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WISCONSIN

— OFFICE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION —



A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Late last year, just before the holidays, the [U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis](#) released its annual economic data on the outdoor recreation industry, and again, the industry had a record year, contributing over \$1.2 trillion (gross output) to the U.S. economy and supporting over 5 million jobs nationwide in 2023. In Wisconsin, the growth of the outdoor recreation industry outpaced the national average, generating \$11.2 billion for the state's gross domestic product.

These record-breaking numbers demonstrate how valuable outdoor recreation is to Wisconsin's economy. While an important benchmark, they don't always provide a full picture of outdoor recreation's impact. To help shed light on that important point and answer the most popular question the Office hears from stakeholders, "What is the economic impact of outdoor recreation in my community?" we were pleased to pilot the [Do-It-Yourself Economic Impact Report program](#) last year. With the help of [The Harbinger Consultancy](#), five communities and organizations completed the program and have just released their reports detailing a collective \$27.3 million in local economic activity from outdoor recreation. Not only did participants learn how to calculate that all-important and previously elusive figure, but throughout the process, they also learned how to gather data and operationalize those efforts to continue learning about visitors and their behaviors into the future.

Want to learn how they did it? At this year's [Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Tourism](#) (WIGCOT), March 9-11 in La Crosse, we'll be hosting a panel of program participants who can share their experiences and insights. Join us at WIGCOT for outdoor recreation inspiration as we celebrate the *boundless* potential for Wisconsin tourism and our outdoor economy. [Register here](#).

Can't make the conference? Download the [Do-It-Yourself Guide: Conducting Visitor and Recreational User Research to Tell an Economic Impact Story](#) on our website. This new, free tool can help communities and organizations unlock the power of knowing how to calculate economic impact.

For even more learning, networking and engagement opportunities this spring, please mark your calendar to join us at the [International Trails Summit](#) in Madison, April 15-17. As a conference sponsor, the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation will be offering Wisconsin attendees a special discounted registration to help you take advantage of this international conference in our backyard. Stay tuned for more details coming soon. In the meantime, check out the field trips and workshops [schedule](#)!

Don't miss your chance to join us and other outdoor recreation professionals at one (or both!) of these conferences. We hope to see you out there!



Cassie Mordini
Director, Office of Outdoor Recreation

The Office is interested in making industry connections.

Click [here](#) to update your information and help build Wisconsin's outdoor recreation directory.

Wisconsin Outside *is a monthly newsletter from the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation. Please share it with friends or colleagues with a vested interest in Wisconsin's outdoor recreation industry by forwarding this email or [subscribing here](#).*

Outdoor Recreation Events: Bringing Economics and Engagement to the Finish Line

The 51st year of the [American Birkebeiner](#) is coming soon, Feb. 19-23. This weeklong event will bring 40,000 participants and spectators to the rural communities of Sawyer and Bayfield counties. According to some estimates, this event will bring over \$20 million to the area. The popularity of the "Birkie lifestyle" is accelerating housing growth and supporting businesses in the region. Events such as the Fat Bike Birkie, Shred de She and Birkie Trail Race utilize the same ski trails for other sports year-round, providing more getaways for visitors to the region – to visit or invest in a seasonal home.

Few events in Wisconsin have the draw or history as the Birkie, but outdoor recreation races, large and small, bolster economic impact and spending across the state. From the [Ride Across Wisconsin](#) to races in the Driftless area, outdoor recreation events are getting outdoor enthusiasts out and about, on and off trail, exploring Wisconsin and driving economic impact while pushing their bodies to new limits. The success of locally grown events is making Wisconsin a key host of national competitions.

Fueling Entrepreneurial Endeavors

Not for the faint of heart, oxygen or endurance, [IRONBULL's](#) events are known for their challenging courses, their sense of fun and their commitment to central Wisconsin. Founded in 2018, IRONBULL was initially formed under the Wausau & Marathon County Parks & Recreation umbrella, receiving early funding from six community foundations. Today, it is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that hosts nearly a dozen events for fat biking, snowshoeing, adventure racing, running and gravel biking. Events often sell out and utilize outdoor recreation spaces in the area, like Rib Mountain State Park.

The rise of events has spawned entrepreneurship opportunities. Races require infrastructure like cones, signs and mechanisms for tracking speeds. [Race Day Events](#), headquartered in Madison, organizes races across the United States. This event production, race timing and equipment rental company works with events of varying sizes, from community run/walks to the Chicago Marathon.

[Driftless Endurance](#) is a husband-wife team of ultra-runners whose passion for the Driftless region of Wisconsin and for trail running is combined into a for-profit business organizing races across the Driftless area. Founder Rickey Chernik said, "The core reason behind our organization was really due to a lack of races, especially ultra distances, in this region of the Driftless area... someone had to take the first step, so we decided to start Driftless Endurance." In their first three years, they've seen a 68% growth, from 288 participants in 2022 to 483 in 2024.

These days, races aren't complete without photographers capturing magical moments. For live-action shots, companies like [Focal Flame](#) provide photo and video services for cycling, running, swimming, and other outdoor recreation events.



The [Ragnar Trail race](#) at Nine Mile County Forest in Marathon County sells out its hundreds of participant slots for its overnight camping/running endurance event. Photo Credit: Paul Jesse, Ragnar

Driving Tourism and Donations

Longstanding events like the Birkie, the [Ironman](#) and the [Tour of America's Dairyland](#) bring thousands of participants and spectators to local communities, but smaller events also have powerful impacts.

A [recent report](#) from partners in Marathon County, produced as part of the Office's DIY Economic Impact Report program, found that activities and events at the Nine Mile County Forest have an economic impact of over \$3.25 million on the region

In 2024, IRONBULL's [Red Granite Grinder](#) and Underdown Trail Races drew participants from 13 different states. IRONBULL's events bring people to Marathon County who support businesses, restaurants, lodging and retailers. Local charities also benefit; the Underdown Trail Races raised almost \$2,000 in donations for trail maintenance and building. In Baraboo, the Race Day Events' [Devil's Challenge Triathlon](#) at Devil's Lake State Park raises hundreds of dollars for the Friends of Devil's Lake in donations from participants.

Similarly, Driftless Endurance events draw participants from out-of-state, consistently averaging about 16% of total participants, which have come from 21 other states. According to Chernik, about 50% of participants travel more than 50 miles to get to a Driftless Endurance race. Chernik said one of his goals was to advance the Driftless area as a premier trail running destination, so encouraging visitors to experience parks and open spaces via their preferred sport is an up-and-coming travel trend.

Expanding Outdoor Recreation Trends

Wisconsin is staying on top of outdoor recreation trends, providing a variety of incentives to visit for fun and competition. Businesses and organizations across the state are investing in niche activities and competitions to hype up activities throughout the year.

Relatively new to the competitive racing scene, gravel biking is rising in popularity. Gravel biking takes place on gravel roads, requiring a different skill set than road or off-road biking. This year, at least eight competitive gravel bike races are planned across Wisconsin, with fun rides like the [Escape Badger Gravel Ride](#) and [IRONBULL Essential Gravel](#) also scheduled. The gravel bike community scores a win this year, with USA Cycling bringing the [Gravel National Championships](#) to La Crosse and southeast Minnesota in 2025 and 2026.

Every July, the [U.S. National Kubb Championships](#) in Eau Claire draw crowds from across the Great Lakes region. When the championships started in 2007, they had 15 teams; in 2024, they had 144 teams. USA Freestyle Nationals and Team Trials and the Midwest Freestyle Championships for kayakers and canoeists were held in Wausau in 2024 at the [Wausau Whitewater Park](#), drawing participants and spectators from outside Wisconsin. The championships return in August. In September, WinMan Trails hosts the [Midwest Enduro & Dual Slalom Onewheel Race](#), with Onewheels being a rising trend in outdoor recreation. Also in September, the [Wisconsin Climbers Association](#) hosts its 17th annual Boulder Bash climbing competition at Governor Dodge State Park, drawing about 120 boulderers and spectators from across Wisconsin and Illinois for a weekend of fall climbing in the Driftless.

Each event brings a new set of visitors to experience all that Wisconsin has to offer – and keep them coming back to explore on their own.



In addition to supporting local economies, events like those sponsored by Driftless Endurance are “developed in conjunction with land managers (like the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources) to showcase unique features of the land while protecting the sustainability of the trails,” said owner Rickey Chernik. Photo credit: Driftless Endurance

Taking Stage and Playing Host

Wisconsin’s welcoming hospitality makes it a great place to host events. [Ariens Nordic Center](#) in Brillion opened in 2022 and is an official national training center for U.S. Biathlon. The Center is already hosting state, national and international competitions. This month, it will host the U.S. and Canadian Masters Biathlon National Championships (Feb. 14-16) and the 2025 World, U.S. and Open Snowshoe Championships (Feb. 27–March 2). The prestigious events showcase both elite athletes and the spirit of Wisconsin’s outdoor recreation landscape. The Nordic Center’s ability to manufacture snow takes guesswork out of the weather.

This summer, Trek Bicycle will host the [2025 USA Cycling Collegiate Road National Championships](#) in Madison, while the [2025 USA Cycling Masters & Junior Road National Championships](#) will come to southeast Wisconsin.

Supporting Events

Outdoor recreation events take capital and funding to get off the ground. [The Opportunity Attraction Fund](#) from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation is available to assist Native American tribes, area visitor and convention bureaus, business improvement districts and private entities with funding.

The Department of Tourism's [Ready, Set, Go! grant program](#) assists destinations in securing competitive sporting events not regularly held in Wisconsin. The RSG program fund has \$110,000 per fiscal year for matching grants.

IRONBULL's Red Granite Grinder race received a [Joint Effort Marketing Grant](#) (JEM) to bolster marketing and promotion efforts. In 2024, this race had a 22% increase in attendance over 2023. Estimates indicate that local spending from the approximately 400 participants was over \$90,000. The JEM program helps nonprofit organizations market and promote events, expanding their ability to attract more event participants and spectators. Events are eligible to receive a JEM grant for up to three years. The Red Granite Grinder was in year two of its JEM funding in 2024.

Sponsorship from local businesses is another way to fund and promote events. Wisconsin gravel racing partners include [Borah Teamwear](#), a Wisconsin company specializing in custom performance apparel, and [Embark Good Energy](#), a Viroqua-based maple syrup hydration company. Partnering with local retailers and producers has led to success in marketing and promotion for both parties.

With a culture steeped in outdoor activities and a landscape that caters to a wide array of outdoor pursuits, races and events across Wisconsin are engaging new participants, creating more opportunities for at-home events, stimulating entrepreneurship and showcasing an abundance of outdoor recreation events for professionals, amateurs and the “just-for-fun” crowds. By the time the Birkie celebrates its 100th anniversary, Wisconsin will be celebrating milestones for other competitive sports races. But the real winner of all these races? Communities that benefit from increased visibility, new visitors and an economic boon for local businesses.



MEET YOUR WISCONSIN OUTDOOR INDUSTRY

Wisconsin's outdoor recreation industry is an impressive combination of businesses, manufacturers, outfitters, guides, destinations and nonprofits. Each month, we share information about the industry so you can get to know your peers across the state and learn how each contributes to the collective success and diversity of the valued outdoor recreation industry in Wisconsin. Here are this month's industry highlights:



Nonprofit: [Wausau Nordic Ski Club](#)

- The mission of the Wausau Nordic Ski Club is to support cross-country skiing in Marathon County through skiing programs and enhancing facilities and opportunities for skiers of all ages and ability levels.



Professional Services: [Driftless Trails Contracting LLC](#)

- Based in Genoa and with over 20 years of experience, Driftless Trails builds multi-use trail systems in the Midwest, using site-specific approaches for large- or small-scale projects.



Guides, Tours, Rentals: [Ecker's Backwater Adventures](#)

- Ecker's Backwater Adventures provides guided fishing trips on the Mississippi River. Winter airboat ice fishing, spring and fall perch and walleye or summer trips are available out of Buffalo City.



Retailer: [Action Marine](#)

- Located in Burlington, Action Marine sells new and pre-owned boats, including pontoons and duck boats. Outboard motors, docks and other boating accessories are also available.



Destinations: [Pringle Nature Center](#)

- The Pringle Nature Center is located within Bristol Woods County Park in Bristol. It is a gateway to environmental learning, with trails for bird and wildlife observation, nature walks, hiking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. An all-terrain wheelchair, snowshoes and other equipment is available for use.

Interested in being featured? To be considered, make sure your business or organization is listed in our [Outdoor Business Directory](#). There, you can submit a request to be added or to update your information. If you are already listed, feel free to send us an [email](#) with your interest to be featured in the newsletter.

INDUSTRY & COMMUNITY NEWS

Governor Proclaims 2025 as the Wisconsin State Park System 125th Anniversary

Governor Evers proclaimed 2025 as the Wisconsin State Park System's 125th Anniversary. To celebrate this occasion, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources [invites](#) all Wisconsinites, outdoor enthusiasts, history buffs and state park aficionados to celebrate 125 years of adventure. [Read the proclamation.](#)

Outdoor Writers Association of America 2025 Conference Call for Speakers

The OWAA is seeking speakers and workshop instructors for its August conference in Tennessee. Dynamic subject matter experts within the outdoor industry will present to 250-plus attendees, 72% of which are media. Organizers seek underrepresented outdoor communities such as BIPOC people, persons with a disability, LGBTQ+ people and others to provide striking content and true expertise. [Learn more.](#)

New Book on Outdoor Industry Marketing Shows Wisconsin Ties

“Shopping All The Way To The Woods: How The Outdoor Industry Sold Nature To America” is a new book from history professor Rachel S. Gross. The book traces the roots of outdoor recreation culture to Wisconsin. [Learn more.](#)

RESOURCES

R3 Angler Grant Applications due Feb. 18

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources provides cost-sharing funds to community-based organizations, community centers, government agencies, Wisconsin tribes, colleges, universities and schools to ensure the education and development of safe and ethical adult anglers. [Learn more.](#)

Outdoor Marketing Bootcamp Feb. 18 – 19

This two-day virtual event is tailored for outdoor industry professionals and enthusiasts. The program is designed to equip participants with actionable marketing strategies and insights specific to outdoor-focused businesses, rec associations, outfitters or any organization within the outdoor sector. [Learn more here.](#)

“Built for Safety” Video Series Out

The Wisconsin Bike Fed launched a new video series in English and Spanish, “Built for Safety: Complete Street Features for All Users.” The series educates and encourages residents to better understand traffic calming features they may see, or wish to see, in their community. [Learn more.](#)

Rural and Tribal Community Technical Assistance Grants Open Soon

The U.S. Department of Transportation's Rural and Tribal Assistance Pilot Program offers \$27 million in technical assistance grants to rural and tribal communities for the planning and design phases of development for transportation projects. Applications will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis beginning Tuesday, March 4, 2025. [Learn more.](#)

Great Lakes TCGM Partnership Grants Available

The Great Lakes Thriving Communities Grantmaking Program will distribute \$40 million to organizations working in and for underserved communities, including tribal communities and rural areas. Three funding tiers are available for various projects that strengthen community-based groups focusing on environmental and public health efforts. Applications are accepted now through November 2026 as funds are available. [Learn more.](#)

JOB LISTINGS

Park Guide, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, Bayfield. [Learn more.](#)

Maintenance Mechanic, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, Bayfield. [Learn more.](#)

Multiple positions open, Vortex Optics, Barneveld. [Learn more.](#)

Rock Climbing Instructors, Devil's Lake Climbing Guides, Baraboo. [Learn more.](#)

Municipal Services & Recreation Director, Village of Maple Bluff. [Learn more.](#)

Seasonal staff positions, Wisconsin State Park System, statewide. [Learn more.](#)

Several positions, Harley-Davidson, Menomonee Falls, Wauwatosa, Milwaukee and Tomahawk. [Learn more.](#)

Several positions, Mercury Marine. Fond du Lac or Menomonee Falls. [Learn more.](#)

Assistant Trail Builder and **Retail and Social Media Manager**, WinMan Trails, Winchester. [Learn more.](#)

This is a new feature for Wisconsin Outside. If you have an outdoor recreation job posting you'd like us to include, please send a link to the posting to orec@travelwisconsin.com.

The Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation is part of the
Wisconsin Department of Tourism

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