



2022-2026

# GEORGIA'S PLAN FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION





# Georgia's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan



**GEORGIA**

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

**Brian Kemp**  
*Governor*  
*State of Georgia*

**Mark Williams**  
*Commissioner*  
*Georgia Department of Natural Resources*

For more information about SCORP 2022-2026, additional online resources or to download the entire SCORP document, visit the Georgia Department of Natural Resources website at: <https://gadnr.org/SCORP> or call (404) 656-3500.

This plan was developed in part through a planning grant from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, under the provisions of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 (Public Law 88-578, as amended).

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) acknowledges the significant contributions made by those who committed their time and expertise to help establish Georgia's official outdoor recreation policy. We appreciate the time and resources from the agencies, organizations and individuals who made valuable contributions to this document.

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# FOREWORD

## *A Message from the Commissioner of Natural Resources*

It does not take a visitor to our state long to realize just how fortunate we are to live among some of the most beautiful and diverse natural resources in our country. For us Georgians who see it every day, open skies, green spaces, and rushing rivers can unfortunately become commonplace at times. We take it for granted that the great outdoors will always be there in pristine condition and as accessible as always. If not careful, I can even easily join this group on a given day. As Georgians, we have to realize that we stand on the shoulders of giants who had the vision to establish opportunities for us to interact with and conserve Georgia's natural world. For as former president Theodore Roosevelt opined over 100 years ago, and it still rings true today, "There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country."

I am proud to report that Georgians, from casual greenway users to the highest public leaders, are showing a united front with a common goal to protect and expand outdoor recreation opportunities. Even our capital city goes by the nickname "City in a Forest." A contributing factor in this was the careful development and execution of Georgia's past Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORPs). These SCORPs presented Georgia-specific goals and valuable resources that were implemented by state agencies, local governments, and recreation authorities. It is my hope that this newest SCORP continues the legacy of showing where the state is going in its pursuit of quality outdoor recreation.

One would be hard-pressed to find a time when Georgians needed the great outdoors more than in 2021. Coming out of 2020 and a global pandemic that touched every aspect of our lives, outdoor recreation has been a balm like no other for Georgians. This trying time exposed many parts of ourselves that we did not know about prior. With the closing of gyms, cancelling of vacations, and overall restricting of social gatherings, it became evident that we were missing many activities that normally improved our mental, physical, and emotional wellness. To bridge this expansive gap, Georgians headed outdoors in record numbers. Even Georgia's neighbors flocked across state lines en masse to access Georgia's many outdoor opportunities. This resulted in nearly 12 million visitors to our state parks and historic sites, 1.5 million hunters and anglers receiving licenses, and countless millions upon millions more utilizing city, county, and private facilities, venturing out on our waterways, and enjoying organized recreation programs. And we are not seeing this greater influx to outdoor properties and facilities slowing down even with the introduction of vaccines.

This increased demand confirms what outdoor recreation leaders already know and now we see more community leaders and planners recognizing the value of time spent outdoors. In addition, Georgia's most recent SCORP statewide survey showed that 80.14% of Georgians indicated they "enjoy spending time outdoors" and 80.2% indicated they support public funding for outdoor recreation. Georgia's natural resources and recreation facilities provide invaluable opportunities that are vital to addressing distressing health trends like obesity and heart disease while also generating significant economic impact for communities and delivering a higher quality of life. This SCORP outlines the roles we all have in serving fellow Georgians by providing greater access to outdoor recreation for underserved populations regardless of ZIP Code, balancing new residential and commercial development with the expansion of connected green spaces and waterways, and ultimately protecting Georgia's natural resources for many generations to come. With these goals in mind, I hope you will find yourself regularly pulling from this carefully developed resource as you make important decisions for our state and local communities over the next five years.



**Mark Williams**

# GOVERNOR'S LETTER

Note: Following approval from the DNR Board of Natural Resources, the SCORP 2022-2026 will be transmitted to Governor Kemp for certification. The certification letter signed by Governor Kemp will appear on this page in the final document.

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*“I have spent my entire life hunting, fishing, and appreciating the great Georgia outdoors. We are blessed to live in a state home to some of America’s most diverse and pristine natural resources. From the north Georgia mountains to the Golden Isles, both current residents and visitors to the Peach State can enjoy countless recreation opportunities, improve their own health and wellbeing, and support the local economies of communities across Georgia.”*

**Governor Brian Kemp**

This 2022–2026 Georgia Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) serves as Georgia’s five-year comprehensive plan for outdoor recreation. The mission of this plan is to provide a roadmap for policymakers, practitioners, and citizens as they make important decisions about the future of outdoor recreation and conservation in our great state. Priority opportunities and challenges were identified through the SCORP planning processes, including an assessment of the supply and demand of recreation resources and facilities, public input, and the guidance of our Advisory Committee. Key findings from this effort are found in this document.

## FOUNDATIONAL GOAL FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION



*To meet the diverse and growing recreation, economic and health needs of all current and future Georgians by increasing access and engagement of our state’s abundant natural resources through outdoor recreation opportunities in the state of Georgia.*



SOURCE: GWINNETT COUNTY



# PILLARS OF OUTDOOR RECREATION

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## Conserve Natural Resources

We must conserve and protect Georgia's natural resources by capitalizing on the current support for conservation while building a new community committed to natural stewardship and outdoor recreation.

## Enhance Economic Vitality

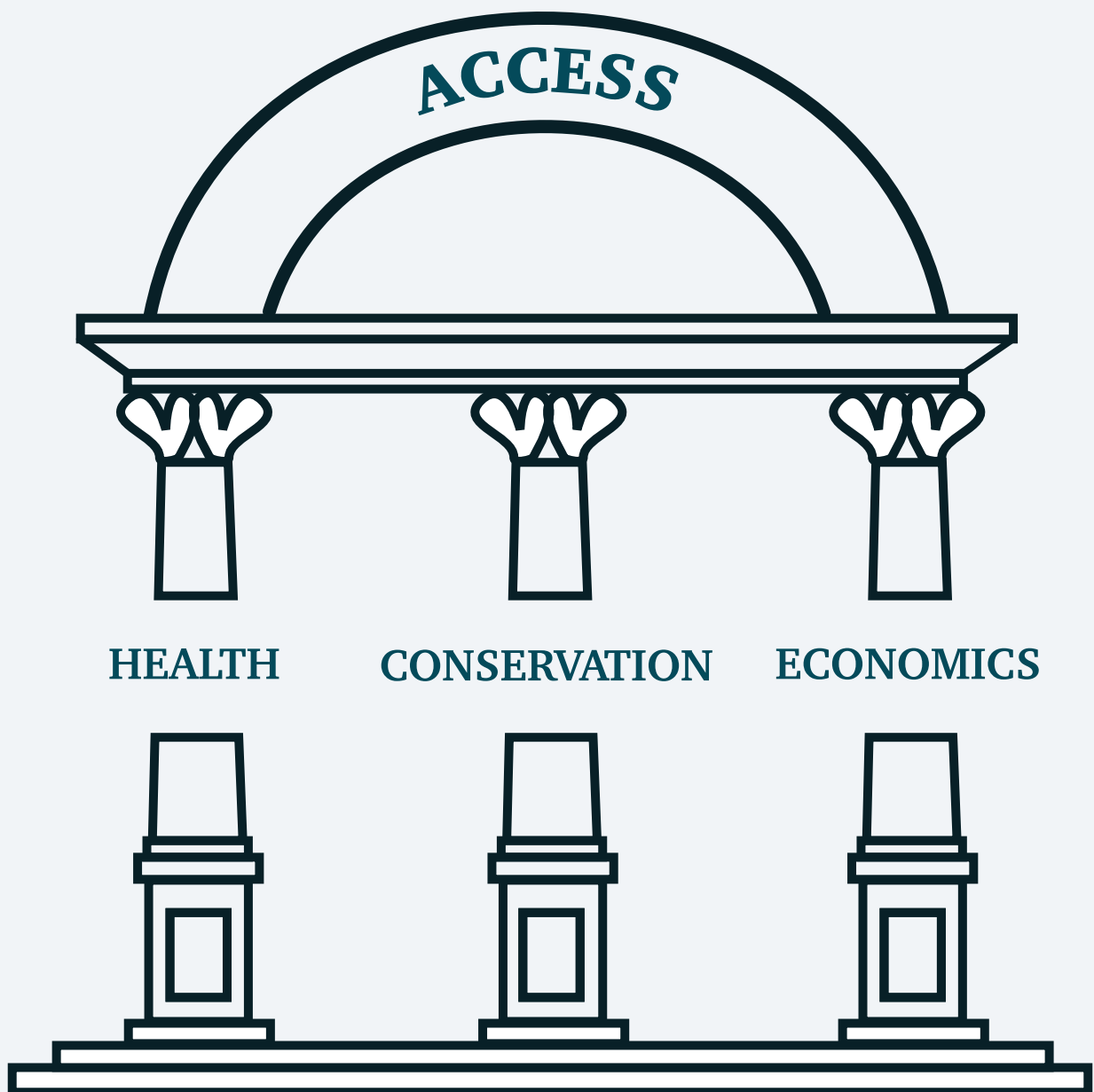
We must support and cultivate Georgia's outdoor recreation resources so that we remain attractive to new residents, businesses, and industries.

## Promote Health, Fitness and Livability of Communities

We must promote the importance of physically active lifestyles and spending time outdoors to reinforce the connection between health, quality of life, and outdoor recreation.

## Improve Awareness, Accessibility and Inclusion

We must ensure Georgians of all ages, backgrounds, means, and abilities have access to and are aware of all Georgia's outdoor recreation areas and opportunities.



## THE PURPOSE OF SCORP

The 2022-2026 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) is a five-year plan that serves as the statewide blueprint for maintaining and sustaining public outdoor recreation resources to meet the demands of Georgia's diverse and growing population. This plan is crafted for two primary reasons: to fulfill Georgia law mandating the development of a state policy on outdoor recreation in Georgia (Georgia Code 12-3-1); and to keep Georgia eligible to receive and disseminate federal Land and Water Conservation Funds to government recreation agencies for acquisition of park lands or the development and rehabilitation of outdoor recreation facilities.

## MANDATORY COMPONENTS OF SCORP

As mandated by The National Park Service, the Plan includes the following components:

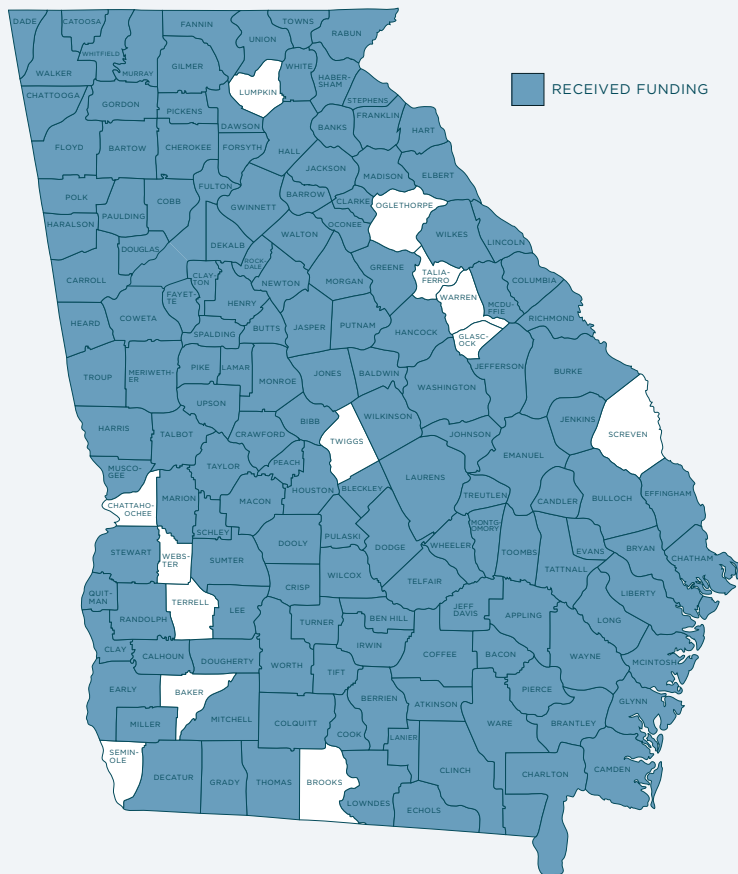
- » The name of the state agency that will have authority to represent and act for the State when dealing with the Secretary for purposes of the LWCF Act of 1965, as amended;
- » An evaluation of the demand for and supply of outdoor recreation resources and facilities in the State;
- » A program for the implementation of the plan;
- » Certification by the Governor that ample opportunity for public participation has taken place in plan development.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) State and Local Assistance Fund provides matching grants to state and local governments for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities. Since the program's inception in 1965, Georgia has received over \$113 million in grant awards and 91% of Georgia's 159 counties have a LWCF funded recreation area. More importantly, those grant funds have leveraged an additional \$113 million from local governments through matching funds (for a total of \$226 million). Key priorities and implementation strategies from this plan will be used to assess and prioritize



funding for future projects. Despite Congress's recent commitment to increase LWCF funding through the Recovering of America's Wildlife Act of 2019, Georgia DNR still receives more applications for assistance than can be fulfilled. Applicants are encouraged to tie proposed outdoor recreation projects to the priorities listed in this document when applying for funding in order to be federally eligible for LWCF funding. It is also important to note that LWCF funds can only support capital projects (like acquisition, construction and rehabilitation) and cannot be used for efforts related to operations, maintenance or marketing.

## COUNTIES THAT HAVE RECEIVED LWCF FUNDING (1965-2020)



## LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND: STATE AND LOCAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM GRANTS AWARDED OVER THE LAST DECADE

### » 2012

| Applicant               | Title  | Type*           |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Alpharetta, City of     | Alpharetta City Pool at Wills Park             | Rehab           |
| Covington, City of      | City Pond Park Miracle League Complex          | Dev             |
| Dalton, City of         | Broadus-Durkan Soccer Complex Improvements     | Rehab           |
| Fort Valley, City of    | Hunt Educational & Cultural Park Project       | Rehab           |
| Maysville, City of      | City Park Playground                           | Acq, Dev        |
| McDonough, City of      | Alexander Park Improvements Phase I            | Rehab           |
| McDuffie County         | Thomson City Park                              | Acq, Dev        |
| Montezuma, City of      | Montezuma Parks & Rec Expansion & Improvements | Acq, Dev, Rehab |
| Moultrie, City of       | Main Street Park                               | Dev             |
| Nashville, City of      | Bee Tree Park Project                          | Rehab           |
| Porterdale, City of     | Yellow River Park Trail Improvements           | Acq             |
| Powder Springs, City of | Linear Park                                    | Dev             |
| Temple, City of         | Temple Recreation Dept Park                    | Dev             |
| Washington County       | Kaolin Park: Relighting Project                | Rehab           |

\*Acq=Acquisition; Dev=Development; Rehab=Rehabilitation

## » 2013–2014

| Applicant           | Title                                       | Type* |
|---------------------|---|-------|
| Alpharetta, City of | Big Creek Greenway Rehabilitation           | Rehab |
| Barrow County       | Field Lighting Improvements                 | Rehab |
| Brunswick, City of  | Urbana Park Facility Rehab                  | Rehab |
| Bulloch County      | Memorial Park: Phase 1 Renovations          | Rehab |
| Doraville, City of  | Halpren Park Renovation Phase 2             | Rehab |
| Douglas, City of    | Tennis Court Rehabilitation                 | Rehab |
| Fairburn, City of   | Duncan Park Improvements 1C                 | Rehab |
| Grady County        | Barber Park Lighting Safety Improvements    | Rehab |
| Gwinnett County     | Ronald Reagan Park Renovation               | Rehab |
| Macon County        | Whitewater Creek Park Rehab & Improvements  | Rehab |
| Newton County       | Lake Varner Accessible Pier & Playground    | Rehab |
| Toccoa, City of     | Henderson Falls Park Rehabilitation Phase 1 | Rehab |
| Tyrone, Town of     | Soccer Field Rehabilitation                 | Rehab |
| DNR                 | Playground/Multiple State Parks             | Rehab |

\*Acq=Acquisition; Dev=Development; Rehab=Rehabilitation

## » 2015

| Applicant                     | Title  | Type*      |
|-------------------------------|--|------------|
| Bartow County                 | Bartow County Parks LED Lighting               | Rehab      |
| Brantley County               | Satilla Fields Enhancement                     | Acq, Dev   |
| Calhoun, City of              | Calhoun Park Expansion                         | Acq        |
| Cartersville, City of         | Dellinger Park Shelter/Pavilion Replacement    | Rehab      |
| Crawford County               | Crawford County Recreational Fields            | Rehab      |
| Doraville, City of            | Halpren Park Phase III: Pedestrian Bridge      | Rehab      |
| Dublin-Laurens Rec. Authority | Stables/RV Hookups at Southern Pines AG Expo   | Dev        |
| Effingham County              | Effingham County Recreation Complex            | Dev        |
| Georgetown-Quitman County     | Georgetown-Quitman County Recreation           | Dev        |
| Grady County                  | Renovations of Barber Park Fitness & Play Area | Dev, Rehab |
| Gwinnett County               | Mountain Park Football Field                   | Rehab      |
| Hiwassee, City of             | Hiwassee Mayor's Park                          | Dev        |
| Jones County                  | Jones County Special Needs Playground          | Dev        |
| Lamar County                  | North Lamar County Recreation Park             | Dev        |
| Talking Rock, Town of         | Talking Rock Town Park Improvements            | Dev, Rehab |
| Tallapoosa, City of           | Rayford Roberts Ball Park Rehabilitation       | Rehab      |
| Toccoa, City of               | Lake Toccoa Pavilion & Pier                    | Dev        |
| Trion, City of                | Trion City Parks Renovation                    | Rehab      |
| Valdosta, City of             | Miracle Field at Freedom Park                  | Dev        |
| DNR                           | Hard Labor Creek State Park                    | Rehab      |

\*Acq=Acquisition; Dev=Development; Rehab=Rehabilitation

## » 2017

| Applicant             | Title                                   | Type* |
|-----------------------|---|-------|
| Bremen, City of       | City Park Fencing Project               | Rehab |
| Brookhaven, City of   | Peachtree Creek Greenway                | Dev   |
| Brunswick, City of    | Howard Coffin Park Renovation           | Rehab |
| Canton, City of       | Etowah River Park Trail                 | Dev   |
| Cedartown, City of    | Goodyear Park Soccer Complex            | Rehab |
| Centerville, City of  | Centerville Center Park Phase 1         | Dev   |
| Chamblee, City of     | Keswick Park Restroom Facilities        | Dev   |
| Crisp County          | Pickens Pool Rehab                      | Rehab |
| Douglas County        | Clinton Nature Preserve Trailhead       | Dev   |
| Douglas, City of      | Miracle Field at Davis Wade Park        | Rehab |
| East Point, City of   | Connally Nature Park Trail              | Dev   |
| Gwinnett County       | Rhodes Jordan Football Renovation       | Rehab |
| Hampton, City of      | East Hampton Community Park             | Dev   |
| Harris County         | Harris County Rails to Trails Project   | Dev   |
| Hawkinsville, City of | Hawkinsville Harness Facility           | Rehab |
| Jeff Davis County     | Upgrade Fence on Ball Fields            | Rehab |
| Jefferson, City of    | Recreation Complex Trail Renovations    | Rehab |
| Jenkins County        | Jenkins County Recreation Expansion     | Acq   |
| Lanier County         | Lanier County Parks & Rec. Project      | Dev   |
| Lyons, City of        | Hallmark Park Renovations               | Rehab |
| Marietta, City of     | Wildwood Park Trail Resurfacing         | Rehab |
| McIntosh County       | Lion's & Eulonia Ballparks              | Rehab |
| Milton, City of       | Providence Park Phase II                | Dev   |
| Rentz, Town of        | Rentz Playground Rehab                  | Rehab |
| Rockdale County       | Costley Mill Park Enhancement           | Rehab |
| Sugar Hill, City of   | Gold Mine Park Bridge/Boardwalk         | Dev   |
| Summerville, City of  | Fairway Recreation Center Soccer Fields | Dev   |
| Talbot County         | Youth Center Renovation                 | Rehab |
| Varnell, City of      | Peacock Alley Park Improvements         | Rehab |
| Vidalia, City of      | Playground Rehab                        | Rehab |
| Whitfield County      | Grant Farm Park Site Development        | Dev   |
| Woodstock, City of    | Rubes Creek Trail Restroom Facility     | Dev   |
| Worth County          | Worth County Recreation Park            | Dev   |

\*Acq=Acquisition; Dev=Development; Rehab=Rehabilitation

## » 2018

| Applicant                     | Title  | Type*    |
|-------------------------------|--|----------|
| Abbeville, City of            | Lions Memorial Park Rehab                    | Rehab    |
| Avondale Estates, City of     | Lake Avondale Recreation Area                | Rehab    |
| Baldwin, City of              | Wilbanks Park                                | Rehab    |
| Ball Ground, City of          | Roberts Lake Green Space Acquisition         | Acq      |
| Brunswick, City of            | Liberty Ship Park                            | Dev      |
| Byron, City of                | Byron City Park                              | Dev      |
| Candler County                | Metter-Candler County Park                   | Rehab    |
| Carnesville, City of          | Sid & Augusta White Memorial Park Splash Pad | Dev      |
| Charlton County               | Traders Hill Rehabilitation                  | Rehab    |
| Crawford County               | Crawford County Recreational Fields Phase II | Rehab    |
| Danville, Town of             | Danville Park Updates                        | Dev      |
| Dawson County                 | War Hill Park Pier Replacement               | Rehab    |
| Doraville, City of            | Honeysuckle Park Walking Path                | Rehab    |
| Dublin-Laurens Rec. Authority | Southern Pines Water Park Picnic Pavilion    | Dev      |
| Evans County                  | Evans County Recreation Park Upgrades        | Rehab    |
| Forsyth, City of              | Forsyth Golf Course                          | Rehab    |
| Ft. Gaines, City of           | Ft. Gaines Rec Area                          | Rehab    |
| Gwinnett County               | George Pierce Trailhead                      | Rehab    |
| Hampton, City of              | East Hampton Community Park Phase II         | Dev      |
| Heard County                  | Glover Road Park Rehab                       | Rehab    |
| Jesup, City of                | Cracker Williams Park Rehab                  | Rehab    |
| Lavonia, City of              | Lavonia City Park Improvements               | Rehab    |
| Milton, City of               | Providence Park                              | Dev      |
| Monroe County                 | Accessibility for Outdoor Recreation Areas   | Rehab    |
| Patterson, City of            | Tennis Court Rehab Project                   | Rehab    |
| Pine Mountain, Town of        | Playground Recreation Enhancement Project    | Dev      |
| Ringgold, City of             | Golden Mile Trail Phase I                    | Rehab    |
| Rockdale County               | Shady Grove Community Park                   | Acq, Dev |
| Roswell, City of              | Roswell Ace Sand Co. Park                    | Dev      |
| South Fulton, City of         | Cedar Grove Park Playground                  | Rehab    |
| Stephens County               | Stephens County Splash Pad                   | Dev      |
| Troup County                  | Pyne Road Park Campgrounds                   | Rehab    |
| Tucker, City of               | Trails Improvements                          | Rehab    |
| Twin City, City of            | Carlee Coleman Park Trail Development        | Dev      |
| Union City, City of           | Skate Park Development                       | Dev      |
| White County                  | Yonah Preserve Playground                    | Dev      |
| Winder, City of               | Fort Yargo Trail                             | Acq      |

\*Acq=Acquisition; Dev=Development; Rehab=Rehabilitation

## » 2020

| Applicant             | Title  | Type*      |
|-----------------------|--|------------|
| Alamo, City of        | The New East Side Park                                       | Dev, Rehab |
| Alpharetta, City of   | AlphaLoop Section A Phase 2                                  | Dev        |
| Athens-Clarke County  | Upper Oconee Water Trail: Princeton Mill Launch Site Landing | Acq, Dev   |
| Bartow County         | Mountain Bike Trail at Wilderness Camp Greenspace            | Dev        |
| Brunswick, City of    | Orange Park Improvements                                     | Rehab      |
| Carrollton, City of   | Carrollton Midtown Water Park Rehabilitation & Expansion     | Acq, Dev   |
| Cedartown, City of    | Goodyear Park Soccer Complex Phase II                        | Rehab      |
| Douglas, City of      | Unity Park Rehabilitation Project                            | Rehab      |
| Forsyth, City of      | Country Club Park Development                                | Dev        |
| Gordon County         | Brookshire Park Project                                      | Dev        |
| Hampton, City of      | East Hampton Community Park Phase 2                          | Dev        |
| Hawkinsville, City of | Hawkinsville Veterans Park Expansion                         | Dev        |
| Hogansville, City of  | Lake Jimmy Jackson Park Improvements                         | Dev        |
| Jones County          | Liberty Park Expansion                                       | Acq, Dev   |
| LaFayette, City of    | LaFayette Municipal Park Splash Pad                          | Dev        |
| Marietta, City of     | Wildwood Park Disc Golf Course & Site Improvements           | Dev        |
| Meriwether County     | Meriwether County/Greenville Recreation Facility             | Dev        |
| Monroe, City of       | Monroe Downtown Green  | Dev        |
| Putnam County         | Poole Recreation Center Splash Pad                           | Dev        |
| Ringgold, City of     | Golden Mile Trail Phase II                                   | Rehab      |
| Rockdale County       | DeCastro Trailhead Nature Center & Pavilion                  | Rehab      |
| Rockmart, City of     | Nathan Dean Park   | Rehab      |
| Shiloh, City of       | Shiloh Walking Trail Development & Rehabilitation            | Dev, Rehab |
| Thomasville, City of  | City of Thomasville, Paradise Park                           | Rehab      |
| Turin, City of        | Turin Community Park G                                       | Acq, Dev   |
| Whitfield County      | Rocky Face Ridge Summit Trail & Restroom                     | Dev        |
| DNR                   | Vogel State Park Campground Renovation                       | Rehab      |

\*Acq=Acquisition; Dev=Development; Rehab=Rehabilitation

Located in the southeastern United States, Georgia is currently the country's 8th most populous state and 24th largest in area. With a growing population and increased urbanization, the demand for outdoor recreation will soon outpace the supply of land and available recreation resources. In this section we will cover the state's population and geographic profile. As more people make Georgia their home, once open land, now hosts a multitude of development. It is important to understand how these trends affect recreation resources in our state.

## THE PEOPLE

Georgia is one of the fastest-growing states in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's estimates, Georgia saw a 10% growth in population between 2010 and 2020, compared to the 7.4% average growth rate across the U.S.<sup>1</sup> The state will add even more people in the years to come; population projections forecast an 11.9% increase in Georgia's population by 2030. According to estimates from the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, between 2020 and 2030, 32 counties will grow faster than the state average.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, 53 counties are expected to lose residents from 2020 to 2030. All but three of these 53 counties are defined by The Department of Community Affairs as rural counties.

While some areas of Georgia may experience a decline in population, Georgia's urban areas have continued to grow over the past decade. The U.S. Census Bureau looked at changes in population of towns and cities with populations greater than 10,000 from April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019. According to this data, the metro Atlanta area, which includes 29 counties, had the nation's 4th highest metropolitan population growth. With an estimated population of more than 5 million people, metro Atlanta is the ninth most populous metropolitan area in the U.S., containing about 57% of the state's population.<sup>3</sup> Five of Georgia's cities were also included in the nation's "100 Fastest Growing Cities List," including Pooler (39%), Woodstock (39%), Suwanee (36%), Grovetown (35%) and Sugar Hill (33%).<sup>4</sup>

Men account for 48.6% of the 2019 estimated population and women account for 51.4%. Persons under the age of 18 years old make up 23.6% of the population, down from 26% from the 2010 census. Georgia's population of persons over 65 continues to grow as life expectancy increases and retirees move to the state. In 2010, 10% of Georgians were over the age of 65. Today that number is estimated to be 14.3%.<sup>5</sup> According to projections provided by the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, the racial makeup of Georgia is expected to change over the next 30 years (see table below).<sup>6</sup>

| Race/Ethnicity     | 2020 | 2035 | 2050 |
|--------------------|------|------|------|
| White              | 52%  | 46%  | 41%  |
| Black              | 32%  | 34%  | 35%  |
| Hispanic or Latino | 10%  | 12%  | 13%  |
| Other              | 7%   | 8%   | 11%  |

Based off projections provided by the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget



# Georgia's Population

Population in 2020 Census = **10,711,908**

Population in 2010 Census = **9,687,653**

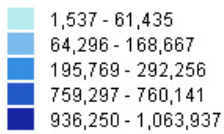
Growth Since 2010 = **10.6%**

US Average Growth Since 2010 = **7.4%**

Based off projections provided by the U.S. Census Bureau

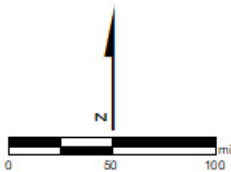
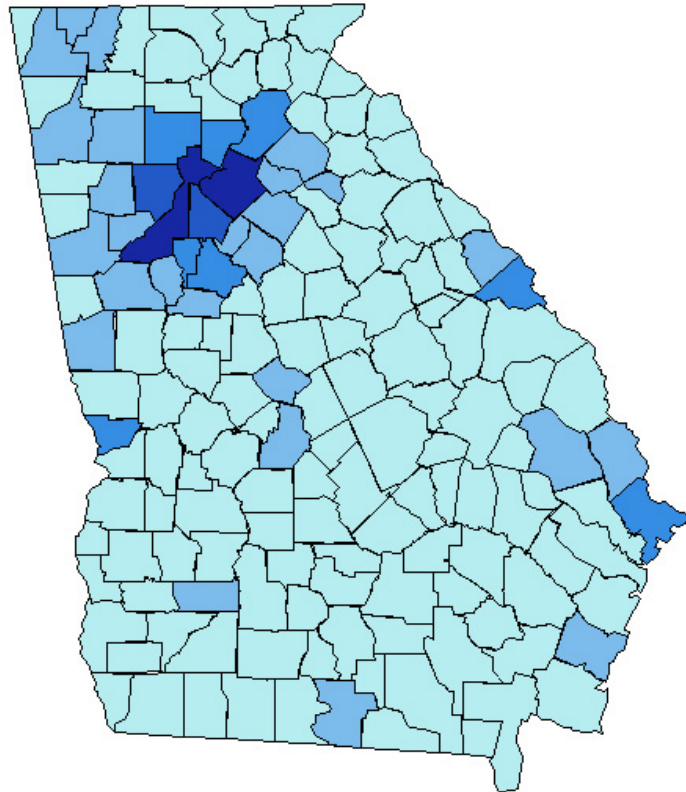
## Population Number by County of Residence, 2019<sup>2</sup>

### Population Number



### Legend

— County



Georgia Department of Public Health  
Office of Health Indicators for Planning (OHIP)

Created with OASIS: 3/31/2021 3:07:52 PM  
<https://oasis.state.ga.us>

Data Classification Method: Natural Breaks (Jenks)

## THE GEOGRAPHY

The geography of Georgia falls naturally into five ecological regions or ecoregions. The major divisions used in this report are as follows: 1) Southwestern Appalachians/Ridge & Valley; 2) Blue Ridge; 3) Piedmont; 4) Southeastern Plains; and 5) Southern Coastal Plain. Georgia covers 57,513 square miles and is 298 miles long by 230 miles wide. This makes Georgia the state with the largest land area east of the Mississippi River.

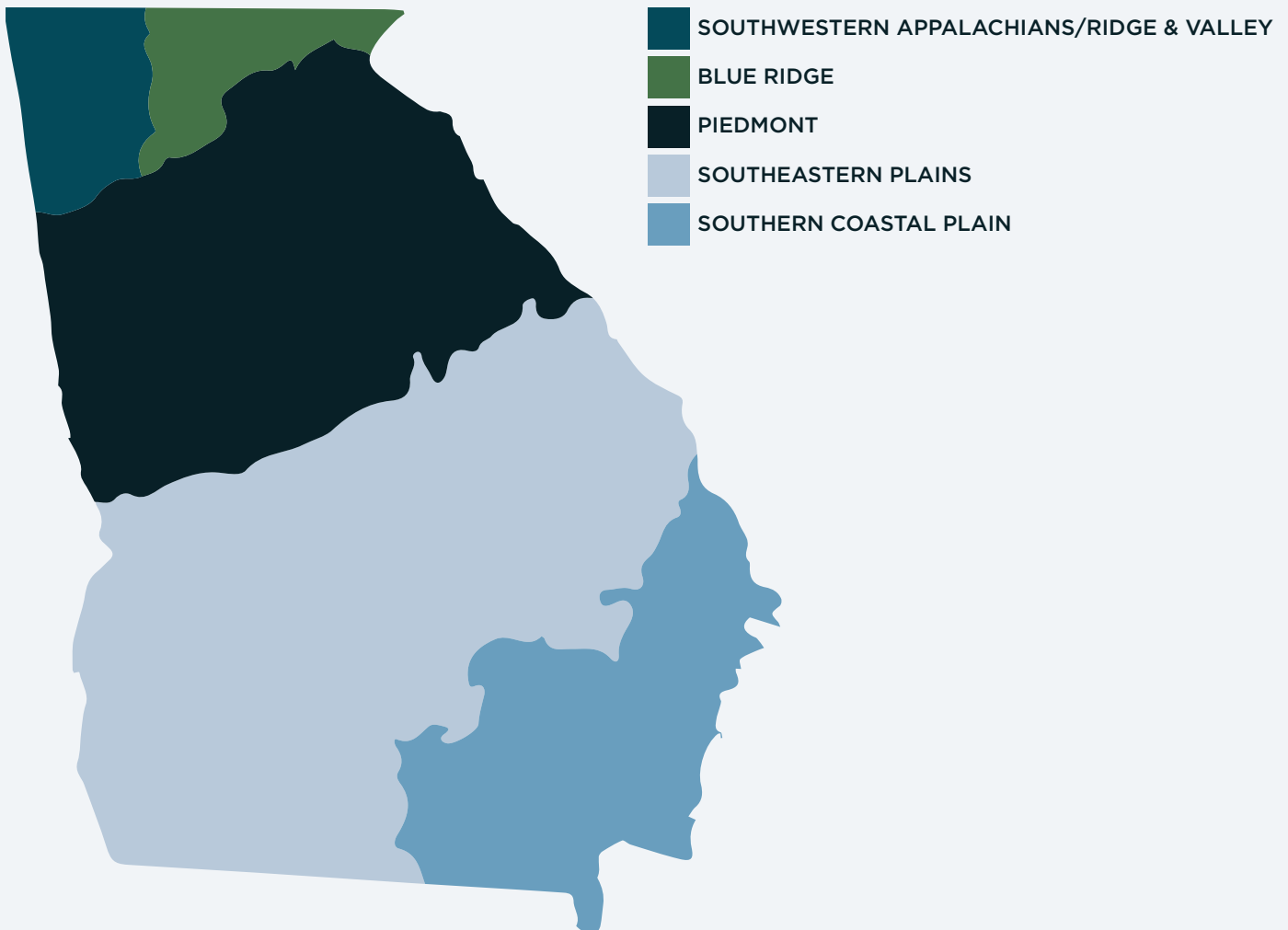
### Southwestern Appalachians/Ridge & Valley

The Southwestern Appalachians and Ridge & Valley ecoregions covers approximately 1,982,245 acres in northwestern Georgia. These two ecoregions share many characteristics relating to geology, topography, soils, and vegetation.

The Southwestern Appalachian ecoregion is characterized by low, flat-topped mountains containing a mosaic of forest and woodland with some cropland and pasture. The eastern boundary of this ecoregion is relatively smooth and notched by small eastward flowing streams; the western boundary has a rougher escarpment that is more deeply incised. The deeper ravines and escarpment slopes of this ecoregion contain mixed forest requiring moderate amounts of moisture, while the top of the plateau has drier mixed pine-oak forests and woodlands dominated by a variety of oaks.

The Ridge & Valley is a relatively low-lying region situated between the Blue Ridge and the Southwestern Appalachians. Its roughly parallel ridges and valleys contain a variety of geologic materials, including limestone, dolomite, shale, siltstone, sandstone, chert, mudstone, and marble. Springs and caves are relatively numerous in this ecoregion. Ridges and slopes are mostly forested, while pasture and row crops dominate the valleys.

There are 110 animal species and 65 plant species identified as high priority for conservation in the Southwestern Appalachians/Ridge & Valley.



## Blue Ridge Ecoregion

The Blue Ridge ecoregion of Georgia covers approximately 1,696,930 acres. Landforms of the Blue Ridge range from narrow ridges to hilly plateaus to more massive mountainous areas with high peaks. The mostly forested slopes, high-gradient, cool, clear streams, and rugged terrain occur on a mix of igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary geology. High peaks in this region may have annual precipitation of over 70 inches. Characteristic vegetation includes northern hardwood forest, dry oak forests, heath thickets, shrub balds, hemlock-hardwood-white pine forests, cove hardwood forests, and mountain bogs. The Southern Blue Ridge is one of the richest centers of biodiversity in North America.

There are 89 animal species and 66 plant species identified as high priority for conservation in the Blue Ridge.

## Piedmont Ecoregion

The Piedmont ecoregion encompasses about 11,003,500 acres, or roughly 29% of the state. The Piedmont comprises a transitional area between the mountainous ecoregions to the northwest and the relatively flat Coastal Plain to the southeast. Geologically, it is a complex mosaic of metamorphic and igneous rocks. The terrain includes broad plains, narrow valleys, rolling hills, and isolated monadnocks (rounded rocky peaks). The soils tend to be finer-textured than in the coastal plain ecoregions. Once largely cultivated, much of this region has reverted to pine and hardwood woodlands, and, more recently, to sprawling urban and suburban areas.

There are 87 animal species and 66 plant species identified as high priority for conservation in the Piedmont.

## Southeastern Plains Ecoregion

The Southeastern Plains ecoregion stretches across middle and southwestern Georgia, covering approximately 16,262,360 acres. It is bordered on the northwest by the Piedmont and on the southeast by the Southern Coastal Plain. The northwestern edge of this ecoregion is known as the Fall Line, a distinctive zone of transition between the topographically varied Piedmont and the relatively flat Coastal Plain.

This expansive ecoregion of irregular plains and broad interstream areas contains a mosaic of cropland, pasture, woodland, and forest. Natural vegetation is mostly longleaf pine-wiregrass, longleaf pine-scrub oak, oak-hickory-pine and southern mixed forest. The region's relatively young sedimentary rocks are overlain by sandy soils, with occasional rocky outcrops. Elevations and relief are generally less than in the Piedmont and greater than in the Southern Coastal Plain. Streams in this region have relatively low gradients and sandy substrates.

There are 145 animal species and 117 plant species identified as high priority for conservation in the Southeastern Plains.

## Southern Coastal Plain Ecoregion

The Southern Coastal Plain ecoregion covers approximately 6,625,700 acres in Georgia. Regionally, the Southern Coastal Plain extends from South Carolina and Georgia through much of central Florida, and along the Gulf coast lowlands of the Florida Panhandle, Alabama, and Mississippi. This ecoregion is lower in elevation with less relief and wetter soils than the Southeastern Plains. Once covered by a variety of forest communities that included longleaf pine, slash pine, pond pine, beech-magnolia, and mixed upland hardwoods, land cover in the region is now predominantly slash and loblolly pine plantations with cypress-gum, bay swamp, and bottomland hardwoods in low lying areas along rivers.

There are 120 animal species and 68 plant species identified as high priority for conservation in the Southern Coastal Plain.

For more information on Georgia's ecoregions, explore the Statewide Action Plan at <https://georgiawildlife.com/WildlifeActionPlan>.

## THE PATTERNS OF WILDLIFE DIVERSITY

Georgia's location within the temperate zone is associated with moderate to high levels of diversity in plant and animal life.

Considering the elevation of Georgia's mountains, the state effectively spans more than the roughly four and a half degrees of latitude it covers. High elevation sites in Georgia harbor plants and animals characteristic of more northern latitudes.

Georgia's position on the Atlantic Slope affords a relatively moderate climate associated with more diverse plant and animal life. The lower reaches of rivers that drain the Atlantic Slope transition into estuaries, and elevation and topographic diversity decline gradually toward the coast. This results in varied natural features and processes associated with diverse terrestrial and aquatic habitats.

Plant species diversity in Georgia is high due in part to the abundant plant life covering the Southern

Appalachians, as well as a diversity of unique habitats such as rock outcrops, bogs, longleaf pine-wiregrass uplands, and depressional wetlands. Both the Appalachian region and the Southern Coastal Plain have high levels of endemic plants, meaning that they are found nowhere else in the world. A number of narrowly endemic plant species are also associated with granite outcrops of the Georgia Piedmont. Nationally, Georgia ranks seventh in terms of overall diversity of vascular plants. Georgia ranks second among all states in amphibian diversity, third in freshwater fish diversity, seventh in reptile diversity, fifteenth in bird diversity, and seventeenth in mammal diversity. Based on a 2000 nationwide assessment of 21,395 species, Georgia ranks sixth in the nation in overall biological diversity based on numbers of vascular plants, vertebrate animals, and the better known invertebrate groups. Georgia also ranks twelfth in the nation in terms of endemic species, eighth in percentage of species considered globally imperiled (12.9%), and fifth in terms of number of known or suspected extinctions.<sup>8</sup>

## THE CLIMATE

The climate of Georgia can be described generally as humid and temperate. Summers are warm to hot. Winters are cool to cold, and moist. Average annual precipitation varies significantly across the state, from less than 45 inches to over 70 inches. In northern Georgia, monthly precipitation totals are highest in late winter to early spring (March to April). A secondary peak in precipitation occurs in July, due to thunderstorm activity. In southeastern Georgia, maximum rainfall occurs in late summer to early fall. Southwestern Georgia locations typically experience two relatively even peaks of precipitation in March and July, with a third peak in December.

For the state as a whole, October is the month of lowest rainfall, but this monthly precipitation minimum also varies significantly across the state.

Severe weather events occur primarily in the warmer months. Tornadoes spawned by intense thunderstorms are most likely in March, April, and May and least likely in September and October. The peak period of occurrence of tropical storms and hurricanes along the Atlantic coast is from August to October.



CATESBEY'S PITCHERPLANT

SOURCE: DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION

Average daily January temperatures vary from 25 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit across the state. Similarly, average daily July temperatures range from 60 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Locations in southcentral Georgia average 90 days per year with maximum temperatures above 90 degrees Fahrenheit, while sites in northernmost Georgia experience less than 10 such days per year. High-elevation sites in the mountains of northern Georgia average 120 days with minimum temperatures below 32 degrees Fahrenheit, while locations along the coast and the southeastern border experience fewer than 30 such days per year.



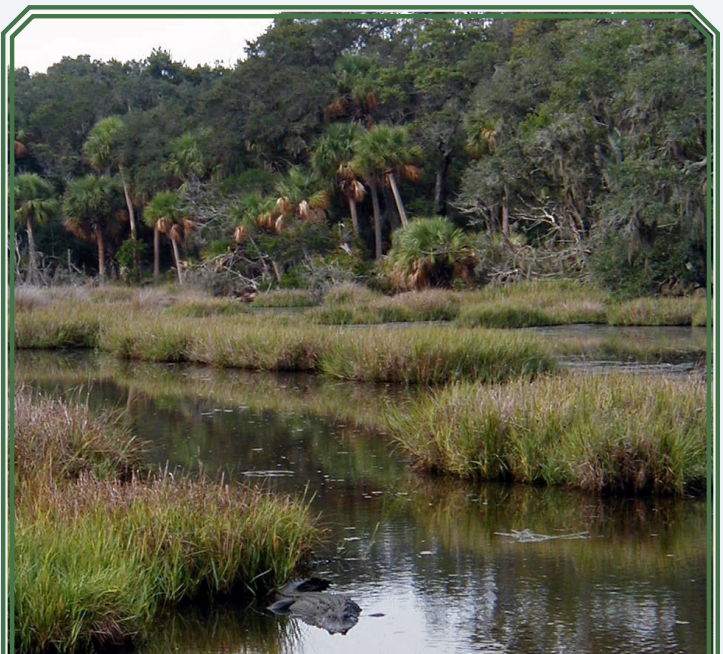
ZAHND WMA  
SOUTHWESTERN APPALACHIANS/RIDGE & VALLEY  
**SOURCE:** DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION



CEDAR CREEK WMA  
PIEDMONT  
**SOURCE:** DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION



SILVER LAKE WMA  
SOUTHEASTERN PLAINS  
**SOURCE:** DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION

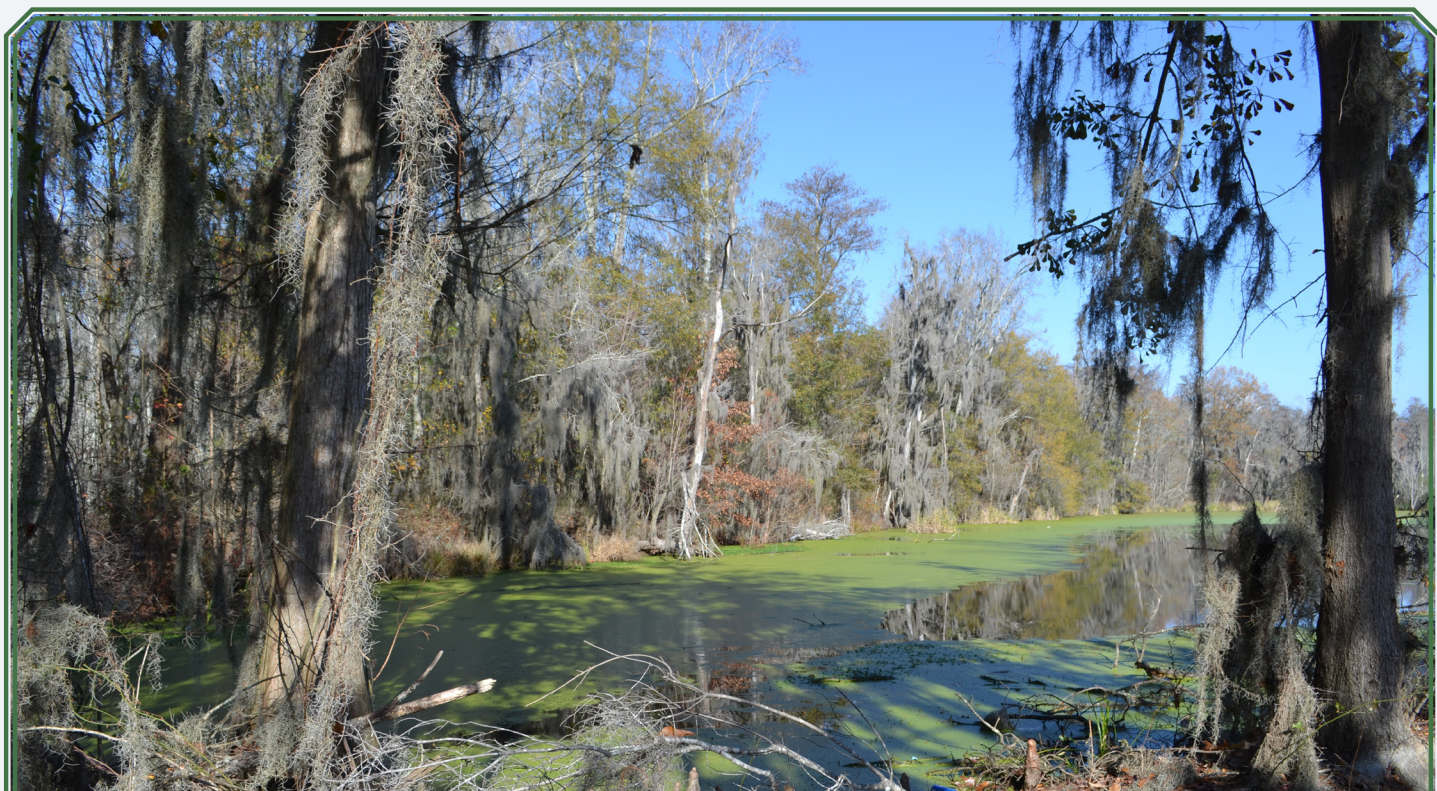


OSSABAW ISLAND WMA  
SOUTHERN COASTAL PLAIN  
**SOURCE:** DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION

## WETLANDS

Wetlands are places of immense natural beauty and play a vital role in the health of our ecosystems. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency define wetlands as “areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs, and similar areas.” From mountain bogs to salt marshes, the diversity of Georgia’s various wetland areas is impressive. Wetlands help improve water quality, mitigate flooding, and support wildlife in many ways.

There is some discrepancy about how much of Georgia is covered with wetlands. Some estimate that Georgia has as many as 7.7 million acres of wetlands, while others estimate the total acres of wetlands within the state as low as 4.3 million acres.<sup>9</sup> While this difference based on methodology and interpretation may seem large, what it does not obscure is that Georgia is a state with impressive wetlands that provide us with many benefits that other ecosystems do not provide.



PHINIZY SWAMP WMA  
SOURCE: DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION

According to the Georgia Coastal Marshlands Protection Act (O.C.G.A. 12-5-280 et seq.), Georgia’s coastal wetlands provide habitat to “many species of marine life and wildlife and, without the food supplied by the marshlands, such marine life and wildlife cannot survive. The estuarine marshlands of coastal Georgia are among the richest providers of nutrients in the world. Such marshlands provide a nursery for commercially and recreationally important species of shellfish and other wildlife, provide a great buffer against flooding and erosion, and help control and disseminate pollutants. The coastal marshlands provide a natural recreation resource which has become vitally linked to the economy of Georgia’s coastal zone and to that of the entire state.” More information about wetlands near Georgia’s coast can be found at <https://coastalgadnr.org/Wetlands>.

Perhaps Georgia's most visible wetland area is the Okefenokee Swamp. At more than 400,000 acres, the Okefenokee is the country's largest blackwater swamp. Around 350,000 of those acres are contained within the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, with smaller parcels in private hands or managed by the Georgia Forestry Commission and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

While the trend for more than 200 years was a man-made decline in wetland acres in Georgia, our State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) cites a change on that front. "Stable or slightly increasing wetland land cover during this time period may signal good news as the long-term trend of wetland loss seems to have abated. Notably, wetlands in the Southeastern Plains and Southern Coastal Plain ecoregions, which were significantly impacted by ditching, draining, and conversion to other land uses in previous decades, appeared to be stable from 2006–2011."<sup>10</sup> While this trend is certainly positive, wetlands protection is a long-term commitment. Georgia's fish and game agency, the Wildlife Resources Division (WRD), has been charged with conserving, enhancing, and promoting Georgia's wildlife. WRD has designated the following types of wetland properties as a priority for acquisition:

- » **Larger wetlands parcels**
- » **Wetlands rich in native species**
- » **Wetlands that have not historically been drained**
- » **Wetlands buffering high priority habitats, like high priority streams and rivers**
- » **Wetlands adjacent to existing conservation properties**
- » **Wetlands with known occurrences of high priority species**
- » **Wetlands affording good wildlife viewing opportunities**
- » **Unique wetland types that are at high risk to development**

DNR's Coastal Resources Division also plays a vital role in protecting Georgia's 368,000 acres of pristine salt marsh wetlands. Through Georgia's 1970 landmark adoption of the Coastal Marshlands Protection Act, the Division is able to balance reasonable development with protection of the coast's natural assets, socio-cultural heritage, and recreational resources for present and future generations. While other East Coast states have seen significant development of marshes, especially in New England and the Mid-Atlantic, salt marshes in Georgia remain largely unspoiled, attracting an estimated \$2 billion in tourism-related activity annually.

To learn more about priority habitats across Georgia, the SWAP is made available for reading at <https://georgiabiodiversity.org>. In the 2015 SWAP revision, priority habitats are described in Appendix A. The Georgia Biodiversity Portal also allows users to explore the high priority species close to home and throughout the state.

On Georgia Department of Natural Resources' owned properties across the state, almost 150,000 acres of protected freshwater wetlands have been identified. This includes adding an additional 20,000 acres from 2017–2020. The Georgia Environmental Protection Division publishes a biannual report on water quality in the state which includes additional information about wetlands protection. The most recent and past documents are accessible at <https://epd.georgia.gov/watershed-protection-branch>.

Wetland areas can provide meaningful opportunities for low-impact recreation that encourages the long-term protection of such places. However, any recreation in wetlands requires extensive planning and consultation to protect the very resource people want to explore and learn about.



**The world lies east: how ample, the marsh and the sea and the sky!  
A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high, broad in the blade,  
Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or a shade,  
Stretch leisurely off, in a pleasant plain,  
To the terminal blue of the main.**

**—Sidney Lanier, Marshes of Glynn**



To assess the supply of outdoor recreation areas and facilities in Georgia, an inventory of existing public recreation opportunities was developed. This section of the document provides an overview of recreation resources in Georgia. This inventory, based on data submitted by recreation agencies from across Georgia, is not comprehensive. Quantifiable data is not always accessible relative to the actual recreation acreage and number of facilities for all provider groups.

## PUBLIC PARKS INVENTORY

In 2016, DNR partnered with GreenInfo Network to create an accurate GIS database of Georgia's public outdoor protected areas. This inventory represents the thousands of public outdoor recreation areas, covering millions of acres, which are managed by hundreds of individual agencies and organizations. Recreation providers were asked to provide data on all park properties and amenities under their jurisdiction.

In 2020, DNR again partnered with GreenInfo Network to update the existing inventory from 2016. A request for inventory was sent to partner organizations including but not limited to the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG), the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) and the Georgia Recreation and Parks Association (GRPA) to review the 2016 data, update any changes,

and add any new recreation areas or facilities. DNR received over 3,200 new activity data submissions via MapCollaborator from recreation providers. This new data was added to the 2016 inventory GIS database. These files can be shared with recreation professionals, decision-makers, and planners to assess the availability of recreation areas and to gauge outstanding needs. Statistics and maps from this data will be highlighted in this section.

Currently, the state of Georgia does not have an up-to-date online inventory of parks that is accessible to the public. Various stakeholders are currently working to develop an online database to host and manage this inventory.

**Georgia Parks Edition** MapCollaborator<sup>Pro</sup>

**Introduction**

This tool is for park and recreation managers to use in helping improve park and recreational activity data for Georgia. Please review instructions below. This information will be used by Georgia Dept. of Parks & Recreation for its 2016 outdoor recreation plan. Parks data is from Univ. Georgia Athens 2012 (with updates), and Recreation Activities Data is from a prior survey by Kramer, et al.

The application uses [GreenInfo Network's MapCollaborator](#) and lets you place notes and park entry points, draw new parks, and identify recreational activities in any park.

[VIEW THE VIDEO TUTORIAL](#)

**PARK SEARCH AND REVIEW**

Use "Search Panel" to find your agency's parks, or just zoom into the map (you can download a list of these results).

Use "Post a Note" panel to comment on park data or note missing parks - move cursor onto map and click at a location, fill out the form.

Use "Add a park area" panel to draw the outline of parks that are missing. Note: parks for this purpose generally do not include small landscape medians or traffic circles.

**ACTIVITIES REVIEW**

Choose the orange "Edit Recreation Activities in Parks" panel to enter information about activities in each of your agency's parks, or choose "Edit Activities" in any park popup window. If you are adding a park on the map, you will be prompted to enter amenity information in the Editor when saving that park area.

**ASSISTANCE**

For technical assistance with this application, send email describing your issue, including the operating system and web browser version you are using, to: [jin@greeninfo.org](mailto:jin@greeninfo.org)

**Zoom to a location** >

**Search** >

**Post a note** >

**Add a park or protected area** >

**Edit recreation activities in parks** >

**Redlands Wildlife Management Area**  
4,734.0 acres

**Owner:** U.S. Forest Service (USFS)  
**Manager:** Georgia Department of Natural Resources  
**Access:** Open Access  
**Recreation Park:** YES

[Zoom To >](#) [Edit Activities For This Park >](#)

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Activities review completed?  | Yes |
| Tennis, basketball, horseshoes, volleyball:                                     | No  |
| Baseball, softball:   | No  |
| Fresh or saltwater fishing, piers:  | Yes |
| Golf, disc golf, mini-golf:   | No  |
| Designated nature area, botanical garden or large natural area (over 20 acres): | Yes |
| Skate parks, rock climbing:   | No  |

MapCollaborator Pro screenshot



## DEFINITIONS—THE WAY WE TALK ABOUT PARKS

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There is a wide range of park types and outdoor recreation activities. Categorizing them can help us to better understand them and to develop a holistic perspective.

### Active vs. Passive Recreation

The terms active and passive recreation describe activities, not sites or facilities. **Active recreation** is based on physiology and is defined as activities that result in a healthy increase in aerobic rate. Thus, active recreation is generally heart pumping activities—like playing tennis at a local park or hiking a trail at a state park. **Passive recreation**, in contrast, includes those activities that do not result in increased aerobic rates, but focus on mental health or stress reduction. Examples of passive recreation would include bird-watching or picnicking.

### Facility-based vs. Nature-based Parks

To differentiate between areas like baseball fields or wildlife management areas, we use the terms facility-based or nature-based. **Facility-based** describes recreation areas that are “built-out” or require intense maintenance. These are kinds of parks that need frequent and high levels of maintenance like cleaning and mowing. In contrast, a **nature-based** area may only have a simple gravel parking area and narrow hiking trail on a natural surface.

### Protected Lands

Generally, we describe **protected lands** as properties that are protected from commercial or residential development. Typically, these are government (public) properties, but several are privately held in Georgia. It’s important to note that our inventory includes all protected lands, and not just recreation lands, like parks, wildlife management areas or national forests. Examples of non-recreation lands include properties that are purchased but not yet open to the public, very small parks or medians, military bases, or even properties that are protected by private conservation easements. We chose to include these areas in our inventory because they can support a wide variety of ecological services including habitat connectivity for wildlife, and the protection of wetlands and water quality.

## A SNAPSHOT OF GEORGIA’S RECREATION LAND

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This inventory recognized 3,651,747 acres of protected land. This makes up approximately 9.85% of Georgia’s total land area of 37,059,877 acres.

### Amenities Available at Georgia’s Recreation Areas

| Amenity   | # of Parks with Amenity | Amenity   | # of Parks with Amenity |
|---|-------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Baseball/Softball field                             | 866                     | Play area, tot lot, etc.                          | 1267                    |
| Campground, horse camp, group camp or RV camping    | 197                     | Pool, beach, spray pool, wading pool, etc.        | 275                     |
| Football, soccer or lacrosse                        | 434                     | Shooting range, paintball, archery, trap or skeet | 52                      |
| Fresh or saltwater fishing                          | 347                     | Skate park or rock climbing                       | 55                      |
| Golf course   | 78                      | Tennis, basketball, horseshoes or volleyball      | 960                     |
| Group shelter                                       | 1246                    | Track for running                                 | 119                     |
| Nature area, botanical garden or large natural area | 589                     | Unpaved trails                                    | 857                     |
| Paddling  | 264                     |   |                         |
| Paved trails  | 516                     |   |                         |

# Summary of Georgia's Recreational Lands



Total Protected Land  
3,651,747 acres



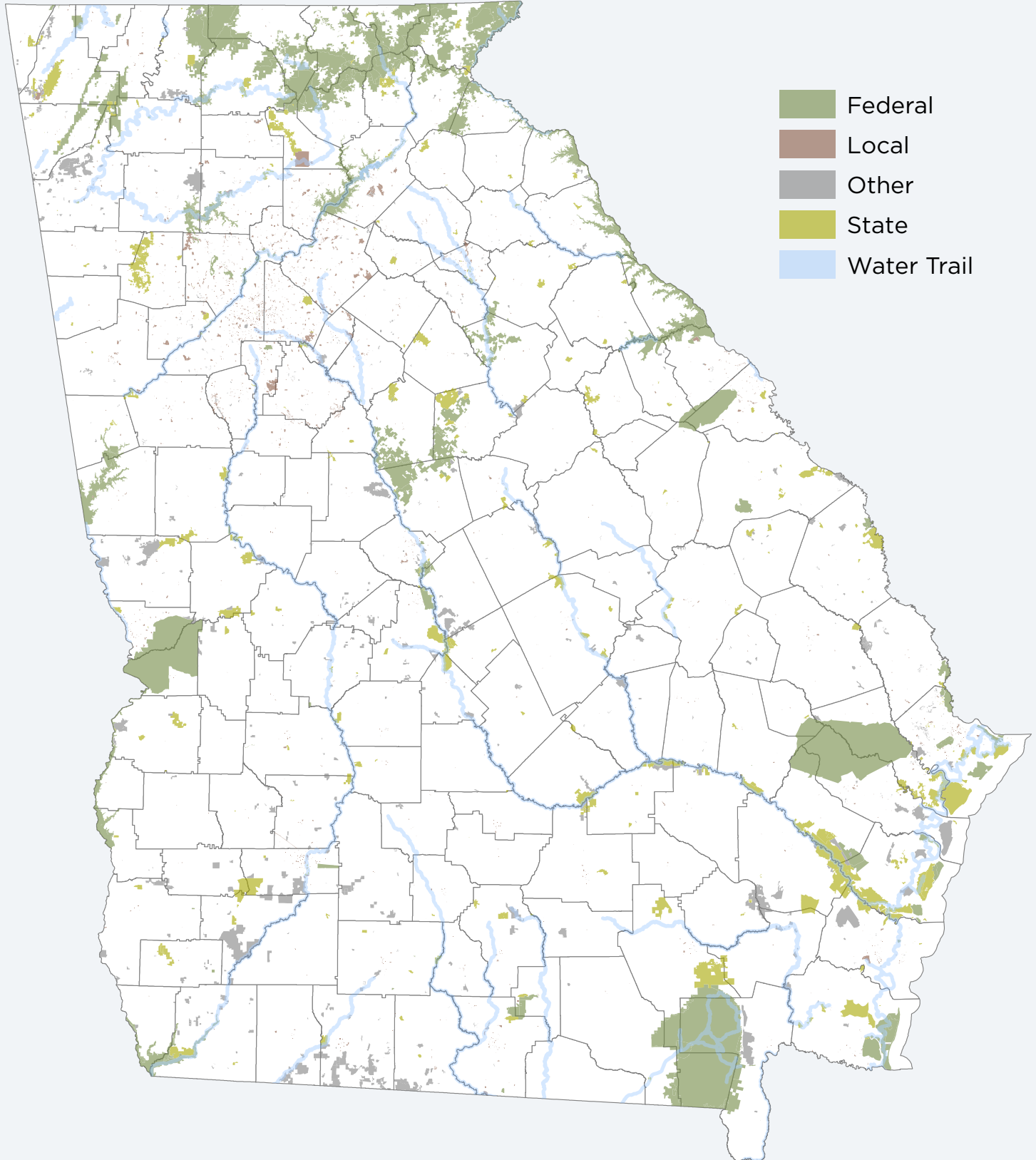
Total Water Trails Mileage  
1,847 miles



Total Parks  
4,859



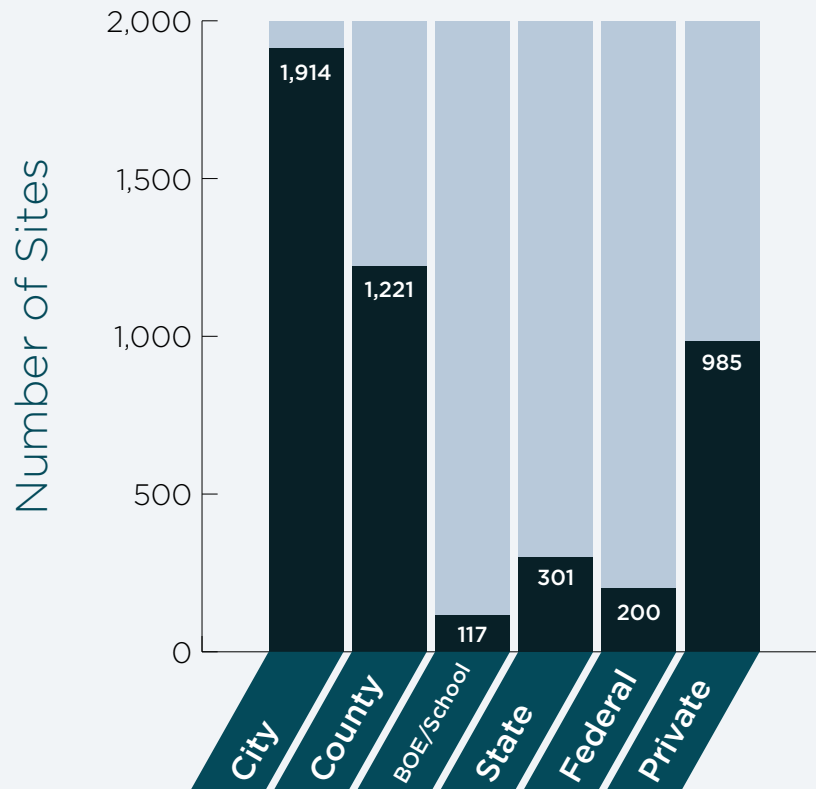
Total Managing Agencies  
498



## RECREATION SERVICE PROVIDERS

Georgia is fortunate to have a variety of recreation service providers such as local, state, and federal government agencies, as well as private and quasi-public organizations. In this section we will gauge the availability of recreation resources by looking at the activity provided, facility type, size and distribution through the lens of Georgia's recreation providers.

### Property Ownership



**Federal recreation providers** manage large-acre tracts primarily for nature-based recreation. These areas provide both active and passive recreation activities including hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, boating, paddling, picnicking, horseback riding, and ATV riding. Federal agencies operate the largest contiguous areas (shown in green on the map to the left) and tend to be in areas with lower population density.

Georgia contains 15 National Park Service managed sites, one national forest and eight wildlife refuges. Key providers include the National Park Service (55,629 acres), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (482,703 acres), U.S. Forest Service (863,167 acres), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (390,102 acres), and military bases (554,119 acres). According to our inventory, federal agencies own more than 2.3 million acres—roughly 66% of the recreation land in Georgia.

**State government providers** offer both facility-based and nature-based areas consisting of mostly large acreage tracts. With a wide range of park types, these areas offer both active and passive recreation activities including hiking, camping, picnicking, hunting, fishing, boating, wildlife watching, horseback riding, golf, caving, and swimming. These areas tend to be distributed a bit more evenly around the state than are the federal lands.

While several different agencies manage state-owned recreation areas, there are two principle providers at the state level. The Parks and Historic Sites Division (Parks) and the Wildlife Resources Division (WRD) of DNR account for most of Georgia's state-managed public recreation lands.

The Parks and Historic Site Division's mission is to protect Georgia's natural beauty and historic integrity while providing opportunities for the public's enjoyment and education. The Division manages 48 state parks and 16 historic sites that preserve the state's environment and history. These facility-based parks focus on people's experiences at the sites by providing a wider range of recreation activities. Almost all Georgia State Parks facilities include amenities such as picnic areas, campsites, and well-maintained walking trails.

The Wildlife Resources Division is charged with conserving, enhancing, and promoting Georgia's wildlife resources, including game and nongame animals, fish and protected plants. WRD manages over one million acres of land, 500,000 acres of lakes, 12,000 miles of warm water streams, and 4,000 miles of trout streams. Nature-based facilities include Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) and Public Fishing Areas (PFAs), which are primarily large-acre tracts located outside of metropolitan areas. These are open for hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, and camping. WMAs are often larger in size than state parks, but activities are often restricted based on regulations. For example, many WMAs have extensive hiking trails that are open to the public, but these trails may be closed for safety during open hunting dates.

### DNR-managed Properties in Georgia



**Local government providers** are the parks and recreation departments for counties or cities. Traditionally, local providers focus on facility-based parks that offer active recreation activities, like athletic fields and playgrounds, and any amenities that support those facilities. These parks are on average much smaller in size than a state park or WMA and are typically located near where people live and work. For many, county and city parks are the closest recreation opportunities available.

According to our inventory, there are 498 managing agencies of parks in Georgia. The vast majority of these agencies are local governments. We estimate that local agencies manage 3,252 parks and recreation spaces around the state. A high percentage of these sites are considered facility-based (including an athletic field or court), but we did see an increase in parks offering designated nature areas and unpaved trails.

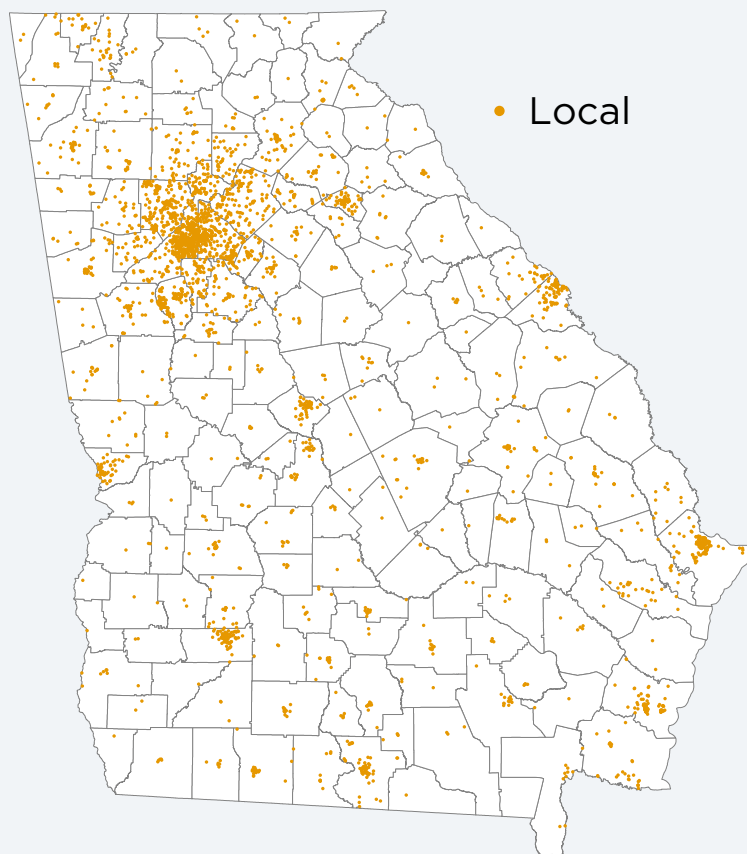
As illustrated on the map of local park sites, there are clusters of parks around major metropolitan areas, with a higher concentration in the northern third of the state. For the purpose of this map, county and city parks were converted to points and do not accurately depict their acreage. While some cities and counties manage hundreds, if not thousands, of acres, over two-thirds of both counties and cities manage less than 100 acres of recreation land. This means in some rural counties there are limited opportunities for public recreation.

**Private recreation providers** also offer recreation opportunities throughout Georgia. Private recreation providers include nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses. Examples of private recreation providers include the Girls and Boys Clubs, YMCAs, churches, nonprofit organizations with a mission of outdoor recreation and/or conservation, golf courses, tennis courts, swimming pools and water parks, campgrounds, and guide services. The Georgia Power Company serves as a quasi-public provider of outdoor recreation through their 58,485 acres of lakes, 1,388 miles of shoreline, and dozens of areas that offer a variety of recreation activities.

## INVENTORY SUMMARY

Through this data gathering effort we now have a better understanding of the recreation opportunities and facilities in Georgia. From our research, we found Georgia offers a wide variety of recreation opportunities, including both nature-based and facility-based parks that are available across the entire state. This data will allow professionals, planners, and decision-makers in the recreation field to assess the parks in their area and the activities offered, allowing them to better gauge outstanding needs. While this data is vital in the decision-making process, having a clear understanding of the supply and the public's demand for outdoor recreation is essential to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the role of outdoor recreation.

### Local Government Parks in Georgia



A critical requirement of the Plan involves determining the demand and need for additional outdoor recreation opportunities and facilities in Georgia. As a part of the SCORP planning process, a series of opportunities for participation was afforded the general public and demand for outdoor recreation services was assessed in several ways including:

- 1. Statewide Demand Survey:** An online questionnaire of 474 respondents about outdoor recreation preferences.
- 2. Focused Demand Surveys:** Additional online questionnaires were sent to two target audiences.
- 3. Public Meetings:** Two online public meetings were hosted in the summer of 2020.
- 4. Written Comments:** An online form was created to receive public input.
- 5. Practitioners and Planners Feedback:** DNR engaged officials and planners through an online questionnaire.
- 6. Advisory Committee:** An Advisory Committee, composed of a variety of stakeholders, provided perspective and oversight for the entire planning process.



SOURCE: CITY OF PERRY

## STATEWIDE DEMAND SURVEY

To assess the demand and preferences for outdoor recreation and facilities in Georgia, an online survey was conducted with a targeted, representative sample of Georgians. In previous years, the statewide demand survey was conducted via telephone. The survey collected responses from more than 400 Georgians during the last week of March 2020. The following section summarizes selected findings.

It should be noted that the survey was conducted during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic. The World Health Organization formally declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 and a National Emergency was declared in the U.S. on March 13, 2020. The survey was designed and approved prior to those events. At the time the survey was collecting responses, the major impacts COVID-19 would have on our society were not yet apparent. Respondents were not asked to answer any questions about COVID-19 nor respond to the survey with COVID-19 in mind.

### Preferences

#### Recreation and Popular Activities

More than 90% of respondents (428/474) indicated they had engaged in at least one form of outdoor recreation within the previous 12-month period. The following activities were the most popular.

- » **walking, jogging, or running**
- » **picnicking**
- » **swimming outdoors**
- » **visiting a nature center or outdoor education facility**
- » **wildlife watching or nature photography**
- » **hiking**
- » **camping**
- » **biking**
- » **fishing**

Some of these activities like picnicking, swimming outdoors, visiting a nature center or outdoor education facility, and camping are enjoyed by lots of Georgians, but only “a few times a year” or “at least once a year.” Other activities, like biking and fishing, were not selected by as many respondents, but those who did select them were more likely to say they engaged in these activities more often. Walking/jogging/running, wildlife watching or nature photography, and hiking are both enjoyed by large numbers of Georgians and are part of their weekly or monthly routines.



SOURCE: HENRY COUNTY

# WHY GO OUTDOORS?

Respondents were asked what factors are important for them when participating in outdoor recreation. More than half of respondents indicated that they were motivated by the opportunity to:

**1** HAVE  
FUN!

**2** RELAX

**3** BE WITH  
FAMILY  
& FRIENDS

**4** ENJOY  
NATURE

**5** BE HEALTHY  
& EXERCISE



## Popularity of Parks and Frequency of Visitation

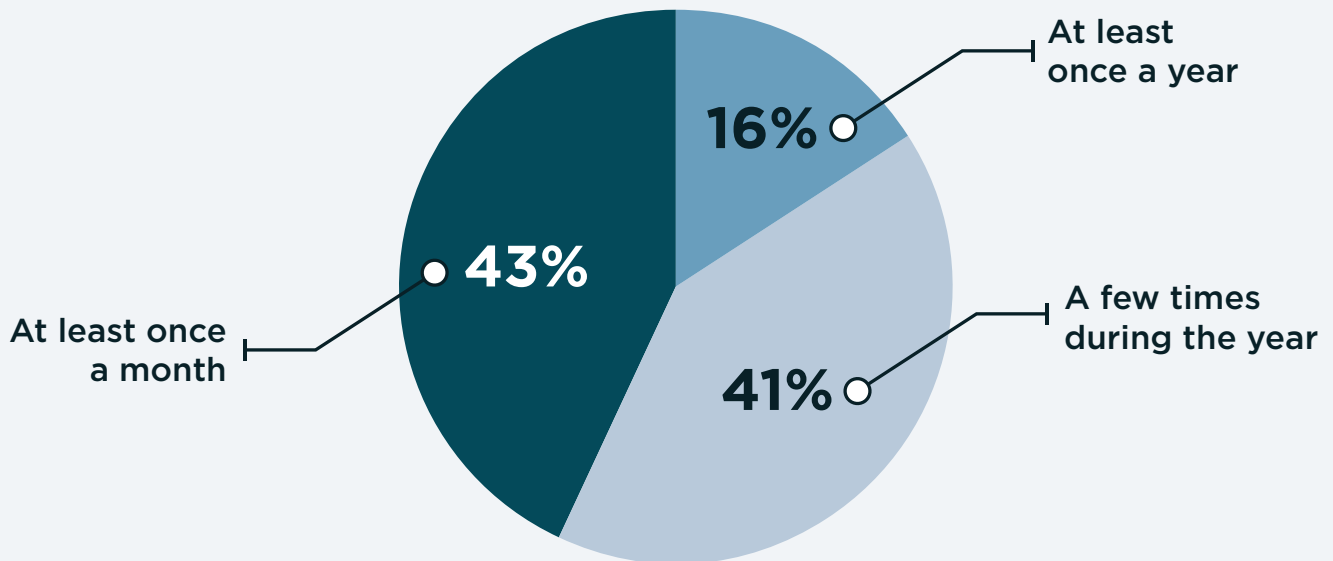
Almost nine out of every ten respondents indicated that they had visited a park (city or county park, Georgia State Park or Historic Site, and/or National Park Service site within Georgia) in the last year.

**89.6% of Georgians surveyed reported visiting a park in Georgia in the last year.**

| Type of Park  | Percent of respondents who had visited this type of park within the last year |
|---|---|
| City or County Park (in the city and/or county where I live)          | 86%   |
| City or County Park (in a city and/or county other than where I live) | 77%   |
| Georgia State Park and/or Georgia State Historic Site                 | 78%   |
| National Park Service site within Georgia                             | 63%   |

Among Georgians who reported visiting parks in the previous year, 43% said they visited “at least once a month,” while 41% reported visiting parks at least “a few times a year.” Sixteen percent described their visits to parks as occurring “at least once a year.”

## Frequency of Park Visits



Among those surveyed, 33% indicated they visit city or county parks in the communities where they live at least once a month. Seventeen percent of respondents said they visit a city or county park outside of the city or county where they live monthly, while 12% visit Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites and one in ten visit National Park Service sites at least once a month.

## Barriers

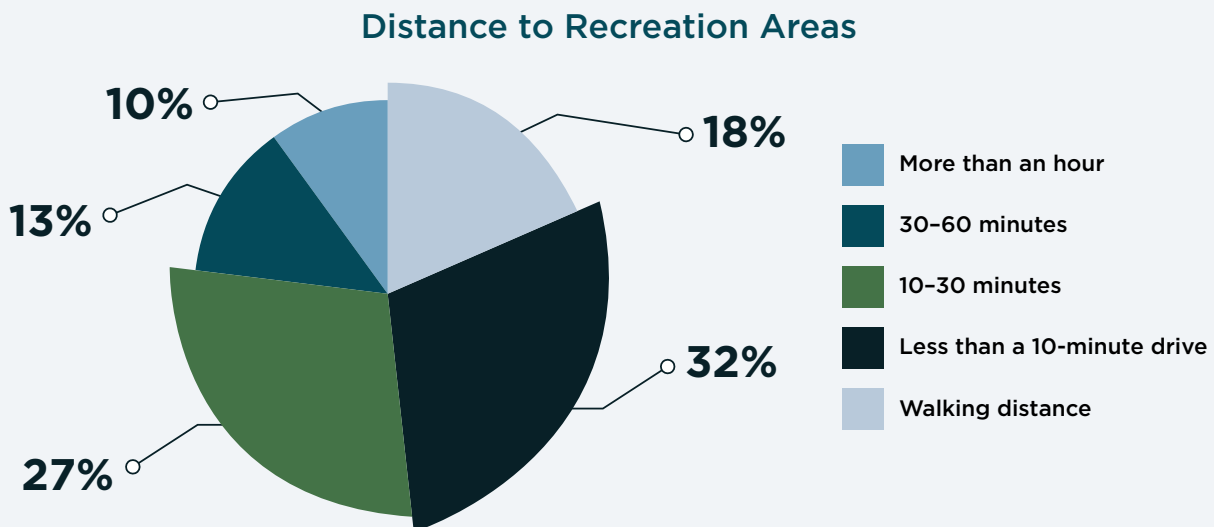
### Deterrents

When asked what factors limited their participation in outdoor recreation, the most common responses were “lack of time,” “overcrowding in outdoor recreation facilities,” “distance to outdoor recreation,” and “health issues.” On a positive note, “poor conditions of facilities” as a factor discouraging participation dropped from 34% during the 2016 survey to 13% in the 2020 survey.

| Issues limiting participation                   | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Lack of time                                    | 32%       |
| Overcrowding                                    | 25%       |
| Distance to outdoor recreation                  | 24%       |
| Health issues                                   | 23%       |
| Safety concerns                                 | 19%       |
| Cost of visiting                                | 17%       |
| Lack of transportation                          | 14%       |
| Poor condition of outdoor recreation facilities | 13%       |
| Prefer different type(s) of recreation          | 11%       |
| None of the above                               | 20%       |

### Distance to Outdoor Recreation Facilities

Respondents were asked the distance to their nearest recreation area. Approximately 50% of recreators say that they live within walking distance or less than a 10-minute drive to the nearest recreation area. At the same time, almost a quarter say that they are more than half an hour from their nearest outdoor recreation area and 10% say that they live more than an hour away from their nearest outdoor recreation area. While this is certainly true for a small number of Georgians, when compared against the supply data gathered for this SCORP, it appears that many respondents are not yet aware of recreation areas near them.



## Safety and Security

Security is a concern for many people when it comes to outdoor recreation. Respondents were asked several different questions to try and find out how common it was for security to be a concern or a barrier to recreation. Overall, about 19% indicated that safety concerns limited their participation in outdoor recreation. Just under 30% of those surveyed listed security as a “problem facing outdoor recreation in Georgia.” When asked about improving outdoor recreation facilities, 40% indicated they’d like to see improvements made in regards to personal safety at outdoor recreation facilities.

Respondents were also asked which “of the following safety issues is most important to you when you visit an outdoor recreation area.” They were limited to selecting only the single issue most important to them.

| <b>Which of the following safety issues is most important to you when you visit an outdoor recreation area?</b> | <b>Responses</b> |
|---|------------------|
| Ability to leave in case of an illness or injury  | <b>22%</b>       |
| Other people  | <b>22%</b>       |
| Lack of emergency cell phone service  | <b>19%</b>       |
| Weather   | <b>18%</b>       |
| Wildlife  | <b>14%</b>       |
| Other   | <b>3%</b>        |

## Areas in Need of Improvement

Those who took the survey saw significant need for improvement in the following areas:

| <b>Need “some” or “a lot of” improvement</b>               | <b>Responses</b> |
|--|------------------|
| Availability of restrooms                                  | <b>55%</b>       |
| Maintenance/cleanliness of restrooms                       | <b>54%</b>       |
| Maintenance/cleanliness of facilities other than restrooms | <b>47%</b>       |
| Parking  | <b>45%</b>       |
| Information at site  | <b>42%</b>       |
| Programs and classes                                       | <b>42%</b>       |
| Safety   | <b>40%</b>       |
| Accessibility for people with disabilities                 | <b>40%</b>       |
| Outdoor recreation activities offered                      | <b>39%</b>       |

## FOCUSED DEMAND SURVEYS

In addition to the statewide public opinion survey, separate surveys were conducted that focused on groups of Georgians who have particular experiences in outdoor recreation. These surveys provide a snapshot of how African Americans and rural Georgians view outdoor recreation opportunities, giving planners and practitioners another tool in order to better assess preferences, challenges, and priorities for these two groups.

*“As governor, I am focused on bringing projects of regional significance to every part of our state so all Georgians—no matter their ZIP Code—have the opportunity to prosper.”*  
*—Governor Brian Kemp*

### African Americans

A separate survey was conducted to explore the views and opinions of outdoor recreation among African Americans living in Georgia. The survey repeated some questions asked in the statewide survey but also included open-ended questions that would allow users to give more detailed responses relating to their experiences with outdoor recreation. Ensuring equal access for all communities is a pillar of recreation in this Plan, so it was important we understood the outdoor recreation opportunities and challenges African American Georgians experience.

When asked “which factors are important to you when participating in outdoor recreation,” respondents to this focused survey were allowed to select multiple options. The most frequently selected options, listed below, were chosen by more than half of respondents:

- » to have fun
- » to relax or reduce stress
- » health and exercise
- » to be with family or friends
- » to experience nature

This list of top responses is identical to the responses in the statewide survey.

Respondents most frequently used the words below when asked, “What feelings do you associate with outdoor recreation?”

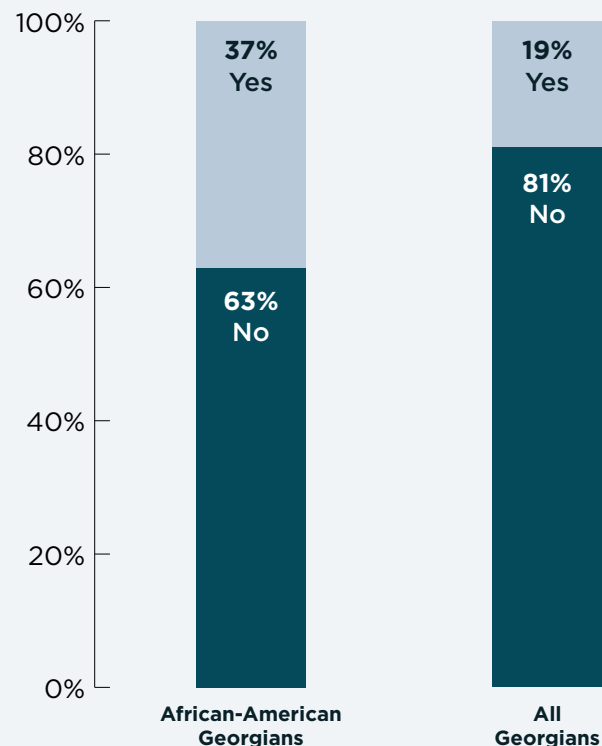
**HAPPY**      **RELAXED**      **CALM**  
**PLAYFUL**      **INSPIRED**  
**ENERGIZED**      **FULFILLED**



SOURCE: CITY OF ATLANTA

When asked about “issues that limit your participation in outdoor recreation,” with the option of marking all that apply, respondents were far more likely to list safety as a concern than people who responded to the statewide survey. Around 19% of respondents to the statewide survey marked safety as a concern, making it the fifth most common concern among this group. However, almost 37% of people included in the African American-focused survey selected safety as a concern, making it the most common choice.

### Safety Concerns Limit Participation in Outdoor Recreation



Additional responses to this question about barriers provided interesting information. Overcrowding at parks was more likely to be a concern for African Americans, with 35% of respondents listing it as an issue that limits their outdoor recreation participation, while 25% in the statewide survey indicated that overcrowding was a barrier. African Americans who were surveyed indicated similar challenges to their outdoor recreation related to health, costs of visiting, poor condition of facilities, and preferences for different types of outdoor recreation compared to the statewide responses. Around one in five respondents to both surveys said that there are no factors limiting their outdoor recreation. African American Georgians were less than half as likely to indicate that a lack of transportation was a barrier to their participation in outdoor recreation as were those in the statewide survey (6% vs 14%).

### Rural Georgians

In Georgia, rural communities often face a different set of opportunities and challenges than those in growing metropolitan areas. It's important that policymakers are aware of these differences when making decisions that affect all Georgians. Through his Rural Georgians Initiative, Governor Kemp has placed a high priority on ensuring equal opportunities are available for those residing in Georgia's rural communities. A focused survey was conducted that targeted Georgians living in rural counties, as defined by the Department of Community Affairs, to discern the differences in participation, opportunities and barriers concerning outdoor recreation.

Rural users are slightly less likely to access parks and outdoor recreation areas at similar frequencies to the full population of survey respondents. Rural users report having visited outdoor recreation areas at a rate of 84%, compared with 90% statewide average. This does not indicate less interest in the outdoors as slightly more rural respondents expressed that they enjoy spending time outdoors. Fishing, shooting sports, hunting, and off-roading were activities that rural respondents were more likely to indicate they participated in than the statewide average. According to the parks inventory, these are activities that are not available in many recreation areas.

At least half of respondents indicated that the important factors to them when participating in outdoor recreation are to relax, be with family or friends, have fun, experience nature, exercise, and/or explore new parts of the state.

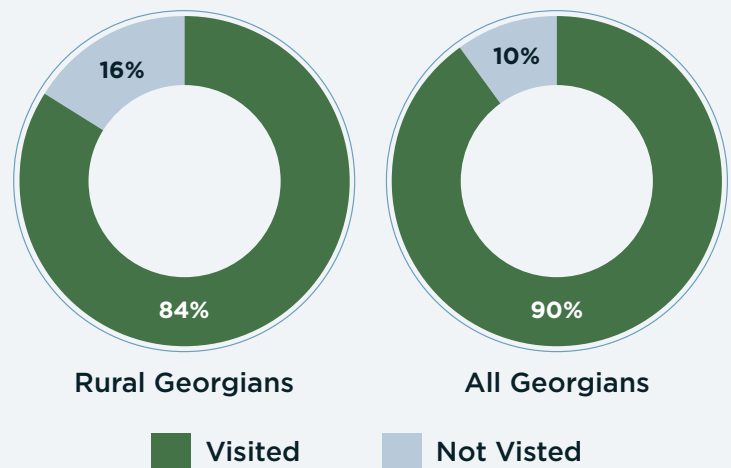
Twenty-seven percent of rural respondents indicated that their closest outdoor recreation area was more than an hour away. For rural respondents, "distance to outdoor recreation facilities" was the most common issue limiting their participation in



SOURCE: CRISP COUNTY

### Outdoor Recreation Area Popularity

*Rural Georgians vs. All Georgians*



outdoor recreation (38%) and "having access to closer outdoor recreation opportunities within my community" was the most popular response to increase their participation in outdoor recreation (45%). Proximity to parks is clearly the greatest barrier to outdoor recreation in the eyes of many rural Georgians.

## PUBLIC MEETINGS

Due to COVID-19, all public meetings were held virtually during July of 2020. These public meetings gave Georgians the opportunity to speak directly to state officials about the importance of outdoor recreation. Attendance was modest, with 17 attendees in total. Meetings started with a brief overview of what SCORP is and its importance to recreation and conservation in Georgia.

The second phase involved a brief survey of nine multiple choice questions focusing on attendees' preferences of outdoor recreation, limitations and challenges related to recreation and statewide goals moving forward. Participants indicated that they participate in a variety of outdoor recreation activities and do so more often than the average Georgian. The most common open comments expressed appreciation for outdoor recreation facilities that remained open during COVID-19.

During these meetings the goals from the 2017-2022 SCORP were presented to attendees and they were asked for their feedback. Participants described each of the 2017-2022 SCORP Goals as either a "priority" or a "high priority" demonstrating continued support for connecting outdoor recreation to conservation, economic vitality, and public health.



SOURCE: CITY OF PERRY

## WRITTEN COMMENTS

Written public comments were received from July 20th until August 31, 2020. More than 900 people from across the U.S. submitted written public comments. Disc golfers and rock climbers demonstrated their passion through the written public comment period. While these activities are popular with a small portion of Georgians, these communities have engaged members who actively seek recreational facilities to accommodate their sports. Another trend reflected in public comments is an increased interest in trails among those active in outdoor recreation.

One written public comment summed up the impact of COVID-19 on outdoor recreation by saying:





*"The challenges presented by our current situation under the COVID-19 pandemic have changed the public's reliance on parks and woodlands as safe places to enjoy. These spaces are critical to our sanity as a community of folks weathering this storm. I devoutly believe in the power of green space as a mental necessity for our communities. The more we can secure, the better."*



SOURCE: CITY OF ATLANTA

## PRACTITIONERS' AND PLANNERS' FEEDBACK

To gauge the opinions of outdoor recreation planners and practitioners, an open-ended questionnaire was created based on feedback through the public survey, written comment period, and public meetings in coordination with the Advisory Committee. While we would have preferred to meet with these stakeholders in person, due to COVID-19 restrictions, we moved to an entirely online survey. We received over 100 responses, gathering excellent insight into key issues facing recreation planners and practitioners. Organizations that participated in the survey included:

|  |  |
|--|--|
|   | <p><b>The Georgia Recreation and Parks Association</b> is a private, nonprofit institution that supports and promotes the recreation and park industries within the state while encouraging a healthy lifestyle of Georgia's citizens.</p> |
|   | <p><b>The Association of County Commissioners of Georgia</b> is a nonprofit instrumentality of Georgia's county governments whose mission is to enhance the role, stature and responsiveness of county governments in the state.</p>       |
|    | <p><b>The Georgia Municipal Association</b> is a voluntary, nonprofit organization who provides tools and services to assist municipal governments in becoming more innovative, effective and responsive.</p>                              |
| <br> | <p><b>State Agencies</b> including the Georgia Department of Transportation and Georgia Department of Natural Resources.</p>   |



SOURCE: COBB COUNTY

Survey questions were based on trends we found in the public surveys as well as feedback we received from the Advisory Committee, public meetings, and written comment period. The survey responses were collected during October and November of 2020. With more information and data available, respondents were directly asked to comment on the COVID-19 pandemic. Themes of the survey focused on the following key issues:

- 1. Access to recreation opportunities**
- 2. Focus on healthy lifestyles and well-being**
- 3. Effects of COVID-19 on recreation**
- 4. Increasing access for a diverse range of participants**

## **Access to Recreation**

When asked why Georgians felt they were far away from recreation opportunities, most respondents indicated that recreation providers can better market their facilities. Many expressed that a greater online presence of their departments was needed, specifically citing improvements to their social media pages and websites. Another common response focused on the need to create partnerships with those inside and outside their communities including schools, social organizations, nonprofit organizations, and other local governments to better promote facilities and recreation opportunities.

## **Focus on Healthy Lifestyles and Well-Being**

Respondents were asked how their agencies contribute to healthy lifestyles. Common responses included offering specific types of programming and recreation opportunities with low barriers to entry. Early engagement of kids through youth sports was also mentioned. Some communities also cited the importance of partnering with public health organizations to introduce programs that specifically contribute to improving quality of life.

## **Effects of COVID-19 on Recreation**

When asked if respondents noticed a change in recreation during the pandemic, almost all indicated they saw an increase in outdoor recreation, specifically noting an increase in walking, hiking, and biking. Many noted a decrease in demand for indoor recreation facility usage and organized youth sports due to local restrictions. Others noted an increase in “first time” recreation users, indicating a possible need for increased information, how-to brochures, and expert guides. Many believed there would be an increased need for maintenance and renovation of current facilities to meet the growing demand for safe outdoor recreation options.

COVID-19 seems to have accelerated changing trends in outdoor recreation. Several respondents stated that a number of trending new activities increased faster than in previous years. The specifically mentioned activities included disc golf, pickleball, and paddling. On the state’s Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) and Public Fishing Areas (PFA), practitioners noticed that nonconsumptive use increased faster than in previous years. Nonconsumptive use on these facilities is generally defined as any outdoor activities aside from hunting and/or fishing and may include hiking, biking, birdwatching, or rock climbing.

## **Increasing Access for a Diverse Range of Participants**

Lastly, respondents were asked to respond to specific challenges of certain user groups that were identified during the public opinion survey and focused surveys. These findings included:

- » African-Americans are less likely to participate in outdoor activities.
- » 40% of Georgians felt outdoor recreation facilities need improvements for those with disabilities.
- » Rural Georgians are less likely to visit park facilities.

A common response among almost all providers was the need to improve communication by increasing the education and outreach to these communities to ensure they are aware of the opportunities in their area. Another common theme included reaching out to established partner organizations that already have a focus on meeting the needs of those in these specific communities. Lastly, providers should offer programming and groups that target specific users. By working with partner organizations to gauge the specific needs and wants of these communities, providers would be able to provide more tailored opportunities.



## ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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The Advisory Committee is composed of members who are deeply committed to the future of recreation in Georgia. The Committee included representatives from local and state government, nonprofit organizations, and industry experts. The Advisory Committee met multiple times via webinar and received updates throughout the planning process. The Committee provided invaluable feedback on a wide range of topics including the current state of parks and recreation areas, challenges and opportunities, specific strategies and policies, while guiding the development of this Plan. Due to COVID-19, the Advisory Committee was only able to meet virtually, but were able to participate in webinars, mini-surveys, and small working groups throughout the planning process.

## DEMAND SUMMARY

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The surveys illuminated several interesting items about Georgians' demand for outdoor recreation. The vast majority of survey respondents visit outdoor recreation areas here in Georgia. While the individuals in the focused surveys have unique experiences, they generally enjoy being outdoors and indicate that they engage in outdoor recreation for similar reasons to those in the statewide survey. People participate in outdoor recreation for a variety of reasons, but more than half cite fun, relaxation, to be with family and friends, health, and experiencing nature as important to them. Demand for outdoor recreation has increased since 2016, and the types of activities that people are engaging with have changed. Hiking, camping, and biking have all become more popular.

There are challenges facing parks and outdoor recreation areas. These include challenges with crowding, safety, parking, accessibility, and restrooms, though this year's survey suggests significant progress made towards alleviating some of these challenges. There remains broad public support for increased public funding for outdoor recreation. Georgians love being engaged in the outdoors, and local, state, and federal facilities provide invaluable spaces for their outdoor recreation needs.



SOURCE: DNR PARKS & HISTORIC SITES DIVISION

Through the 2022–2026 SCORP, Georgia’s Foundational Goal for Outdoor Recreation is: to meet the diverse and growing recreation, economic and health needs of all current and future Georgians by increasing access and engagement of our state’s abundant natural resources through outdoor recreation opportunities in the state of Georgia.

This foundation was established through a comprehensive, years-long public engagement process with conservation and recreation leaders, local governments, and individual stakeholders representing the broad and diverse population of the state. Georgia’s SCORP Advisory Committee and project management team coordinated this effort and composed the received wishes, vision, and priorities into a core foundation and four pillars of outdoor recreation, which are equal in order and scope. It is this foundation and the subsequent pillars that will guide Georgia in determining the state’s priorities for LWCF funding.

## GEORGIA’S PILLARS OF OUTDOOR RECREATION

- » **Conserve natural resources:** Georgia’s recreation partners and practitioners will conserve and protect the state’s vital natural resources, pristine scenic beauty, and open spaces by capitalizing on the current bastion of strong support for conservation while also equally building up a new community committed to natural stewardship and outdoor recreation.
- » **Enhance economic vitality:** Stakeholders, from outdoor recreation to economic development to local government, will collaboratively support, invest in, and cultivate Georgia’s outdoor recreation resources so that our communities remain attractive to new and current residents and businesses seeking to utilize the public’s growing wish to be outdoors and willingness to travel to experience nature and participate in recreational events and programs.
- » **Promote health, fitness, and livability of communities:** Health officials, recreation providers, and community planners will promote physically active lifestyles and spending time outdoors as a means to combat health conditions challenging Georgians and to increase opportunities proven to enhance quality of life.
- » **Improve awareness, accessibility, and inclusion:** The outdoor recreation field will improve current efforts and develop new strategies to ensure that Georgians of all ages, backgrounds, means, and abilities have access to and an awareness of outdoor recreation areas and opportunities. Increased attention must be given to serving underserved populations and engaging these group with a wider range of high-quality recreation activities.

With a common commitment to outdoor stewardship, the following sections outline actionable, evidence-based methods that can be used by planners and practitioners from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Golden Isles when making decisions concerning the future of outdoor recreation. Each pillar or outdoor recreation is accompanied by related key strategies. Incorporating these outdoor recreation strategies into local, state, and federal planning will ensure that each pillar of SCORP will be successfully met. The outdoor recreation community is committed to working in partnership with local and regional recreation stakeholders to meet this foundational goal and pillars for outdoor recreation over the next five years.



SOURCE: DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION

## Conserve Natural Resources

By conserving Georgia's natural treasures and following best management practices, the state can retain and expand upon the greenspaces and waterbodies that allow for robust outdoor recreation, achieve desired health outcomes, and provide economic benefits. The state's conservation takes a vast effort that requires the work of multiple state agencies, nonprofit organizations, farmers and agricultural authorities, recreation departments, and others; all of which have different specialties and abilities that together create a comprehensive conservation strategy. Georgia's many conservation stakeholders have a legacy of unity and working well together. This could not be better observed than in the new Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program, which is a designated fund that awards approximately \$20 million annually to conservation and recreation projects. The program, a first-of-its-kind nationally, was created through state legislation and a successful constitutional amendment referendum. The hard work of a wide coalition of stakeholders working together over two decades to spearhead the creation of the program made it possible.

The natural world within the borders of Georgia is a precious and limited resource requiring active care by the individuals fortunate to call Georgia home. As the largest state by area east of the Mississippi River, Georgia holds a rich environmental legacy stretching from the mountains through the piedmont to the coast. Georgia's environment houses an expansive ecosystem rarely seen in this country with the 2nd highest number of amphibian species and 3rd most freshwater fishes. These natural resources still stand, in great part, due to the multiple generations of Georgians who have seen the value in living in such an environment. The good stewardship of Georgia's natural resources undeniably results in clean air, abundant water, sustainable energy sources, and forestry. Additionally, proper conservation provides ecosystems for hundreds of species of rare and endangered flora and fauna, resilience to natural disasters, scenic surroundings, and endless opportunities to pursue recreation outdoors.

With such pristine natural resources, it is no surprise DNR found in its Statewide Demand Survey that 8 out of 10 Georgians enjoy recreating outdoors. Georgians have made the care and conservation of the state's natural resources a universal tradition. In many ways, this is more important than ever as the Peach State continues to support an unprecedented era of population and economic growth with over 2.5 million people moving to the state in less than 20 years. Georgia was fortunate to be named the "Top State for Doing Business" for the 7th consecutive year in 2020.<sup>1</sup> Significant residential and commercial development often reduces irreplaceable green spaces, forestlands, tree canopies, and wetlands.

With this substantial recent growth, both individuals and companies are making it clear that they appreciate and want to be near and among the intense natural beauty of Georgia.

### Key Strategies to Address this Pillar

- » **Integrate opportunities for natural resource conservation on recreation lands by prioritizing conservation-based site selection, management, and priorities when developing a new park or improving an existing recreation area to allow for increased recreational and ecological connectivity.**
- » **Include outdoor recreation planning at the state and local level of land management planning to ensure outdoor recreation is identified as an important part of providing, maintaining, and protecting Georgia's natural resources.**
- » **Increase access for all user groups to public conservation lands to meet increasing demand for passive-use outdoor recreation opportunities.**
- » **Create interpretive, educational, and demonstration-based opportunities that directly connect outdoor recreation and Georgia's natural resources through increased education and programming that introduces the public to the importance of conserving Georgia's flora, fauna, geology, and hydrology in recreation areas.**
- » **Develop and support organizations that recruit members of local communities to help build and maintain public lands.**

## Economic Vitality

Outdoor recreation is an invaluable asset for residential and commercial growth. We have long known that outdoor recreation positively impacts our residents through better health, a clean environment, and the conservation of limited natural resources. However, outdoor recreation is perhaps first and foremost a significant contributor of economic growth and vitality to communities all across Georgia. Well-managed outdoor recreation areas such as parks and trails create vibrant communities that are stimulated by higher home values and tax revenues. Additionally, this attracts new residents, visitors, and tourists, spurring new recreation-related industry and new business moving into the area. Outdoor recreation is one of the strongest economic forces on Georgia's economy with 238,000 directly related jobs, \$27.3 billion in consumer spending<sup>12</sup>, and \$12.4 billion in value added greenspaces according to the 2019 reports of the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the Outdoor Industry Association<sup>13</sup>. With overwhelming data like this, it is not hard to see that Georgia's natural resources and outdoor recreation mean big business and jobs for Georgians, bringing great prosperity to our communities in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

The expansive world around outdoor recreation is not just impactful for jobs and business, it also influences where people want to live and residential valuations. According to a 2019 survey from the National Recreation and Park Association, 85% of respondents stated that they seek high-quality recreation areas and programs when choosing where to live.<sup>14</sup> An urge to be active and be out in nature and green spaces is a powerful driver for individuals. With a clear demand for outdoor recreation opportunities, communities report that homes and properties closer to parks, greenways, waterbodies, and other recreation areas regularly achieve a higher valuation than those further away. This is only becoming clearer as the emerging and expanding group of millennial and retiree homebuyers seek and prioritize a certain quality-of-life and amenities including parks and trails that ultimately contribute to where they decide to settle. Businesses are recognizing these trends as they explore ways to attract a sustainable talented workforce. In having to find nearby qualified employees, businesses are establishing operations in highly sought after locations that are closer to greenspaces and trails systems and are more pedestrian-accessible than ever before. Examples include the rapid expansion of businesses along the Atlanta Beltline, the Augusta Riverwalk, and the historic squares of Savannah. The residential and commercial growth and improved standing in areas in close proximity to recreation areas benefit local communities through increased home and rental values, growing populations, and burgeoning tax revenues.

Georgia is fortunate to have vast natural resources and infrastructure that provide countless world-class recreation opportunities ranging from coastal sport fishing to boating on Lake Lanier to camping in north Georgia. All of which has attracted millions of visitors who wish to experience them firsthand. This level of tourism in Georgia created 484,000 jobs and generated a total economic impact of \$68.96 billion.<sup>15</sup> Tourism, and recreational tourism especially, is critically important as it brings visitors who make investments, oftentimes in more rural parts of the state. Communities find the most success when they work with and support local partners who can provide access to unique experiences. As individuals place greater attention on healthier active lifestyles and new experiences, the great outdoors and recreation areas provide ever-important ways to serve and attract tourists.

The influx of outdoor enthusiasts coming to Georgia and homeowners who want quality recreational opportunities near their places of residences are creating a growing market for related services. Outdoor recreation is directly responsible for about 238,000 jobs in Georgia and growing.<sup>16</sup> Staff at state parks, personnel at boat marinas, or program instructors at local recreation facilities might be thought of first, but this is not the full extent of outdoor industry jobs. Never to be overlooked, Georgia's sportsmen and sportswomen produce an irreplaceable economic impact in Georgia:

- » Georgia's 1.5 million hunters and anglers account for \$2.3 billion in retail sales, support nearly 40,000 jobs, and generate \$215 million in state and local tax revenue.
- » 2.4 million Georgians and tourists participate in wildlife viewing activities and spend an estimated \$1.8 billion each year in Georgia.
- » 1.2 million people enjoy shooting sports, spending \$532 million in retail sales and producing \$41 million in state and local taxes.<sup>17</sup>

A burgeoning public recreation interest creates new businesses like bike shops, clothing and gear outfitters, more restaurants to serve visitors, and repair shops for boats and recreational vehicles. The outdoor industry equally has proven time after time to attract the spirit of entrepreneurship and advanced technology in the growing gig economy. The State of Georgia and its local communities can trust that an investment in outdoor recreation will bring economic vitality to our citizens and businesses.

### Key Strategies to Address this Pillar

- » **Quantify the economic benefits of outdoor recreation in Georgia through market research, including the tracking of demographic and usage trends, to produce reports which communicate the financial return on investment in outdoor recreation facilities.**
- » **Facilitate partnerships between local convention and visitor bureaus, recreation equipment vendors, guide services, nonprofit organizations, local governments, and state agencies to maximize the economic benefits of outdoor recreation.**
- » **Market our recreation resources to gain public participation and support, advance tourism and economic development opportunities, and encourage volunteerism. Collaborate with state agencies that specialize in market analysis and promotion to significantly strengthen any marketing efforts.**
- » **Expand partnerships with organizations promoting specific forms of tourism (i.e. sports tournaments/ tourism, heritage tourism, business conventions, religious conventions) to encourage visitors to utilize the area's outdoor recreation facilities.**
- » **Prioritize identification, planning, and funding to support the development of public outdoor recreation ventures to create economic opportunities in financially disadvantaged areas.**
- » **Foster the collaboration, partnership, and marketing efforts between the State, all levels of government, and civic and business stakeholders needed to catalyze further economic vitality.**



SOURCE: ATLANTA BELTLINE, INC.

## Health Through Fitness and Livability

Outdoor recreation provides many different and effective ways to pursue physical activity that will improve personal health. Countless research and studies confirm the prolific benefits of recreation on physical health, mental health, and overall well-being. Increased recreation is a great equalizer as it improves health concerns for people regardless of age, sex, size, or race. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists physical activity as one of the most effective strategies for overall health.<sup>18</sup> For these reasons, the NRPA has made recreation and its impact on health and wellness one of its three core pillars.

The opportunity that recreating outdoors provides, and its connection to overall health and wellness is particularly important in Georgia. In its most recent State Health Improvement Plan, the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) listed obesity, hypertension, and diabetes as health issues of great impact to Georgians and generated strategic objectives to address each point.<sup>19</sup> The CDC lists physical activity as one of the most effective strategies for preventing and combating all three of these issues.<sup>20</sup>

Obesity in both adults and children has risen to a crisis level over recent decades. The obesity rate in adult Georgians has quickly climbed from 10.1% in 1990 to 33.1% in the CDC's 2019 Adult Obesity Prevalence Maps from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.<sup>21</sup> The obesity crisis is even starker for children with 18.3% of high school students rating as obese, which is the 7th highest percentage among all U.S. states and the District of Columbia.<sup>22</sup> Corresponding to obesity in many cases, 34.8% of adult Georgians report having high blood pressure, placing Georgia in the top third of states with the highest levels of hypertension. DPH additionally targeted diabetes as a severe health burden for Georgians.<sup>23</sup> In just 25 years, the CDC has reported a 300% increase among Georgians of all ages who have diabetes, resulting in a 2019 rate of 12%. Even more concerning is that 16.2% of Georgians between the ages of 45–64 report having diabetes and 1 out of every 4 Georgians over 65 are diabetic.<sup>24</sup>

Many health experts recommend getting at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, in order to lower the risk of hypertension and diabetes and more easily manage their weight.<sup>25</sup> However, from not fully realizing this or prioritizing other activities in their already busy and complicated lives, 52% of Georgians are not meeting the weekly threshold of 150 minutes<sup>26</sup> and 28% of Georgians report no physical activity participation in the past month.<sup>27</sup> With this stark data in mind, outdoor recreation professionals must join with public health experts to establish new strategies to provide recreation opportunities and help Georgians increase their physical health.

Study after study shows that outdoor recreation, be it through programs or infrastructure such as trails, parks, or recreational facilities like ball fields or tennis courts, provides opportunities that are linked to improving the



SOURCE: FORSYTH COUNTY

health and well-being of surrounding communities. Our surveys confirm that safe, accessible, and maintained facilities and attractive programs made available in a public setting are regularly the first avenues that Georgians pursue when looking for recreation and exercise. For this reason, state and local governments must be deeply involved in encouraging their citizens and visitors to better follow physical activity guidelines through providing ample opportunities and growing their outdoor recreation offerings and infrastructure.

### Key Strategies to Address this Pillar

- » Acquire, development and improve safe and well-maintained parks near where people live and work and explore ways to connect existing facilities for pedestrians and non-motorized vehicles.
- » Encourage residential and business areas to maintain greenspaces, include outdoor recreation facilities, and provide safe pedestrian access to parks from schools, businesses, retail centers, etc.
- » Recognize how recreation preferences change with shifts in demographic composition to create cross-culture opportunities that increase participation in outdoor recreation activities.
- » Work with statewide organizations such as the DPH, GRPA, and others to advance the “Healthy Communities Initiative” and incorporate health and livability programs at the state and local outdoor recreation sites. Continue to promote the positive mental and physical health benefits of outdoor recreation.
- » Leverage initiatives, programs, funds, partnerships, and LWCF support to advance outdoor recreation projects that directly support active, healthy lifestyles.
- » Encourage the outdoor community to explore creating a statewide outdoor recreation asset map to educate the public on where to find nearby recreation opportunities, while developing an aspirational vision for a growing Georgia trail network.



SOURCE: CITY OF ATLANTA



“Participating in a walk/hike and other enjoyable activities in the great Georgia outdoors is quite therapeutic. The varied experiences offer connecting with nature, clarity of mind, calming of spirit, greater confidence, and healthy physical benefits ... all of which result in improvement through recreational movement!”

—Carolyn Hartfield, Outdoor Lifestyle Advocate



## Accessibility and Inclusion

Outdoor recreation brings clear benefits of physical fitness and economic growth that are foundations on which to build healthy and effective communities for Georgians of all ages, backgrounds, races, and income. Because of this, equitable access to well-managed and safe facilities and recreation areas is critically important for all health, business, recreation, and government stakeholders. Georgia is fortunate to already have one of the most diverse populations in the country, and it is becoming even more so with each year. This diversity is an invaluable strength to current and future generations of Georgians. However, stakeholders must also recognize that this comes with a great responsibility to find creative solutions to guarantee that all communities have the proper support to meet each unique geographic, demographic, cultural, and socio-economic challenge, and not just generalized one-size-fits-all strategies.

It is prudent for stakeholders to listen to their customers and constituents and learn what specific opportunities their recreational users want. In an urban area where greenspaces and waterbodies are more difficult to access, it may be important to protect remaining undeveloped properties. While in a more rural area that has publicly-accessible forestland allowing for access to hiking and biking opportunities, the development of an outdoor public fitness facility would create new opportunities for people in the area. Whatever the case, stakeholders need to acknowledge Georgia is becoming more diverse and that different individuals have different outdoor recreation interests. Providing recreation opportunities to everyone, regardless of income, age, skill, and background, and addressing disparities in outdoor access is a top priority throughout the state.

When asked about why access and inclusion in outdoor recreation matter, O'Ree Crittenden, member of the Georgia Recreational Trails Advisory Board and an advocate for outdoor inclusion for all, shared his thoughts. "As an individual who uses a wheelchair, I find that access to outdoor recreation is vital to my general well-being. There is nothing the equivalent of being out in nature for recharging yourself, the fresh air from all the plants, and just the general beautiful scenery. That for me really brightens my soul. I feel that access to outdoor recreation can really help people reconnect with nature and bring awareness to the need to preserve our natural resources for all abilities to enjoy."

In the Statewide Demand Survey, a number of issues were identified as impediments for Georgians to enjoy the outdoors and participate in recreational activities. Respondents listed time constraints, distance, and overcrowding as barriers to outdoor recreation. These difficulties facing the state and local communities show that additional available resources need to be utilized to bridge the gaps preventing underserved populations with the greatest needs from being shutout and excluded from valuable recreational opportunities and their associated benefits. This can be through investing in new infrastructure, recreational areas, and programming. However, in some cases the issue of accessibility rests primarily on information and education. For example, a community might have a stocked lake and an ADA pier or fishing platform, but it is under-utilized due to a lack of users who know how to fish despite being interested in the activity. In a situation like this, stakeholders would best serve users by investing resources in educational opportunities and providing materials and equipment to help overcome this barrier. Oftentimes, where recreation areas are already available, it is a lack of awareness of these options that prevent potential users from accessing and increasing their usage. This is supported by the recent Statewide Demand Survey where 10% of recreators say that they live more than an hour away from their nearest recreation area, which probably indicates that these recreators are not aware of nearby recreation areas. Regardless of the circumstance, outdoor recreation and



SOURCE: DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION



health stakeholders must remain vigilant in discovering and acknowledging barriers and gaps that already exist or could develop and then take an active role in remedying the deficiencies.

### Key Strategies to Address this Pillar

- » Encourage state and local governments to include underrepresented communities in outdoor recreation planning to promote a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion that includes multilingual resources, training, and awareness at all levels.
- » Maximize access for all users by not just meeting ADA requirements but utilizing universal design principles and promoting a model for accessible outdoor recreation friendly communities.
- » Identify and reduce barriers that prevent the use of outdoor recreation facilities (e.g. safety concerns, cost participation, incorporation of public transportation networks and accessibility by those with physical limitations) to give greater attention to universal accessibility.
- » Encourage opportunities for state agencies, local governments, businesses, civic organizations, and faith communities to collaborate to increase access to outdoor recreation facilities.
- » Identify existing public land and facilities such as schools, utility corridors, and libraries that could be reimagined to provide opportunities for public recreation in addition to their primary use.
- » Engage with existing technology companies to ensure online mapping tools include accessibility information.
- » Explore creating a statewide outdoor recreation assets map that would allow planners, advocates, and civic leaders to identify the areas most in need of new recreational amenities.



SOURCE: DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION

The Foundation and Pillars of the SCORP document provide a framework and vision for our state by offering recommendations, in the form of key strategies, for making this vision a reality. In the previous section, the pillars of outdoor recreation were presented along with a “to do” list of recommendations to help planners and practitioners achieve these priorities. While developing these recommendations through the guidance of the Advisory Committee, a common theme was identified as an essential component for achieving success under each pillar—**connections**. This idea of creating connections appeared critical, whether that be connecting organizations and stakeholders through partnerships, building connections to the community through outreach and education or physically connecting Georgia’s outdoor resources. Throughout the planning process it seemed clear that these connections would be vital in conserving our natural resources, enhancing our economic vitality, promoting healthy communities, and ensuring access to recreation opportunities for all Georgians.

Government agencies and their partners can be much more efficient and responsive to the overall needs of their citizens when there is effective collaboration with all stakeholders. Forming partnerships with other government organizations, nonprofit organizations, businesses, community groups, and faith-based organizations when planning, designing, and developing community assets like parks, trails, and outdoor recreation spaces will enhance recreation experiences. Benefits of creating partnerships include providing a wider array of programs and facilities, increasing the user base, strengthening applications for grant funding, and providing cost savings through shared resources. According to a survey published by NRPA in October 2020, about 40% of agency leaders reported that their agency benefits from partnerships of a park-specific foundation or “friends group.” Roles in which these recreation leaders see the foundation as a “very” or “extremely” important partner include: fundraising (73%), special events (35%), capital construction projects (28%), acquisition (27%), marketing (24%) and lobbying, advocacy and political activity (24%)<sup>28</sup>.

When asked about the importance of partnerships for local parks, Michael Halicki, Executive Director of Park Pride, shared that Park Pride has been part of local government efforts to leverage local funding to obtain state dollars to support new park acquisition and development. These partnerships provided the opportunities to turn these places into high value parks that meet the communities’ needs and provide access to nature. Halicki noted “Kirkwood Urban Forest and Vine City Park are two that come to mind that were acquired with state funding. Both are treasures for the local communities and for residents throughout the city and region. Partnerships like these are able to fuel these projects, something Park Pride and our local government partners would not be able to do in isolation.”



SOURCE: MICHAEL HALICKI, PARK PRIDE

*“Local communities play an integral role in the operations and protection of natural resources at Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites. It takes a village to run these places. Without the volunteers, staff, and local organizations that work with our Parks, we could not provide the quality experience people have come to expect of Georgia’s State Parks and Historic Sites.”*  
*Jeff Cown, State Parks and Historic Sites Division Director*

Increasing outreach and education is a key element in connecting communities with outdoor recreation opportunities. Based on the supply of outdoor facilities and our demand research, we know a gap exists between recreation opportunities provided and the public's awareness of these opportunities. Recreation providers must prioritize and take an active role in marketing their facilities, programs, and activities. Based on previous surveys, recent trends indicate that most Georgians are looking to internet searches and social media posts to find information about recreation opportunities both close to home and when planning to travel. Providers should use relevant technology, such as their agency's website, social media sites, and online mapping tools to promote their facilities and continuously monitor that information to ensure the public is receiving the most up-to-date information. Marketing recreation opportunities to the public is an important tool for increasing access, but it also serves as a means of educating the public on how important recreation is for our health, economy, and natural resources. By educating the public and fostering a love of the outdoors, we are able to heighten the level of awareness among policy makers and practitioners.

The last essential connection is the idea of physically connecting Georgia's outdoor recreation resources. For some, this looks like trails for hiking between different parks, long-distance corridors for cycling from one town to another, or enough publicly owned and maintained canoe/kayak launch sites to make the next paddling excursion the most exciting one yet. For others, the need for more physical connections may seem much more local. While most Georgians are generally supportive of creating more greenspaces across the state, in specific areas there are residents who see a real shortage of publicly available outdoor opportunities or that their local parks lack the activities they most enjoy. In these communities, conversations and partnerships may go a long way toward building the places people seek for outdoor recreation. What may not be as obvious, but can be seen in careful viewing of the maps of protected spaces across Georgia, are the wildlife corridors we have built and can continue to build. As Georgia continues to grow into the future, wild places for wildlife to thrive remain important, but we must also keep an eye on the connections wildlife can use to prevent populations from becoming isolated.



SOURCE: FORSYTH COUNTY

## 08 CONCLUSION

Georgia is a land of great opportunity for everyone, and outdoor recreation is a key component of that opportunity. Opportunities for casual recreation, committed outdoor engagement, and healthy lifestyles abound in Georgia's outdoor spaces. The vast natural beauty of Georgia has warmly welcomed and attracted generations who call the state their home as well as millions of visitors each year. And while Georgia continues to grow and change, the chance to get outdoors is still available in each city, suburb, and rural place across the state. This SCORP is a roadmap crafted by experts from across the state who invite policymakers and professionals to seek ways to make outdoor recreation a foundation on which a healthy Georgia can grow.

It is evident from the statewide survey used to compile this Plan that Georgians view getting outdoors as crucial for a better life filled with relaxation, good health, and engagement with nature. However, there is still work to be done to break down barriers to make sure that all Georgians, regardless of ZIP Code, can have convenient access to high-quality recreation opportunities. With such important outcomes as reduced risks of heart disease and diabetes linked to increased physical recreation and additional benefits like higher home values in areas near parks, it is imperative that Georgia's public-sector and private-industry leaders realize how outdoor recreation is an essential tool in making Georgia the best place to live, work, and raise a family. With this comprehensive plan in hand, Georgians have a new tool to support the common pursuit of a better Georgia.

## RESOLUTION FROM THE BOARD OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Note: Following approval from the DNR Board of Natural Resources, a signed copy of the Resolution approving this document will be placed on this page.

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