improve as the trails dry out. Groups of twenty or less are welcomed on all but the most sensitive trails by this time, unless the weather has been very rainy. (*See section on Group Size.*)

Since trees will be leafing out now and starting to flower, it is a good time to observe trees and late spring flowers. Use caution when exploring off trails, as many wildlife species are giving birth and brooding young at this time. Lakes and ponds still tend to be cold, although the water levels may be dropping. Black flies are out by Memorial Day in most of their usual haunts.

Most Vermont schools are in session until mid-June. Clean rest rooms close to natural and historic features, spacious lawns and

beaches with ample picnic and parking facilities make state park trips preferred end-of-the year outings.

Schools should plan to pay the current day use rate for their students unless they combine an educational experience with the fun. To apply for the parks educational rate, prepare a letter of request detailing the Vermont Standards to be addressed by your outing, and the number of students. Send it to the park you wish to visit at least two weeks prior to your planned visit.

**Summer Programs**-Summer camps and community programs throughout Vermont find State Parks to be a wonderful place for swimming, hiking and overnight camping activities. Please contact the Park Office for ideas on how to plan summer group use in a for your program.

Home school and summer school organizations can take advantage of the seasonal naturalist programs all summer. Call the park to get the interpretive program schedule or check out the VT State Parks Web Site ([www.vtstateparks.com](http://www.vtstateparks.com)).

**Fall Park Use**- Most of the biting insects are gone, but many of the flowering plants are still in their glory in late summer and early fall. This is the season when we still want to be outside even though classes have begun. What better time to plan an outdoor class?

If you plan your visit before Labor Day, you may be able to take advantage of the summer park naturalist program for interpretive activities. After Labor Day, most parks with swimming are closed. Others may have a staff member who can give programs or the park may have an interpretive program to which you can take a group (please call to see). Because of the heavy demand, we suggest that you finalize fall trip planning in early to mid-August.

Early fall is a good time to plan camping trips as the weather is still warm enough to be pleasant, but rarely hot enough to be uncomfortable. Check the web site or call to see which parks are open until October 15 for group camping.

**Winter Use**-The rest rooms are closed, the gates are shut, but State Parks are still available for winter camping, hiking or cross-country skiing trips. While no fees are collected for winter use, it is still a good idea to check with the parks office (call 802-241-3655 for a current directory) when planning winter trips. The staff can help direct you to the most accessible trails or locations for your activities, may suggest where you can safely leave your vehicle, and can provide maps and other information to help with trip planning and safety.

**Accessibility**-Many campsites and toilet buildings are handicapped accessible. Please call ahead to inquire about accessible facilities, and suggestions for accessible outings for students in Vermont State Parks. Brochures can be requested in braille or large print prior to your visit. The Parks web site is also designed to meet standards for accessibility.

### **Fee Reductions for Educational Groups-**

The Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation supports *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*. To receive a reduced rate for your outing, submit a letter that includes the date of the visit, school name, the number of students and chaperones, and at least two of the standards/opportunities that will be addressed on this trip. Submit your request to the park ranger at least one week before your planned outing. If approved, you will be asked to share with your students the basic guidelines on outdoor ethics mentioned earlier in this piece. Some parks may offer special free programs for schools in the fall. Fee waivers do not apply to the rental of shelters or overnight camping.

For general information on Vermont State Parks, please call (802) 241-3655 or check out our Web Site at [www.vtstateparks.com](http://www.vtstateparks.com).



## **Enjoy Vermont State Parks!**

This document available upon request in large print, braille, and audio cassette. Call 802-241-3651 or VT TDD 1-800-253-0191