

Connecticut Trail Census

Statewide multi-use trail user study



COVID-19 Trail Impact Report



(image: National Park and Recreation Association)



April 13, 2020

Overview

This is a report on infrared (IR) counter data collected by the Connecticut Trail Census. It documents trail use during March 2020 at 13 sites along some of the most popular multi-use trails in Connecticut, and compares use with the same period in 2019, as one indication of the unprecedented changes in trail use occurring simultaneously with the outbreak of COVID-19. A total of 172,099 uses were recorded across all 13 sites in March 2020, which reflects a combined 77% increase over the same period in 2019 across these trails.

More than half of the trails participating in this study recorded an increase of greater than 100% in use, compared to March 2019. Trails with the largest relative increase in use were the Hop River Trail in Bolton (+216%) and in Vernon (+177%); Farmington Canal Heritage Trail/Hamden (+177%); and Air Line Trail/East Hampton (+166%).

This brief report is part of an ongoing trail research project conducted by the Connecticut Trail Census. The study team wanted to share these initial findings as soon as the data was available; comprehensive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on trail use will be conducted at a later date.

The **Connecticut Trail Census** is a statewide volunteer data collection program, designed to get a better understanding of multi-use trail use trends, and to make this information widely available. In addition to this report, the Trail Census publishes annual reports on trail counts and user data, and provides data visualization tools, all available at cttrailcensus.uconn.edu

**BE SMART
STAY 6 FEET
APART**

The Connecticut Trail Census is funded by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Recreational Trails Program; project partners include the Connecticut State Greenways Council and the Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments.

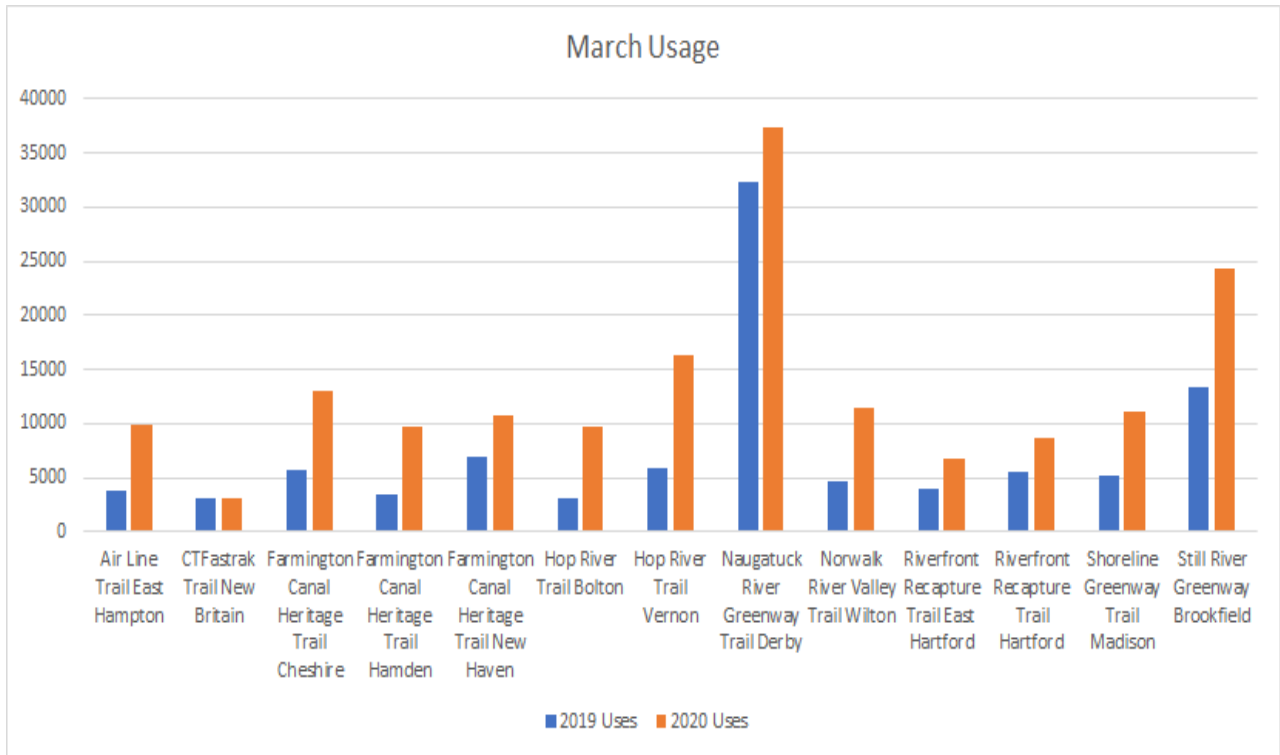
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Comparison of Trail Use in March 2019/March 2020

Key Takeaways

- **Connecticut's Busiest Trails Got Even Busier:** The most heavily used trails during March 2020 were the Naugatuck River Greenway in Derby, the Still River Greenway in Brookfield and the Hop River Trail in Vernon. In previous years, these three trails are consistently among those receiving the highest annual use. Even on these trails, the increase in volume from the previous March was dramatic: Naugatuck (+4999), Still River (+10,821) and Hop River (+6677).
- **Trails are Family-Friendly Spaces:** Connecticut Trail Census volunteers across the state provided their own observations from the field as a complement to the trail counter data. Many volunteers report that they have never witnessed this level of trail use in March, or anytime. Among the new trail users, the trail volunteers are seeing more families. Long-time trail volunteer Jack Walsh reported on the Naugatuck Greenway Trail in Derby: "I will tell you that from my own observations, usage has increased dramatically in the past week when the weather has been good. There are many people using the Greenway who have either never been there or very seldom. The newer users represent many more families with children than before."
- **Still River Greenway Reaches a Social Distance Limit:** In Brookfield, the increase in trail use on the Still River Greenway reached a point where social distancing was no longer feasible, and the trail was closed on March 27. Mary Knox, Director of Brookfield Parks & Recreation observed: "The decision to close the trail was driven by Brookfield having a higher number of infections versus other towns of similar population, and it was thought that the Greenway may be a contributing factor. There was also concern that people were not following guidance on social distancing, due to the sheer number of users and the likelihood of bumping into someone you know."
- **Commuter-Oriented Trail Use Cools:** Three trails that typically include commuting as part of their overall use pattern saw only double-digit increases: the two Riverfront Recapture Trails in East Hartford (+74.26%) and Hartford (+54.76%); and the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail in New Haven (+55.67%). Probably the most commuter-oriented trail of all participating trails, the CT Fastrak in New Britain alone recorded a slight decrease in use (-4.23%). This makes sense, given the declines in overall commuting due to Stay Home Stay Safe mandates.

Comparison of March 2019/March 2020: Adjusted Infrared Trail Counts



Still River Greenway, Brookfield CT

Percent Change in Infrared Trail Counts: March 2019/March 2020

Trail	2019	2020	% Change
Air Line Trail East Hampton	3709	9887	166.7%
CTFastrak Trail New Britain	3165	3031	-4.2%
Farmington Canal Heritage Trail <i>Cheshire</i>	5772	13001	125.4%
Farmington Canal Heritage Trail <i>Hamden</i>	3527	9771	177.0%
Farmington Canal Heritage Trail <i>New Haven</i>	6912	10760	55.7%
Hop River Trail <i>Bolton</i>	3078	9755	216.9%
Hop River Trail <i>Vernon</i>	5875	16297	177.4%
Naugatuck River Greenway Trail Derby	32336	37335	15.5%
Norwalk River Valley Trail Wilton	4705	11520	144.9%
Riverfront Recapture Trail <i>East Hartford</i>	3893	6784	74.3%
Riverfront Recapture Trail <i>Hartford</i>	5546	8578	54.7%
Shoreline Greenway Trail Madison	5199	11145	114.7%
Still River Greenway Brookfield	13414	24235	80.7%
Total	97,131	172,099	

Study Limitations and Next Steps

This analysis does not consider possible changes in use due to factors such as variations in weather from 2019 to 2020, changes in length or amenities on trails, or any other factors that may have contributed to the overall increase in use during this period. Additional analysis would be necessary to determine if these changes can definitively be attributed to effects of COVID-19 and Stay Home, Stay Safe mandates. However, given the observations collected by trail coordinators and users, it is highly likely that use patterns have changed in this period.