

Bear Lake State Park

Introduction: Bear Lake is frequently referred to as the “Caribbean of the Rockies.” The lake has a unique turquoise color that enhances its scenic beauty and reminds some of the waters surrounding the islands in the Caribbean Sea. But even more than that, a visitor can walk on the beach and listen to the small waves lapping at the shore, hear the sounds of sea gulls, and feel the cool breeze blowing in off the lake surface and this environment is the closest one can come to an “ocean shore” in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. Bear Lake may not be the most scenic and natural state park in Idaho but it is clearly the most popular. Close to 550,000 visitors are attracted to the park each year and many of these visitors are Utah residents. Bear Lake State Park’s unique combination of turquoise clear water, shallow and slow sloping shoreline, white sandy beaches, large lake surface, easy access, and convenient facilities all combine to make this park an attractive destination.

Getting There: The classic approach to Bear Lake from Utah is via U.S. highway 89 from Logan, Utah. This is a dramatic approach. Right where the highway crosses the last ridge over the mountains, the Utah state highway department has provided a scenic overlook with a visitor center. From here, a view of the entire Bear Lake from north to south can be had. The approach from Idaho is on southbound U.S. Highway 89 from Montpelier, Idaho. This approach will bring you to St. Charles, Idaho where the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation has an office/visitor center for Bear Lake State Park. There are no views of the lake from here as you must proceed east on North Beach Road to get to the park.

Major Features:

The Lake: Bear Lake sits in a long valley at an elevation of 5,900 feet. It is 18 miles long, 7 miles wide and about 210 feet at its deepest point. By surface area, Bear Lake ranks 47th among the largest lakes in the U.S. It has a surface area of 109 square miles and a shore line of 48 miles. There are paved roads and highways that wrap all the way around it and driving its circumference makes for an interesting day. The State of Utah provides several state park units on the south end of Bear Lake.

The Park: Bear Lake State Park is classified by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation as a recreation park. The park consists of 933 acres. There are three properties that make up the park: (1) the North Beach, (2) the East Beach, and (3) the St. Charles Administrative site. The elevation of the park starts at the average lake level of 5,900 feet and rises to a little above 6,800 feet in the mountains in the east beach property.

The north beach property is about 15 acres in size. It includes about 2 miles of beach frontage. The north beach property is the most popular and is for day use only. It has an entrance station, several parking lots, two boat ramps, a jetty that extends into the lake, five vault toilets, 3 picnic shelters, and 78 picnic tables scattered along the beach.

The east beach property is about 914 acres. It includes about 1.8 miles of beach frontage. It also includes a significant piece of upland property that extends to the east of Bear Lake. The facilities located on this property include: a family campground with 20 hook-up campsites and 27 standard campsites; 2 group campsites with shelters; 1 primitive group campsite; 5 parking

lots; 8 vault toilets; 3 group picnic shelters; 4 family picnic shelters; a boat ramp; an entrance station, and a dump station,

The St. Charles property is almost 4 acres and has the park office, visitor center, and maintenance shops. It is located on U.S. highway 89 in St. Charles, Idaho.

Geology: The valley in which Bear Lake is located is a fault-bounded basin, or graben. The largest of the faults runs along the east side where the east beach property of the state park is located. This fault has been dropping the valley downward and tilting it eastward for about 10 million years. The Bear Lake Basin was once filled by a shallow sea. There was an abrupt uplift of the surrounding area about 70 million years ago and this changed the climate and eliminated the saline waters. Bear Lake was formed about 150,000 years ago. Bear Lake had its peak of formation during the Pleistocene Epoch when the Bear River flowed into it along with melt water from glaciers in the surrounding mountains. Shifts in the faults along the eastern and western shores about 8,000 years ago provided the shape of the lake as we know it today. The geology of the region is dominated by limestone deposits. Run off from these deposits provide the high concentration of calcium carbonate that give the lake its bright blue color. Bear Lake has been intermittently connected to the Bear River during the past 30,000 years. However, Bear Lake has been naturally isolated from the Bear River for the past 8,000 years.

Today, the lake level is artificially maintained and manipulated. The Utah Power and Light Company secured water rights to Bear Lake in 1912 and began constructing canals to connect Bear Lake to the Bear River. The Bear River Outlet Canal was completed in 1915. The Lifton pumping station allows Bear Lake waters to be pumped into the Bear River Outlet Canal for irrigation use downstream on the Bear River. This operation can often cause the lake levels to vary by about 20 feet from high water to low water.

The north beach property consists of Quaternary alluvial deposits of mostly sand. The lowland areas of the east beach property consists of Triassic sedimentary rocks such as shale and siltstone. The upland areas of the east beach property consist of Jurassic sedimentary rocks such as limestone and sandstone.

Ecosystems and Plant Communities:

The Lake: Despite its clear waters, the lake ecosystem is supported by substantial populations of plankton. However, Bear Lake is classified as an oligotrophic lake where there are very few or scanty nutrients. Hence its clear waters. But, the lake is also home to such plant species as chara, myriophyllum and potamogeten. Chara is a genus of green algae that resemble land plants because of stem-like and leaf-like structures and is also known as stonewort. It grows in shallow water that is 15 to 30 feet deep. Myriophyllum is a fresh water plant that is also known as watermilfoil and grows in areas of less than 3 feet of depth. Potamogeten is an aquatic plant also known as pondweed which is found throughout the lake. The lake is also home to a unique crustacean called the Ostracode (genus *candona*). Although these minute creatures are rare, they constitute a large part of the littoral zone biomass.

The edges of the lake were once covered with lush growth of cattails and bullrushes. But these only exist near streams and springs now. The huge fluctuation in water level of the lake has now left the areas between the low water level and the high water level pretty much devoid of aquatic vegetation. It has been said that in historic times there were willows, bullrushes, and

even cottonwood trees growing along the edges of the lake. Today, the only areas in the state park where this habitat exists is on the northern boundary of the north beach property that is adjacent to the Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

The Land: Other than a few cottonwood trees and the boundary adjacent to the Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge, there are few natural plant communities in the north beach property. The east beach property is mostly within the montane sagebrush steppe ecosystem. It is dominated by sagebrush, rabbitbrush, bitterbrush, arrowleaf balsam root, and associated grasses and forbs. Mountain mahogany and Utah junipers occur in scattered clumps. Other important plant species include mules ear, snowberry, prickly pear, and serviceberry. Grasses present include bluebunch wheat grass, Sandberg bluegrass, Indian ricegrass and lesser amounts of bottlebrush squirrel tail. The most numerous forbs are Utah milkvetch, thistle, wayside gromwell, and yellow salsify. There are also willows and chokecherry that grow along the riparian areas of the park, especially in Chokecherry Canyon. The montane sagebrush steppe ecosystem at Bear Lake State Park is quite similar to that which covers most of southern Wyoming to the east of the park. The upland areas of the east beach property is recognized as Sage-grouse habitat.

The keynote plant species is the Utah juniper. It is fairly rare on the property but does exist in the part of the park near the Utah border and in copses located on the sheltered upland mountain sides. So it is a plant species that stands out in the park. The Utah Juniper is a bushy tree with a rounded crown and a many forked trunk. It has an extensive root system to compete for precious moisture. Some trees can reach as high as 30 feet. They often live to be 650 years old. They grow at elevations of 4,000 to 7,500 feet. They commonly grow on dry rocky hillsides. The Juniper berries or cones are eaten by jackrabbits, foxes, and coyotes. The foliage is grazed by mule deer when other foliage is scarce. The tree occurs only occasionally in Southern Idaho. Several of these trees can be found near the group tent campground at the south end of the east beach property. Three large copses of these trees can be found on the north facing slopes in the three southern most canyons of the east beach property as well.

Wildlife:

Mammals: The mammals known to be present in the park include: mule deer, moose, cougar, skunk, jack rabbit, cottontail rabbit, pygmy rabbit, fox, and coyote.

Birds: The birds known to be present in the park include: Sandhill crane, white pelican, great blue heron, snowy egret, trumpeter swan, sea gull, duck, sand piper, rail, coot, grebe, osprey, Canada goose, burrowing owl, gray flycatcher, long-billed curlew, peregrine falcon, merganser, bald eagle, Swainson's hawk, magpie, raven, and downy woodpecker. The upland area is also known sage grouse habitat.

Fish: There are 5 species of endemic (found no where else) fish in Bear Lake: the Bear Lake cutthroat trout; the Bonneville cisco; the Bonneville whitefish; the Bear Lake whitefish; and the Bear Lake Sculpin. The other native fish found in the lake are: the Rocky Mountain whitefish; the Utah sucker; the smallfin redbside shiner; the Utah chub; and the speckled dace. The fish that have been introduced into the lake are: kokanee; Yellowstone cutthroat; rainbow trout; lake trout;

eastern brook trout; Michigan whitefish; carp; yellow perch; green sunfish; chum salmon; silver salmon, landlocked salmon; and largemouth bass.

The keynote wildlife species is the Bonneville cisco. The Bonneville cisco is one of three species of whitefish that are endemic to Bear Lake. Attempts to transplant them to other waters have not been successful. They are distinguished from the other whitefish by their pointed mouth and small size. They seldom grow any larger than 9 inches. They are pale moss green on top with silver sides. The cisco eat small aquatic invertebrates or zooplankton. Cutthroat, lake trout, and other whitefish prey upon them. Cisco mature at 3 years and go to spawn on the rocky beaches in the south-east corner of Bear Lake at Cisco Beach. Estimates of the number of Bonneville cisco in Bear Lake have been as high as 9 million. So they are very abundant and prolific.

Cultural History: The Bear Lake region was used and occupied by the Shoshone, Bannock, Ute, Sioux, and Blackfoot tribes, primarily during the spring and summer periods. They favored the prime hunting and fishing opportunities in the area. The tribes would spend many weeks on the shores of Bear Lake trading furs, ponies, and fish with other tribes and eventually the earlier explorers.

However, the Northwestern Shoshone were the primary tribe in the area. There were three major bands of Northwestern Shoshone by the time the first Mormon pioneers began settling in the area. The band that occasionally occupied the Bear Lake region were under Chief Bear Hunter. By the 1840s, the Northwestern Shoshone had obtained horses for mobility and the hunting of game. They fished Bear Lake and the Bear River, using spears, gill nets, and basket traps. They snared or shot waterfowl, grouse, coots, and owls, and they snared small animals like wood rats, muskrats, and squirrels. They also hunted mountain sheep, pronghorn antelope, beaver, elk, porcupines, mountain lions, bobcats, hares and rabbits, otters, badgers, marmots, and bears. The Shoshone ate such diverse plants as thistle stems, sagebrush seeds, the leaves and roots of arrowleaf balsamroot, buffalo berries, limber pine seeds, pinyon nuts, sego lilies, wild rye seeds, Indian ricegrass, and cattails. Much of these plant foods grew in abundance in the valleys and along the hillsides around Bear Lake before the cattle and sheep of the white man

Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1968 to protect and manage habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds. The refuge is located adjacent to the north beach property of Bear Lake State Park. The 19,000 acre refuge is comprised mainly of a bulrush marsh, open water, and flooded meadows of sedges, rushes, and grasses. Portions of the refuge include scattered grasslands and brush-covered slopes. Bear Lake Refuge encompasses what is locally referred to as Dingle Swamp or Dingle Marsh. Along with Bear Lake proper, the marsh was once part of a larger prehistoric lake that filled the valley. As it drained and receded, Dingle Marsh was reduced from 25,000 acres to less than 17,000 before it became part of the refuge. Because the refuge and surrounding area had always provided excellent goose nesting habitat, management originally emphasized Canada geese. Today, priorities have shifted to four other species whose populations have declined from historic levels: redhead and canvasback ducks, trumpeter swans, and white-faced ibis. Moose can sometimes be found on the refuge, along with wintering mule deer. Smaller mammals often seen are muskrats, skunks, and cottontail rabbits.

denuded these rich areas. This put the Shoshone in direct competition with the white settlers. The white settlers slowly moved northward along the eastern shores of Great Salt Lake until by 1863 they had taken up lands in the Bear Lake Valley. In that year, soldiers from Camp Douglas in Salt Lake City assaulted the winter camp of Bear Hunter's Northwestern group of 450 men, women, and children on Beaver Creek at its confluence with the Bear River. At least 250 Shoshone were slaughtered in what is now called the Bear River Massacre.

History: L.W. Miller discovered the Bear River in 1811-12 while pioneering a route leading across South Pass. In 1817, Donald MacKenzie named the lake Black Bear Lake. It later became Bear Lake. Explorers John C. Fremont and Captain Benjamin Bonneville wrote about their journeys through the area. As the Native American tribes had already begun using the Bear Lake area for trading with others, it eventually became the site of a rendezvous by mountain men in 1827 and 1828. The likes of Jedediah Smith, Jim Bridger, William Ashley, and Tom Fitzgerald gathered here, along with trade goods suppliers, and Native Americans from different tribes. The Oregon and California trails skirted the east side of the valley in the early 1830's. In 1863, Mormon pioneers led by Charles C. Rich settled in the Bear Lake Valley through an agreement they made with the Native Americans. Rich established the community of Paris, Idaho. The arrival of the railroad and phosphate mining brought about the establishment of Montpelier, Idaho. The Mormons gradually moved south and established villages near the shores of Bear Lake. St. Charles, Idaho was settled in May 1864 and for eight years it was thought to be located within the Utah Territory. However, the official survey of the boundary in 1872 determined that it was located in Idaho Territory.

The first proposal to divert the Bear River into Bear Lake so it could be used as a reservoir was made in 1898 by the Utah Sugar Company and the Telluride Power Company. In 1912, the project was taken over by the Utah Power and Light Company who constructed the diversion dam on the Bear River, the Rainbow canal and the Lifton pumping station. The projects were completed in 1918. The project resulted in Bear River waters draining through Mud Lake into Bear Lake and then the Lifton pumping station pumps water from Bear Lake into the outlet so that the water can drain down the Bear River for irrigation purposes. This project essentially turned Bear Lake into a reservoir. So like any reservoir, the lake level fluctuates greatly resulting in large expanses of beach when the lake level is low.

Park History: In 1961, the local community began supporting the development of swimming facilities at the north beach property. Since Utah had already established a state park at the south end of the lake, an Idaho state park at the north end was desired. But at that time Idaho had only a few state parks. Local legislators pushed the idea and the north beach property became a state park in 1963 through a long term agreement with the Utah Power and Light Company. Since the IDPR was yet to be created, some funding was made available through the Idaho State Lands Board to pay for maintenance and wages for a single employee. Development of improvements began between 1962 and 1965. The shallow slope of the beach was not favorable for boat launching. The 1,200 foot jetty at north beach was constructed by Bear Lake County in 1963. Rock was hauled from a quarry five miles away at Indian Creek. Funding for this project was provided by the Waterways Improvement Fund. Boat docks, buoys, trees, and picnic tables were added in subsequent years. At first, the north beach property was open to camping. But parking space was extremely limited due to the terrain. In 1971, camping at the north beach property was

eliminated, but access, parking, and traffic were still significant issues. In 2004, the county access road was reconstructed and traffic was routed around the primary parking area.

The 914 acre east beach property was acquired from the BLM in 1969 through the Recreation and Public Purposes Act for \$2.50 an acre. The Idaho National Guard 116th Engineer Battalion and the 126th Dump Truck Engineer Battalion performed the construction work necessary to develop the east beach property. The facilities at east beach were opened and dedicated by Governor John Evans on June 26, 1986.

Recreation Activities:

Camping: Camping is not permitted outside the developed campground. A family campground with 20 hook-up (water and electricity) campsites and 27 standard campsites is provided at the east beach property. There is also 2 group campsites with shelters there. These groups camps have RV hook-ups available. There is a separate primitive group campsite located on the East Shore Road near the Utah border. This campsite has a parking lot for vehicles, picnic tables, a vault toilet and several areas suitable for tents. About 15,000 people camp at Bear Lake State Park annually and the campgrounds are full to capacity during many of the summer weekends. Reservations are recommended.

Picnicking: Bear Lake State Park has 7 family picnic shelters available for what could be called traditional picnicking. Further, there are 3 group picnic shelters available at the east beach property. But the primary use at the north beach property isn't as much "traditional picnicking" as it is "day camping." This is where family and friends groups set up their own day camp of shade awnings, umbrellas, grills, etc. on their "own" piece of beach to support their recreation for the day. One could call it Bear Lake "tailgating." The IDPR has provided 78 picnic tables to enhance this use. However, many bring their own tables and chairs.

Please Remember

- The north beach property is extremely popular on the weekends of the hot summer months. During heavy use periods, expect delays in accessing the park. To avoid the crowds, consider visiting this property on the week days.
- The portion of the North Beach Road from Camp Lifton to the park entrance has been designated by Bear Lake County as a "no passing zone."
- The north beach property is only opened from dawn to dusk. No overnight camping is allowed.
- There is a \$5.00 per vehicle per day fee required for access to the beach and park areas.
- Open fires are not allowed on the beach, but you can bring your own grills and cook on the beach.
- Pets are not allowed on the north beach property.
- Please take your trash up to the entrance to dispose of in the provided dumpsters.
- Motor vehicles can drive and park on the beach. All Idaho motor vehicle laws are enforced on the beach. Only vehicles that are licensed for the road can be operated on the north beach property. The posted speed limit is 15 MPH.

Fishing: Bear Lake is well known for its diverse fishery. However, a boat of some kind may be required to access deeper water. You can fish for Bear Lake cutthroat trout, Bonneville cisco, Bonneville whitefish, Bear Lake whitefish, Rocky Mountain whitefish, kokanee, Yellowstone cutthroat, rainbow trout; lake trout, eastern brook trout, Michigan whitefish, yellow perch, largemouth bass and some salmon. The limit of Bear Lake Cisco is 30 per day. Cisco may be taken by using dip-nets from January 1 through February 15. Idaho Department of Fish and Game fishing regulations should be consulted for all other limits, seasons, and methods of take.

Boating: Boating of all kinds is permitted on Bear Lake. Three boat ramps are provided for this purpose. However, during periods of low water, sometimes the ramp near the north beach property entrance is the only one with deep enough water for launching. As always, personal flotation device (PFDs) are required for all occupants. A boat trailer parking lot is provided across North Beach Road from the entrance station. After launching, most boaters like to park or moor their boat on the beach near their “day camps.” In this manner, members of their party can readily access the boat so they can move farther off-shore for fishing, water skiing, and other aquatic sports. There are no state park marina facilities or services available.

Swimming: The shallow slope of the beaches at the park make it ideal deal for swimming activity. Although, a person must get significantly off-shore in order to take a few strokes. But much like an ocean beach a great deal of fun water play can be had close to shore. This is a favorite for families with small children. But all should be aware that the IDPR does not provide any lifeguard services.

Trails: Bear Lake State Park does not really have any designated hiking trails. However, walks along the beach frontage is an available activity. Bicycles can also be ridden on the beaches as well. The east beach property also has significant upland areas were a person can explore the numerous canyons and ridges, although no developed trails are provided.

Motor vehicles: Bear Lake State Park is one of only two state parks in Idaho that allows for use of motor vehicles off of established access roads. The area of land that occurs between the high water level and the low water level is technically public land administered by the Department of Lands. However, because these lands are immediately adjacent to the state park lands, they are for all intents and purposes under the custody and control of the IDPR. During periods of low water level, motor vehicles are allowed to drive on the beach. (See the “please remember” text box for the rules for this use.) Access to the beach areas is done through use of the boat ramp at the end of the jetty at the north beach property and at the boat ramp at the east beach property.

Visitor Center: There is a visitor center located at the St. Charles located on U.S. Highway 89. Here one can get park information, purchase souvenirs, gifts, drinks, or snacks at the Visitors Center Nature Store.

Resource Management Issues: Despite improvements made in 2004, ever increasing visitation to the north beach property is once again creating major traffic, parking, and crowding problems. There are times in the summer months when park personnel have reported that on some days there are clearly more than 800 people using the 15 acre north beach property. That is the size of

a small city. Sometimes it is so busy that between 10 AM and 2 PM that the wait to get into the park can be as long as 30 minutes. Further, the east beach campground is often full to capacity on summer weekends.

There appears to be livestock grazing occurring in the East Beach part of the park. The livestock trails and impacts are clearly visible using Google Earth. Yet, the policy of the IDPR says that: "Grazing is not encouraged in state park areas." The policy makes an exception that it can occur if "It is determined that grazing would be advantageous, with no expected detriment to the park environment or enjoyment of the people, and in conformance with the master plan." This grazing use could be a spill over trespass from neighboring properties under "open range" law if there are no fences in place to prevent it.

Suggestions for the Future: The recreation demand for Bear Lake State Park is clearly exceeding its capacities. A few suggestions for future improvements are:

- Resurface all existing paved surfaces. The paved surfaces at the park are in poor condition and are in need of resurfacing.
- Enlarge and improve the parking area at north beach. This would require some serious diking work. It is suggested that diking be used to expand the existing improved parking lot out to the high water line and then back filling and bringing to grade the land behind the dike. The wider area could then be used for a larger paved parking lot where the spaces are designated by lines enabling a greater number of vehicles to park there. The wider and improved area could also be used to develop a better entrance station operation. It is also suggested that the existing jetty be widening to twice its current width and extending it into deeper water so that the boat launch ramp will be available even in low water conditions.
- Upgrade and add campsites at east beach. Adding a shower facility and flush toilets to the east beach property would bring the facilities up to normal state park standards. Consideration should also be given to putting in another 50 campsite loop somewhere south of the existing group picnic shelter. This would double the park's camping capacity.
- Consider acquiring additional properties. The biggest issue concerning overcrowding at Bear Lake State Park is the lack of available shoreline properties. When opportunities occur for acquisition of additional properties, consideration should be made for same. Perhaps the most favored properties would be Bear Lake Hot Springs and shoreline properties near the St. Charles administrative site. If a suitable piece of property was obtained in the St. Charles area, consideration could be given to development of a marina facility.
- Develop trail systems. Consider developing a paved shoreline trail on existing properties. The east beach uplands represent an untapped recreational resource. Consider developing hiking and mountain biking trails in that area.