

DODGE COUNTY:

Visitor Spending at Outdoor Spaces Supports Local Businesses



Executive Summary

Dodge County Parks and the Horicon Marsh are vital assets to the community, offering a variety of recreational opportunities and contributing significantly to the local economy. These natural areas attract visitors from near and far, boosting tourism and supporting local businesses.

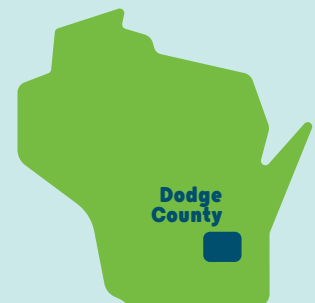
At more than 33,000 acres, the Horicon Marsh in Dodge County is the largest freshwater marsh in the United States. It is a critical rest stop for migrating ducks and Canada geese and is recognized as a Wetland of International Importance. It brings visitors to the area to experience unparalleled birdwatching and other nature activities.

Two-thirds of the Horicon Marsh is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and one-third is managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Dodge County Parks manages five county parks and three recreational trails, including 20 miles of the 34-mile Wild Goose State Trail along the western edge of the Horicon Marsh and through the center of Dodge County.

Visitor spending stimulated by county parks and Horicon Marsh provides several benefits to the community, including:

- **Economic Vitality:** In 2023, spending by visitors to Dodge County Parks and the State Wildlife Area supported over \$8 million in local business activity, especially in dining, retail and other services.
- **Quality of Life:** Parks and natural areas provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, improving the overall quality of life for residents and visitors.
- **Environmental Preservation:** These areas play a crucial role in preserving the region's natural beauty and biodiversity.

Visitors to Dodge County's outdoor spaces support over \$8 million in economic activity



Natural Spaces for Residents and Visitors

Dodge County Parks and Horicon Marsh are invaluable natural resources offering diverse recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike. These areas encompass a variety of landscapes, including forests, wetlands, prairies, lakes and rivers, providing a unique and scenic environment for outdoor activities.

Dodge County Parks has a long history of serving the community, providing recreational spaces and preserving natural areas. Over the years, the parks have undergone various improvements and expansions to enhance their offerings and accessibility.

Horicon Marsh is managed in two sections: by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a federally designated National Wildlife Refuge and by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as a State Wildlife Area. There are three visitor centers, one on each property, as well as the Marsh Haven Nature Center, which operates as a separate nonprofit. The state's Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center was constructed in 2009 to bring an accessible, modern design for visitor services, and the Explorium was added in 2015.

Led by the Dodge County Land Resources and Parks Department, this analysis aimed to quantify the economic benefits generated by spending from visitors to these natural areas. Data from Dodge County Parks and the Horicon Marsh entities were used to estimate the economic contributions of Dodge County's key outdoor recreation assets. This analysis is the foundation of a system that will help county officials to document usage, quality conditions and financial contributions over time to inform future investments and marketing actions.



Cultivating Repeat Visitors

The 2023 Dodge County Parks survey revealed that about a third of campers are over 65 years old, often visiting in pairs for three-night stays. Many of these campers return, having discovered the parks through various means such as driving by, word-of-mouth recommendations or online research.

The parks' appeal and value is reflected in 66% of survey respondents indicating that they are repeat visitors. Some visitors mentioned living locally, while others traveled to visit friends or family, visit local events or simply use the parks' assets such as camping, hiking, kayaking and disc golf. Overall, the survey data demonstrates the high satisfaction of visitors with Dodge County Parks, reinforcing their importance as community assets and valuable destinations for outdoor recreation.

In 2023, Horicon National Wildlife Refuge attracted a largely female audience (56%) with most visitors in their 60s. Nearly half of the surveyed visitors have some college education, and the median household income was between \$75,000 and \$99,999.

The average group size at the refuge is four people, indicating its popularity for family outings and social gatherings. More than two-thirds (69%) of visitors are local. Over half (56%) of non-local refuge visitors specifically traveled to the area because of the refuge, driving an average of three hours to get there. For 83% of local visitors, visiting the refuge was the primary reason for their trip.

Dodge County Park Visitors



90% were satisfied with Dodge County Parks

66% were repeat visitors

2023 Dodge County Parks Visitor Survey



Supporting the Local Economy

In 2023, Dodge County Parks and the Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center welcomed nearly 131,000 visitors. These visitors contributed significantly to the local economy through their spending on food and drink, fuel, transportation, retail and lodging.

Analysis of visitor spending revealed that a significant portion of expenditures was directed towards local businesses, supporting a wide range of economic activities. This spending supported \$8.4 million in total business activity within the county.

The economic impact of visitor spending extends beyond direct expenditures, creating a multiplier effect that benefits the broader community. Jobs are supported in various sectors, including:

- **Hospitality:** Hotels, restaurants and other lodging establishments
- **Retail:** Local businesses selling food, beverages, clothing and other goods
- **Recreation:** Outdoor activity providers, such as guided tours and equipment rentals

Dodge County Parks and Horicon Marsh play a vital role in stimulating economic activity in the region. Visitor spending supports local businesses, creates jobs and enhances the overall quality of life in the community.

Benefiting Community and Environment

Outdoor recreation areas like Dodge County Parks and Horicon Marsh offer residents and visitors a wealth of health and wellness benefits. These spaces provide opportunities for hiking, biking, snowshoeing and other year-round outdoor activities at no cost.

Not only do these parks enhance the quality of life for the community, but they also play a crucial role in preserving the environment. These natural areas provide important ecosystem services, such as clean air, water filtration and wildlife habitat.



Horicon Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

The National Wildlife Refuge is another major draw for visitors to the area. While managed federally and not included in the Dodge County study, it should be noted that spending by visitors to the refuge also contributes to the economic vitality of Dodge County.

In 2017, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that refuge visitor spending supported \$8.6 million in economic activity in Dodge and Fond du Lac counties, \$577,000 in state and local tax revenue and 104 jobs.

Division of Economics, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2019. The Economic Contributions of Recreational Visitation at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge.

Popular activities of visitors:


- Hiking 76%
- Biking 70%
- Wildlife observation 68%
- Driving tours 61%

2023 Horicon Marsh National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey




The Economic Significance

For Dodge County Parks and the Horicon Marsh Education Center




130,748

Visitors



\$8.4 million

in economic activity



3 nights

Average length of stay

Upcoming Park Improvements

Dodge County parks and trails are managed and maintained by the Dodge County Land Resources and Parks Department. The department is continually working to improve and enhance these parks through various projects.

Upcoming projects include:

- **Astico Park:** Construct a new shower building, restroom, and picnic shelter.
- **Derge Park:** Improve the boat ramp and construct a new fishing pier.
- **Harnischfiger Park:** Upgrade campsite pads, electrical and water systems.
- **Nitschke Mounds:** Build the Red Wolf Hiking Trail boardwalk and install interpretive signage.
- **Ledge Park:** Widen and pave park roads.
- **Gold Star Memorial Trail:** Construction of the Gold Star Memorial monument and Phase 2 of the trail connecting the City of Horicon to the Wild Goose State Trail.

The Dodge County parks have no entrance fees, and are available for family or group events or gatherings. The Horicon Marsh Education Center also offers educational programs promoting conservation and environmental awareness.

By supporting and utilizing Dodge County Parks, the community contributes to the preservation of these valuable natural resources and can enjoy the many benefits they provide.



"Dodge County is home to a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities that are available year-round and pique the interest of visitors and residents alike. The wide scope of recreational assets spurs economic activity in the local communities and adds to the overall quality of life in Dodge County."

Nathan Olson, Dodge County
Community Development Administrator

Methodology & Data Sources

Visitor counts and visitor spending estimates were derived from a variety of sources. The State of Wisconsin provided visitation figures for the Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center. Dodge County Land Resources and Parks department provided the number of campers at county parks from the camping reservation system. Other visitation for county parks and trails is based on traffic counter data adjusted to account for in-and-out traffic, campers and multiple entrances by the same visitors.

Daily visitor spending was estimated based on these sources:

Visitor spending by county park campers is estimated using data from the Dodge County Land Resources and Parks 2023 survey of camping visitors.

Overnight visitor spending is estimated using spending data from National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey: 2023 Results for Horicon National Wildlife Refuge¹ and an average length of stay from the 2022 analysis² of the economic impact of tourism in Wisconsin.

Local day-use park visitor spending is estimated by averaging findings from visitor surveys at three park and trail areas in rural Pennsylvania (Heritage Rail Trail, Oil Heritage Region and Perkiomen Trail), checked against figures from studies of the economic impact of Wisconsin State Parks³ and the Ice Age Trail.⁴

The economic contributions of trail user spending to the local economy were estimated using a sales area multiplier calculated using the formula provided by Wen-Huei Chen in "Variations in multipliers and related economic ratios for recreation and tourism impact analysis" (Michigan State University, 2001) and applying a conservative capture rate of 70% to reflect the proportion of visitor spending that is retained in the local economy.

¹ Dietsch AM, Sexton, NR, & Gutierrez E. (2024) National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey: 2023 Results for Horicon National Wildlife Refuge. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, School of Environment and Natural Resources.

² Longwoods International Travel USA Visitor Profile (2022).

³ Kim D, Marcouiller DW & Prey J. (2013) Economic Impacts of the Wisconsin State Park System: Connections to Gateway Communities. (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Report #PR-487-2013). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

⁴ Kashian R & Winden M. (2020). An Analysis of Ice Age Trail Users. Whitewater, WI: University of Wisconsin Whitewater: Fiscal and Economic Research Center.



OutdoorRecreation.wi.gov



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