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WISCONSIN OUTSIDE | June 2025

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The long Memorial Day weekend has unofficially ushered in the summer season. June is full of opportunities to highlight Wisconsin's vast outdoor recreation offerings and insert your business or organization into the conversation. In addition to June being [Great Outdoors Month](#), a nationwide celebration of the outdoors and its benefits, several other commemorative days and weeks take place this month, promoting various activities, events and ways to engage. How will your business or organization leverage these opportunities to connect people to the outdoors?

[Wisconsin Bike Week](#) (June 1-8): Celebrating cycling as transportation, recreation and an essential part of everyday life, the Wisconsin Bike Fed and dozens of organizations across the state host Bike Week events and programs.

[National Fishing and Boating Week](#) (June 1-8): Encouraging folks to enjoy the benefits of time on or near the water, the Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation offers media tools, interactive maps and educational materials to promote boating and fishing activities.

[National Trails Day](#) (June 7): Inspiring trail users to connect with the outdoors, each other and give back to the trails they love, National Trails Day events can be found and added to the American Trails calendar.

[Free Fun Weekend](#) (June 7-8): Making the outdoors more accessible, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources waives state park and trail admission fees and fishing license requirements during Free Fun Weekend.

[Get Outdoors Day](#) (June 14): Waiving fees at most day-use sites, the U.S. Forest Service lowers the cost barrier for visitors.

[Go RVing Day](#) (June 14): Celebrating the joys of RV travel and visiting outdoor destinations, the RV Industry Association has a full media toolkit for industry partners.

Engaging people in the outdoors is critical to our collective success. Whether it is introducing someone to a new activity for the first time, helping a customer pick out the right camp stove, designing that perfect camp stove or teaching skills and safety for the outdoors – it's our charge to facilitate positive experiences outside and cultivate lifelong outdoor enthusiasts. When we do, people live healthier lives, communities are fueled by visitor spending and supported by meaningful jobs, and our industry and economy thrive. Thank you for your important work!



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](#).

Here's to 125 Years: The Wisconsin State Park System, a Pillar of Culture and Economy

The roots of Wisconsin's state park system are perhaps the oldest in the country, dating back 125 years with the establishment of [Interstate Park](#) in 1900. While Wisconsin's wasn't the first state park in the nation, just a few years later, it had one of the first park systems. "The first act passed by any State creating an agency charged with administration of all State parks and related areas was apparently that of Wisconsin which created a State Park Commission in 1907," as the National Park Service chronicled in the 2004 book [A Study of the Park and Recreation Problem of the United States](#).

Leaders and businesspeople saw the value in Wisconsin's remarkable outdoors and the benefits that public recreation could provide. Landscape architect John Nolen was hired to help the State Park Commission define, justify and designate a state park system. In [State Parks for Wisconsin](#), Nolen argued that natural landscapes were essential to human happiness, offering that state parks' "main purpose is to refresh and strengthen and renew tired people, to fit them for the common round of daily life." The report led to the subsequent creation of Peninsula State Park in 1909, Devil's Lake State Park in 1911 and Wyalusing State Park in 1917.

But even before their creation, some state parks were already tourist destinations, and nearby communities benefited. In the late 1800s, [H.H. Bennett's](#) photographs of the rock formations, cliffs and lake vistas made the Wisconsin Dells and Devil's Lake popular as visitors shared his postcards and newspapers printed his images. Tourism became a major industry for the area.

Today, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has replaced the State Park Commission and oversees the Wisconsin State Park System, which includes 50 state parks, 44 state trails, 15 state forests and eight state river and resource areas. The park system provides abundant recreation activities for residents and visitors, but its benefits spread far beyond park boundaries helping to shape Wisconsin's culture and support its economy.

True wonders in the late 19th century, and true wonders today, Wisconsin's state parks continue attracting visitors to the state. Travel Wisconsin's [Wonders of Wisconsin](#) campaign highlights unique places to warm the heart, thrill visitors and create lasting memories. It's no wonder four of the first 10 are at state parks, including [Devil's Lake State Park](#) and [Peninsula State Park](#), which continue to stun visitors even after all these years. Rounding out the state parks of the Wonders of Wisconsin, Willow Falls at [Willow River State Park](#) (created in 1967) and [Kohler-Andrae State Park](#) (featured in the photo at the top of the newsletter, established in 1928) awe visitors with their natural features and sweeping vistas, whether it's their first or fortieth visit.



The 125th Anniversary of the Wisconsin State Park System is the perfect time to visit Willow Falls, one of the Wonders of Wisconsin, at Willow River State Park in Hudson.

State Parks Benefit Wisconsin's Businesses

In 1909, Wisconsin's economy was largely agricultural, investing deeply in manufacturing and mineral extraction. Today's state parks have become economic hubs for the communities around them, bringing resources into the parks and providing resources outside the parks to serve visitors and residents.

[Paddleboard & Nordic Specialists](#) in Oconomowoc have offshoots of their flagship store at the [Kettle Moraine State Forest – Southern Unit's](#) Ottawa Lake and the [Kettle Moraine State Forest – Lapham Peak](#) to rent seasonal equipment such as kayaks, paddleboards and skis. [Adventure Outfitters, LLC](#), is a year-round gear shop in Waupaca. Just 10 miles down the road at [Hartman Creek State Park](#), their outpost rents kayaks, paddleboards, Maui mats and bikes and sells concessions by the beach. At Nicolet Beach in Peninsula State Park, the [Camp Store and Nicolet Beach Rentals](#) are run by Vanessa McGowan and Jake Danen. They also coordinate with two food trucks, Kitty's Coffee and Backbone Food Truck, that operate out of Nicolet Beach. In 2024, after running the entities at Nicolet Beach for several years, the couple opened a nearby retail store in Fish Creek, [Blue Pine Door County](#).

Not all state park concessionaires have brick-and-mortar operations. The Surf Shack, LLC, has outposts at several state park properties, with kayak and paddleboard rentals available by the hour. In addition to the state parks, Surf Shack has 25 locations at city and county lakes across the state. Access to the rentals is all done [online](#). Services like these provide access to more visitors and residents and generate income for entrepreneurs.

In addition to retail and rental operations, restaurants, bars, grocery stores, gas stations and lodging facilities often benefit from state park property visitation. The park visitor's experience is further enhanced by nearby arts, boutiques and entertainment centers in adjacent communities.

When visitors get to the parks, they find activities catering to a variety of interests. Astronomy lovers have several options for engaging with the night sky in the state parks. The [Lawrence L. Huser Astronomy Center](#) at [Wyalusing State Park](#) contains several high-powered telescopes where the StarSplitters Astronomy Club provides free public astronomy programs from May through October. The [Northern Cross Science Foundation](#) sponsors telescope viewing at [Harrington Beach State Park](#) and the [Kettle Moraine State Forest – Pike Lake Unit](#). [Newport State Park](#) capitalizes on the “astrotourism” trend, with its International Dark Sky Park designation and evening sky-gazing programs. [Universe in the Park](#), a program of the UW-Madison Astronomy Department, travels across the state with a free 30–40-minute talk and slide show before setting up a telescope for participants to look up.

For art lovers, parks provide playful opportunities to connect with creativity. The [Northern Sky Theater](#) (left) is a longtime resident of Peninsula State Park, hosting outdoor shows in the park. [Summit Players Theatre](#) takes its Shakespeare production on the road every summer with Shakespeare in the Park. In 2025, *Love's Labours Lost* is featured at 17 state park properties. Each all-ages production includes a pre-show workshop on Shakespeare.

State park properties also serve as gathering spaces for surrounding communities. Schools, nonprofit organizations and businesses utilize the state park system for outings and events. Friends groups, that provide thousands of volunteer hours to help support the mission and activities of the park system, organize events, raise money and provide services like selling firewood or concessions, and often partner with businesses and groups invested in giving back to nearby parks. From hiring guiding services to volunteer workdays or “learn to” events, state parks are a convener of Wisconsinites.



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in giving back to nearby parks. From hiring guiding services to volunteer workdays or “learn to” events, state parks are a convener of Wisconsinites.

Parks As Tourism Hubs

When John Nolen envisioned Wisconsin's state park system in 1909, Wisconsin's population was about 2.5 million. His report outlined the increasing population gain and how other states, particularly on the East Coast, had failed to protect land for public use. While Nolen's plan called for state parks to be beautiful, sweeping and scenic, he also saw their competitive advantage in tourism, writing in 1909: “Wisconsin, surrounded by prairie States and States monotonous in topography, has in its beautiful and refreshing scenery and in its invigorating climate, resources that it can ill afford to neglect.”

Since Wisconsin started opening state parks, visiting them has continued to gain popularity, in terms of visitation and revenue generated. Attendance at Wisconsin state parks has been about 20 million each year since 2020. Visitors purchased over 500,000 vehicle admission stickers in 2023, compared to about 350,000 pre-pandemic – a 43% increase. Wisconsin's state parks system receives state funding entirely through the sale of annual and daily passes, so as visitation increases, so does revenue. In 2023, the value of state park stickers, passes and camping fees was almost \$35 million.

A 2013 report detailed the [economic impacts of the Wisconsin State Park System](#). It found that visitors' average spending at state park properties ranged from \$41 per day to over \$90 per day (that's \$57 to \$125 today when adjusting for inflation) which generated an impressive

economic impact of over \$1 billion. With a 42% growth in visitation since the report, the economic impact is undoubtedly much greater.

The [National Association of State Park Directors](#) also notes that state parks contribute to regional economies via lodging, guide services and equipment rentals, with parks serving as anchors to local economies in rural areas, providing jobs and sustaining small businesses.

In Wisconsin, many municipalities collect room taxes from lodging businesses, which benefit tourism entities like destination marketing organizations and tourism commissions. Room tax revenue is then spent on tourism promotion and development. State parks and forests can motivate travelers to visit rural areas, increasing their room tax revenue, which can go back into promoting the community as an outdoor recreation hub.

More Than Just Fresh Air

Trips to state parks, forests, trails and recreation areas provide more than opportunities to breathe fresh air and soak in Wisconsin's beauty. The [Wisconsin Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#) highlights health, social and civic benefits of outdoor recreation in addition to the economic.

To encourage more people to enjoy Wisconsin's state parks and trails, the Wisconsin DNR offers [Free Fun Weekend](#) on June 7-8. State park admission fees, fishing licenses and trail passes are waived. In collaboration with public libraries, the DNR also sponsors the [Check Out Wisconsin State Parks At Your Library](#) program, a collaboration between public libraries and parks. Anyone with a library card can check out a day pass to Wisconsin's state parks.

As we celebrate 125 years of our parks, the Wisconsin State Park System continues to look to the future as it evolves, expands and adapts, making improvements and contributions that benefit Wisconsin and its communities. Here's to many more years of public recreation, economic success and improved well-being for Wisconsin!



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: [Rhinelander Area Silent Trails Association](#)

- The Rhinelander Area Silent Trails Association (RASTA) builds and maintains trails in the Rhinelander area for mountain biking, hiking, snowshoeing, skiing and fat biking.



Manufacturer: [Yogi Rods LLC](#)

- Mike “Yogi” Taake has been building custom fishing rods in Mauston as Yogi Rods LLC since 1985. Taake offers custom rods ranging from ice rods to big game musky rods using modulus graphite and ample tonnage to match the fishing style.



Guides, Tours, Rentals: [Adventure Outfitters LLC](#)

- Adventure Outfitters LLC in Waupaca offers kayak and paddleboard rentals as well as river adventure trips along the Waupaca and Crystal rivers or the Upper Chain of Lakes. Bike rentals are also available.



Retailer: [The Garage Bikes + Brews](#)

- The Garage Bikes & Brews in River Falls is both bike shop and brewery. Bikes are available for sale or rent with service and repair also available, along with craft beers.



Destinations: [Sand Haven Campground](#)

- Sand Haven Campground in New Auburn offers 110 campsites, all with electric hookups and proximity to multiple lakes, boat access areas, state trails and recreation areas and county ATV trails.

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.

SUCCESS STORIES

“Uniting Young Bucks and Old Dogs:” The Fat Tire Tour of Milwaukee

Imagine a pub crawl on bikes with 400-500 of your closest friends, and imagine doing that for 41 years! Well, that’s the Fat Tire Tour of Milwaukee, and it happens every June. This annual group bike ride includes four to five bar or brewery stops over a full day, covering 15-20 miles. The most interesting part? The route is a surprise every year. Riders don’t know where they’re going until the morning of the ride.

The Fat Tire Tour is the oldest group bike ride in Milwaukee. Wisconsin Bicycling Hall of Famer [Phil Van Valkenberg](#) started the ride with a handful of friends to expose some of the city’s underground watering holes. Today, it is organized by Jason and Amanda Manders of [Trail Genius](#) and Van Valkenberg still rides. In 2017, Trail Genius started a second ride in Green Bay that occurs in August.

Riders are encouraged to dress up, bring props or decorate their bike in the year’s theme. Contests, competitions and bike skill events lead to prizes donated by local sponsors. The 2025 theme for the June 14 ride is “Milwackyshack,” a play on the popular 1980 film *Caddyshack*.

The Fat Tire Tour shines a light on local businesses while bringing bikers together for a rain or shine recreational and fun event considered by many to be a bucket-list urban ride. [Learn more about the Fat Tire Tour.](#)

INDUSTRY & COMMUNITY NEWS

Wisconsin Businesses Win in Readers’ Choice Awards

For the sixth consecutive year, [Ravin Crossbows](#), based in Superior, won the *Bowhunting World* Readers’ Choice Award. [Mathews Archery](#) of Sparta won gold for compound bow of the year and silver for quiver and silver for stabilizer. The awards were announced at the 2025 Archery Trade Association Show earlier this year. [Read more.](#)

Musky Festival celebrates 75th Anniversary June 20-22

Hayward’s largest summer celebration is the annual Musky Festival, telling the history of fishing in Wisconsin’s Northwoods. The weekend includes activities such as the crowning of a Musky Festival Queen, Musky Run, fishing contest and much more. [Learn more.](#)

Invasive Species Awareness Weekend is June 21-22

Several events are occurring throughout Wisconsin on June 21-22 to bring awareness to the impact of invasive species on natural resources. Events include guided hikes, educational components and invasive control fieldwork opportunities. [Learn more.](#)

Wild Rivers Celebrate 60 Years

Wisconsin's state system of [Wild Rivers](#) was established in 1965 to allow Wisconsinites to enjoy natural streams, attract out-of-state visitors, boost the state tourism industry and preserve some rivers in a free-flowing condition from development. To mark the 60th anniversary, the [Wild Rivers Interpretive Center](#) in Florence will host a celebration on June 28. [Learn more.](#)

Proposed High Cliff Connection Trail Between Menasha and Sherwood

A new feasibility study, which has been approved or accepted by the Menasha City Council, Harrison Village Board and Sherwood Village Board, calls for a new trail to connect High Cliff State Park to the Fox Cities Trestle Trail. The first segment of the 11-mile trail would be built in 2027. [Learn more.](#)

RESOURCES

Don't Forget to Add Your Events to TravelWisconsin.com

Travel Wisconsin's Event webpage sees thousands of visitors each day. The free database showcases events and activities that are open to the general public, tourism-related, draw travelers from other areas and generate revenue. [List your event.](#)

Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Grants Due June 26

Regional, local and Tribal governments are eligible to apply for this federal funding program to strengthen their approach to roadway safety through developing a Comprehensive Safety Action Plan or funding projects and activities that support these plans. [Learn more.](#)

AllTrails Stewards Fund Applications Due June 30

Building on their commitment to stewardship, AllTrails is introducing the AllTrails Stewards Fund to support nonprofit trail groups' projects that improve, maintain, rebuild and restore our outdoor spaces through an open application process. Awards range from \$2,000 to \$10,000. [Find out more.](#)

Verizon Small Business Digital Ready Grant Now Available

Access free courses, live coaching sessions and insightful resources by joining Verizon Small Business Digital Ready. Sign up for the Verizon platform and complete two courses to unlock a \$10,000 small business grant application due June 30. [Learn more.](#)

Off-Highway Motorcycle Trail Grants Due July 1

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is now accepting applications for Off-Highway Motorcycle (OHM) Trail Grant projects, such as developing and maintaining OHM trails and parks. Applications that were previously submitted but not funded may be resubmitted. Cities, villages, towns, counties, Tribes and other government entities are eligible applicants. [Learn more.](#)

JOB LISTINGS

Kayak Shuttle Driver, Forward Outdoor, Milwaukee. [Learn more.](#)

Retail Associates, The Camp Store, Fish Creek. [Learn more.](#)

Research and Development Formulator; Line Operator, Wisconsin PharmaCal, Milwaukee.
[Learn more.](#)

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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