**Showcasing the DNR: Pocket Park offers opportunities of a lifetime**

**By JOHN PEPIN**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

Underneath a stand of tall pine trees, tucked into the northeast corner of the Upper Peninsula State Fairgrounds in Escanaba, sits a magical place – a place where discoveries to last a lifetime can be found.

Just a week ago, a couple of young boys from Alabama, ages 8 and 9, discovered this unassumingly.

In Delta County to visit friends, the boys came to the fairgrounds with one of their contemporaries and found the Pocket Park – a place where the boys caught bluegills from a pond shaped like the Upper Peninsula.

“The two kids had never caught a fish before and had the best time,” said Jo Ann Alexander, a co-organizer of events at the facility. “By the time they left the park, they knew how to bait a hook, set the hook and take a fish off the hook.”

The same week, two youth from Texas had a similar experience, taking their first shots with bows and arrows and a pellet gun.

In 1998, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources renovated an old maintenance area to build the park, with the help of a $250,000 Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant. That same year, construction of the fishing pier and pond began.

In 1999, the public was first welcomed to the park, which sees its highest numbers of visitors during the U.P. State Fair week every August. Each year, the park draws thousands of visitors.

The DNR pocket park caters especially to children, but adults will find many things to explore here as well. During fair week, many DNR staffers – including conservation officers, wildlife and fisheries biologists and others – are on hand to answer park visitor questions.

From 2000-2005, construction at the park included the archery and pellet gun ranges, a fire tower display, 11 native plant gardens – featuring hundreds of plantings – and the planting of about 150 native trees.

In 2006, another trust fund grant was received in the amount of $178,300 to renovate an existing maintenance facility into a classroom and an accessible restroom. That renovation was completed in 2008.

Last year, a $150,000 appropriation from the state’s general fund was received to address priority maintenance and repairs at the park, including repairing a leaking roof and replacing structural supports on the porch of the classroom building.

“We know that without some kind of connection to the natural world, the next generation will be less likely to carry forward all of our gains toward resource protection,” said Jon Spieles, facility manager of the park. “The DNR Pocket Park demonstrates our interest as an agency in connecting with all of Michigan by exposing families and kids to the shooting sports and fishing to make that connection.

“We try like crazy to help fairgoers and visitors throughout the year understand the great opportunities to recreate in the outdoors and to feel confident and comfortable when they go.”

The park’s classroom is used for numerous educational activities, including off-road vehicle and hunter safety training.

Alexander said many year-end school trips were taken to the park in May and June.

“For many kids, it was their first time at the park,” she said. “After they learned it would be open all summer long, a lot of kids have been coming, and we have seen much higher attendance.”

In fact, July attendance hit a record at the park and June wasn’t far behind, said Bryn Beauchamp, field and maintenance manager at the park.

“It’s primarily family groups and a lot of grandparents with their grandkids,” Beachamp said. “The average age of the kids is around 7 or 8.”

In addition to the main attractions, the park also offers numerous exhibits and information booths during fair week.

Exhibits this year include live hawks and owls from the Chocolay Raptor Center, Michigan reptiles provided by the U.P. Children’s Museum, two local taxidermists and a Native American education demonstration.

In addition, booths will be staffed by the Girl Scouts, the DNR’s Becoming an Outdoorswoman Program, DNR conservation officers and fire prevention specialists, with Smokey Bear celebrating his 75th birthday at the park.

There will also be an “Ask the DNR” question booth and booths for selfies, including one with a moose mount.

Volunteers make the world go around at the Pocket Park, especially during fair week, when roughly 200 time slots must be filled to cover the open four-hour shifts. Entry to the fair, a free meal, T-shirt and gift bag are provided in return.

Sportsmen and sportswomen, DNR staffers, clubs, various groups, individuals and families volunteer to help others – some for several shifts or days, with many returning each year.

“All of them truly enjoy seeing the delight on children’s faces when they catch a fish, shoot an arrow at a 3-D bear or deer target, or hit the bullseye with a pellet gun,” said Kristi Dahlstrom, Alexander’s counterpart in organizing activities at the Pocket Park during fair week. “It is surprising how many children today have not experienced these types of outdoor recreation, and with families and long-distance relatives coming to the fair together, it is a great way to introduce children to these fun activities in a true U.P. outdoor setting. The DNR Pocket Park is also a place where people of all capabilities can participate.”

During the off-fair part of the Memorial Day to Labor Day season, the park’s fishing pond and archery and pellet gun ranges are available for use by supervised groups. The park is open to the public daily, and by appointment to host family gatherings, picnics, youth organizations, school groups, sports associations, scouting campouts, meetings and public events.

There is no charge to visit the Pocket Park.

Two decades after the park was first opened, it remains an important place in Delta County – an oasis located just off the fairgrounds midway, where there are benches for a rest, picnic tables to eat lunch and a fun and nurturing space where young visitors can find valuable first fishing and hunting experiences.

Perhaps best of all, it is a place where the sounds of children laughing, playing and enjoying life abound.

To learn more about the [DNR Pocket Park](https://www.upstatefair.net/fair-info/dnr-pocket-park/), contact either Kristi Dahlstrom at 906-226-1331 or dahlstromk@michigan.gov or Jo Ann Alexander at 906-786-2351 or alexanderj7@michigan.gov.

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