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COLORADO 14ER HIKING USE UP SLIGHTLY IN 2024 TO 265,000 DAYS REOPENED DECALIBRON LOOP OFFSETS DECLINES ELSEWHERE

(Lakewood, Colo.) Hiking use on Colorado’s 14,000-foot peaks edged up 1.9 percent overall in 2024 to an estimated 265,000 hiker use days compared to the prior year according to Colorado Fourteeners Initiative’s 10th edition of the hiking use report. The reopening of the Decalibron Loop near Alma and a revised calculation for Mount Blue Sky were the largest factors increasing estimated hiking use, while declines at several top locations largely offset these higher levels. Fourteener hiking use peaked during the 2020 pandemic summer at 415,000 hiker days but has steadily returned to the mean since then.

“Opening or closing hiking access to a few key fourteeners has been a significant cause of fluctuating hiking use levels over recent years,” said Lloyd F. Athearn, executive director of Colorado Fourteeners Initiative. “With Mount Democrat becoming public land in 2024 and an electronic waiver system also in place by the landowner of Mount Lincoln, hiking use levels on the Decalibron Loop effectively doubled last year compared to 2023 when the loop was closed for half the season. However, reduced hiking use on perennial top-tier peaks, including Grays and Torreys Peaks and Mount Elbert, largely offset this increase. Tweaks to the modeling code also resulted in swings in estimated use for both Mount Blue Sky and Longs Peak that largely offset each other.”

In terms of the most popular fourteeners, Mount Bierstadt and Quandary Peak again topped the list in 2024 with use on both peaks estimated to be in the 25,000 to 30,000 hiker days range. Bierstadt’s trail counter captured data suggesting that hiking use on the mountain was above 28,000 days (a very slight decrease from 2023), while Quandary’s trail counter recorded more than 26,500 hiker days during the full season. Changes to one of the modeling factors—assuming most people climbed the 5.5 round-trip miles from Summit Lake rather than the 17 miles from Echo Lake—caused Mount Blue Sky to jump into the second tier (20,000 to 25,000 hiker use days). In 2023 Blue Sky was in the fourth tier (10,000 to 15,000 days). The best-guess estimate for Blue Sky last year was 20,600. Mount Elbert and Grays and Torreys Peaks, which had all been in the second tier of use in 2023, fell to the third tier in 2024, suggesting only 15,000 to 20,000 climbers hiked those mountains. Best-guess estimates were 17,200 for Elbert and 18,400 for Grays/Torreys. The Decalibron Loop (Mounts Democrat, Cameron, Lincoln and the Bross bypass), which was in the 7,000-to-10,000 range in 2023 due to a key landowner closure, rebounded in 2024 to the 15,000-to-20,000 range. The best-guess Decalibron Loop estimate was 15,300.

In 2024, an estimated 54 percent of statewide hiking use (144,344 hiker days) occurred on the 12 closest fourteeners to the metro area (Front Range, Tenmile Range, Mosquito Range and Mount Elbert). The remaining 46 peaks accounted for 120,656 hiker days.

Compared to 2023, hiking use in 2024 fell in three mountain ranges: Sawatch Range (-7500 days, -8.9 percent), Sangre de Cristo Range (-1500 days, -15 percent), and the Tenmile Range (-500 days, -1.9 percent). Hiking use was up in four ranges: Mosquito Range (+8000 days, +55 percent), San Juan Mountains (+3000, +9.2 percent), Front Range (+2000 days, 2.4 percent), and the Elk Mountains (+1500 days, +20 percent).

Several factors could be influencing CFI's estimated hiking levels. The State Demographer's Office noted much slower population growth recently than in prior decades, with additional demographic changes that could affect the population hiking 14ers. The population aged under 18 declined in absolute terms, those between 25 and 44 grew at a considerably reduced rate, while those over age 65 increased significantly. A recent report from the Colorado Tourism Office detailed a decrease in overnight visitors to the mountains last summer. The statewide economic impact of hiking Colorado fourteeners in 2024 was \$71.9 million, based on historic fourteener hiking use expenditure studies.

Access to Mount Lindsey in the southern Sangre de Cristo Range was closed to public use the entire season due to landowner liability concerns. People continued to climb the peak as trespassers, but at lower levels than usual.

CFI maintained a network of 23 counter locations in 2024. Counters that had observed data for more than 90 percent of the season included Mount Bierstadt (93 percent), Quandary Peak (100 percent), and Kit Carson/Challenger Point (100 percent). Counters that collected between 60 and 90 percent of the season included: Grays/Torreys (74 percent), Bross (68 percent), La Plata (71 percent), Shavano (74 percent), Handies (77 percent), Sneffels (62 percent), Wilson Peak (62 percent), and Redcloud/Sunshine (77 percent)

CFI's most recent estimate of hiking use suggests a statewide economic impact of \$71.9 million directly attributable to hiking fourteeners based on economic expenditure studies performed by Colorado State University economists John Loomis and Catherine Keske. Their 2009 study found that climbers of Quandary Peak near Breckenridge spent an average of \$271.17 per day for gasoline, food, lodging, equipment, and other retail purchases.¹ This expenditure estimate has not been updated in more than a decade, so it is likely understated.

CFI's hiking use projections are based on the combination of several data sources. 1) CFI collected hour-by-hour data during the 2024 hiking season using compact infrared trail counters that were placed at 23 locations adjacent to summit hiking trails servicing 22 fourteener peaks. Hiking use is estimated for the period between May 26 and October 5. Missing data were modeled using a linear model incorporating week number, day of the week, holiday and use levels on other similar peaks, which has shown to be statistically accurate. 2) Hiking use projections for all other fourteeners were based on crowdsourced "14er checklists" submitted to the 14ers.com website by more than 25,900 individual hikers. Estimates for peaks without trail counters were determined using a trend line calculated by the relative frequency of reported hiking use on all peaks using data points as anchors for peaks that had trail counters in 2024.

CFI began deploying compact infrared trail counters as part of a pilot program in 2014 at five locations: Grays/Torreys, Castle, Quandary, Redcloud/Sunshine, and Handies Peaks (American Basin). The program was expanded in 2015 to five additional locations: Mt. Elbert (3 locations), Mt. Democrat, and Handies Peak (Grizzly Gulch). Additional funding in 2016 allowed CFI to add 10 new monitoring locations: Mounts Sneffels, Sherman, Princeton, Antero, and Shavano, La Plata, Huron and Wilson Peaks, Challenger Point/Kit Carson Peak and Blanca Peak/Ellingwood Point. In 2017, the Antero counter was moved to the Winfield approach to La Plata Peak. In 2018, two new counters were deployed on Pikes Peak (Barr Trail and Devil’s Playground), while the La Plata (Winfield) counter was moved to the West Ridge of Quandary, and the Princeton counter was moved to Mt. Lindsey. In 2020 the West Ridge of Quandary counter was moved to a better location on Mt. Princeton, while a new counter was deployed to Mt. Bierstadt. In 2024 the Bierstadt counter was replaced for a third time—two counters were stolen over consecutive years—and counters were placed on Bross and the Winfield approach to La Plata. The Lindsey and Blanca/Ellingwood counters were not placed in 2024 for staffing reasons.

CFI uses the term “hiker use days” to report hiking use on the fourteeners. This represents one person hiking one peak on one day. Anecdotally we know that individual enthusiasts may hike multiple fourteeners over the course of a given year, including climbing the same peak multiple times. Using “hiker use days” reports the number of days of hiking use that occurred but does not represent the number of individual people who hiked fourteeners that year.

About Colorado Fourteeners Initiative. CFI was founded in 1994 to preserve and protect the natural integrity of Colorado’s 14,000-foot peaks through active stewardship and public education. To date CFI has constructed 40 sustainably designed, durably built summit trails on 37 14er peaks. CFI has engaged almost 23,000 days of volunteer stewardship since 2001 in the construction and maintenance of these peaks. A multi-pronged educational strategy has contacted more than 210,000 hikers in the field through paid crews and volunteer Peak Stewards, while CFI’s YouTube channel contains more than 90 educational videos that have been viewed more than 525,500 times. Learn more at www.fourteeners.org and obtain frequent updates on Facebook and Instagram.

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¹ Loomis, John and Catherine Keske, “Did the Great Recession Reduce Visitor Spending and Willingness to Pay for Nature-Based Recreation? Evidence from 2006 and 2009,” *Contemporary Economic Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 2, April 2012, pp. 238-246.