**Showcasing the DNR: Water parks making splash in state parks**

**By CASEY WARNER**

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For 100 years, state parks have been known as some of the best places in Michigan to experience a variety of outdoor fun – from boating and fishing to swimming and hiking, plus camping and lodging for those who want to make more than a day of it.

In recent years, Michigan’s state parks are attracting an even wider range of visitors by offering unique ways to enjoy the outdoors, including disc golf, geocaching, yoga and stargazing opportunities at dark sky preserves.

The newest adventure available at state parks takes advantage of one of Michigan’s most popular and defining features – water.

Inflatable water parks, also called aqua parks, add another dimension of family fun at five state parks across Michigan. These floating playgrounds feature a series of connected inflatable slides, runways, jumping pillows and bouncers that are suitable for both kids and adults.

“We’re always looking for new ways to remain relevant to the public and provide even more reasons to visit state parks,” said Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Chief Ron Olson. “In our quest to get more kids and young people outside, we think the water parks add a layer of adventure to the traditional beach experience and offer visitors some pretty exhilarating, exciting ways to challenge themselves outdoors.”

One way state parks have been able to enhance visitors’ experience with water parks and other amenities is through partnerships with businesses offering these services.

Water parks came to Michigan state parks in 2016, when concessionaire Jump Island approached the DNR with the idea.

A Parks and Recreation Division team that works on state park innovations was open to that idea.

“So we offered Jump Island a two-year contract to give it a try. That’s typically how we approach new concession or business ideas, by offering a short-term contract,” said Lori Ruff, concession and lease manager for the DNR Parks and Recreation Division.

At the end of the short-term contract, the business opportunity is opened to competitive bidding as required by state law, Ruff explained.

The first aqua park opened at Holly Recreation Area in Oakland County in 2016, with Jump Island as the first concessionaire.

Other water park vendors soon followed, and the ventures have proven successful for both the concessionaires – with gross sales ranging from $112,000 to $373,000 in 2018 – and state parks.

The concessionaires pay the state a percentage of their gross sales, which goes into the DNR’s Park Improvement Fund.

The water parks also have helped draw more visitors to the state parks.

“WhoaZone and Jump Island before it have been wildly popular at Holly and have increased beach visitation dramatically,” said Shawn Speaker, unit supervisor at Holly Recreation Area and part of the innovation team that initially brought the water parks to state parks.

Kale Leftwich, unit supervisor at Brighton Recreation Area in Livingston County, said his park also saw a sharp increase in use – as measured in sales of the Recreation Passport required for state park entry – when it began offering a water park two years ago.

“Passport sales in 2017 jumped up roughly $46,000 over the previous year without a water park,” Leftwich said.

He added that, while 2019 is off to a slow start, “hopefully that will change when and if it ever stops raining.”

This summer, there are five water parks located at state parks in southeastern Michigan, the northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula.

Jump Island at Brighton Recreation Area, a water obstacle course situated on Bishop Lake, features an inflatable iceberg, inflatable slides, runways and more that give visitors the ability to balance, walk, run or slide on water.

New for 2019 at Brighton is Splash Island, a smaller version of the floating structures in shallower water for smaller children 44-48 inches tall. Most of the water parks, including Jump Island, have a height requirement of at least 48 inches. Jump Nation, the company that operates the water park, also will offer swimming lessons and yoga classes.

“Most of the comments we receive are positive. People enjoy something new in the park and are glad to see something aimed at the youth audience. They also appreciate the availability of food at the beach,” said Leftwich, who added that the vendor operates a small barbeque and sells snacks and drinks.

Another Jump Island location on Budd Lake at Wilson State Park in Clare County offers a water course with an inflatable iceberg, inflatable slides, runways and more, where visitors can balance, walk, run or slide right on the water.

Located in the Upper Peninsula on Lake Michigamme in Marquette County’s Van Riper State Park, Water Warrior Island includes 20-foot water slides, rock climbing walls, trampolines, floating walkways and a ninja-warrior-like obstacle course.

Water Warrior Island also operates at Oakland County’s Bald Mountain Recreation Area, with a course that challenges visitors to defeat a 20-foot wall, conquer a 25-foot slide, and swing and blast themselves into the air while testing their strength and ability to climb, jump, balance and grip.

“This is our first year with Water Warrior Island. We have had a lot of folks calling about it and coming in to look at it, but the weather has not been very nice to get out in the water yet,” Adam Lepp, Bald Mountain unit supervisor, said. “The customers that have used it really liked it and want to do it again!”

WhoaZone at Holly Recreation Area’s Heron Beach features a course offering four different routes with varying degrees of difficulty, with a gigantic springboard, semi-circle step, wiggle bridge, half-pipe and more that visitors can climb, jump, crawl and slide on. A special water play area is available for kids at least 4 years old and 39 inches tall.

“Most people love the water parks, even if they aren’t using them,” Speaker said. “Lots of people have shared with me they enjoy watching the people out there having fun and think it’s a great addition to the beach.”

[Check out a video on the water parks](https://youtu.be/TeLz4u8uLAo).

Ticket and reservation information, rules, height requirements and hours of operation vary between each individual attraction. Links to the water park websites and a map can be found at [Michigan.gov/DNRWaterParks](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205_86388---,00.html).

The aqua park endeavor has been a win-win for both the vendors running the facilities and the state parks hosting them.

The DNR also offers a number of other opportunities for operating concessions in Michigan state parks and other destinations.

Those interested in operating a business in partnership with state parks, trails and waterways can visit [Michigan.gov/StateParkConcessions](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79136_79732_84099_84100---,00.html) for a list of what is currently out for bid.

“Additionally, if they want to learn more about what it means to be an ‘outdoorpreneur,’ they can register for our destination training experience coming up in August,” Maia Turek, DNR Parks and Recreation Division resource development specialist, said. “It’s a chance to get the inside scoop on owning an outdoor business.”

The DNR is hosting the [Become an Outdoorpreneur](https://app.mobilecause.com/form/1tCi9Q?vid=nf5d) program – designed to inspire new, sustainability-minded entrepreneurs that will help enhance the visitor experience at Michigan state parks, trails and waterways – in Traverse City Aug. 2-4. Attendees can learn from seasoned "outdoorpreneurs" through hands-on experiences, plus get business basics including a business plan and potential return on investment with Davenport University.

To learn more about the abundant outdoor recreation opportunities at Michigan’s 103 state parks, visit [Michigan.gov/StateParks](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205---,00.html).

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---,00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr).

/**Note to editors:** Contact: [John Pepin](mailto:PepinJ@michigan.gov), Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**Climb**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237930/Climb.jpg): A couple of kids have fun climbing at WhoaZone, which features a course offering four different routes with varying degrees of difficulty. (Photo courtesy of the WhoaZone)

[**Features**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237932/Features.JPG): Inflatable water parks, now at five Michigan state parks, are floating playgrounds featuring a series of connected inflatable slides, runways, jumping pillows and bouncers that are suitable for both kids and adults. Here, two girls enjoy one of the water park features.

[**Jump**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237933/Jump.jpg): Visitors enjoying Jump Island, which has locations at Brighton Recreation Area in Livingston County and Wilson State Park in Clare County. (Photo courtesy of Jump Island)

[**Kids**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237934/Kids.jpg): Five state parks around Michigan now offer inflatable water parks for visitors to enjoy. (Photo courtesy of Water Warrior Island)

[**Lifeguard 1**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237935/Lifeguard%201.JPG): A lifeguard paddleboards a young swimmer back to shore from the inflatable water park.

[**Lifeguard 2**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237937/Lifeguard%202.JPG): A lifeguard watches as a fresh group of swimmers heads out to the inflatable water park.

[**Slide**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237941/Slide.JPG): A young park visitor enjoys the water slide on the beach at Van Riper State Park. The slide accommodates beachgoers who don’t meet height requirements for Water Warrior Island.

[**Van Riper 1**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237942/Van%20Riper%201.JPG), [**Van Riper 2**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237943/Van%20Riper%202.JPG) and [**Van Riper 3**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/06/26/file_attachments/1237944/Van%20Riper%203.JPG): Visitors enjoy an afternoon at Water Warrior Island at Van Riper State Park in Marquette County./