

**Jones Beach dreamin' on such a winter's day**  
*Park's visit rose in 2020 despite pandemic, cold weather.*

Derek Futterman and Brian Stieglitz | February 8, 2021 | Long Island Herald

Amid the stress of 11 long months of the coronavirus pandemic, and the dangers of indoor gatherings, it's no wonder that area residents have been escaping the confines of their homes by the tens of thousands to find relief outside, at state parks. According to Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office, state parks saw some 78 million total visits in 2020 — a record.

"Although it's the winter, we're still seeing people walk the boardwalk at Jones Beach," said George Gorman, the regional director of state parks on Long Island. "It's freezing cold out during some days, and you'll still see hundreds of people out. It's extraordinary."

Despite last week's nor'easter, the park's boardwalk was mostly cleared by last Saturday, and a number of couples were walking along it hand in hand near Field 6. On the sand, meanwhile, visitors spotted a harbor seal lying on its side.

"I just wanted to rush over and wrap a blanket around it," said Lee Pastore, 55, of Seaford, who first spotted the beached animal and reported it to the New York Marine Rescue Center, in Riverhead.

A representative of the NYMRC asked Pastore to text a photo of the scene and, in a reply, texted back that the seal didn't appear to be sick or in danger, but rather looked to be "in good body condition" and was "just resting." Pastore shared the exchange with the Herald.

In fact, the seal was one of many that migrate south to the shores of Jones Beach through January, February and March. Each winter since 2002, the Jones Beach Energy and Nature Center has offered visitors seal walks, giving them the opportunity to spot the marine mammals playing in the surf.

On the half-mile tour, along the Sloop Channel shore of Field 10, participants can observe as many as four species of seal — gray, harbor, harp and hooded — in their natural habitat. The tours are free and available almost every day through March. To book a tour, go to <https://bit.ly/3cSluL3>.

"New York's State Parks system has long offered compelling attractions for visitors and residents alike in a safe and socially responsible setting," Ross Levin, the state's executive director of tourism, states in a news release. "Last year provided families with the perfect opportunity to rediscover the natural beauty and world-class amenities of our state parks in their own backyard, and more visitors than ever before chose to experience what people from around the world have raved about for years."

Jones Beach led the state in visits last year, with 8.3 million, an astonishing feat considering the 50 percent capacity limit imposed to minimize the spread of Covid-19.

“Jones Beach State Park had about 150,000 more visitors” in 2020 than in 2019, Gorman said. “That is telling, considering that concerts could not take place, [which] automatically add somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 visitors. The fireworks program and the Bethpage Air Show [also] did not take place — approximately 750,000 park visitors we did not see.”

Gorman attributed the increase in visitors to people’s natural inclination to escape the limitations imposed by the pandemic. But even such a spacious park, of course, has regulations of its own.

“We have restrictions, including social distance, masks and blankets 10 feet apart,” Gorman said. “People followed those rules, by and large.”