**The not-so-off-season for Michigan state parks**

*This is part of a series of stories to mark the centennial of Michigan state parks. On May 12, 1919, the Michigan Legislature established the Michigan State Park Commission, paving the way for our state parks system. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources is celebrating this milestone throughout the year with special events, podcasts, historical stories, videos, geocaching and more. Find more details at* [*Michigan.gov/StateParks100*](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205_85747---,00.html)*.*

**By CASEY WARNER**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

The first day of autumn marked off on the calendar, the kids settled back into their school routines, stadiums full of cheering football fans – it’s officially fall.

At Michigan state parks, it’s the time of year that traditionally was considered the off-season but is becoming less so in recent years, with parks now offering so many opportunities for fall fun.

**Harvests and haunts**

“One of the biggest changes we have seen in the past 20 years is an increase in use during key fall weekends,” said Jason Fleming, chief of the Resource Protection and Promotion Section in the Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Division. “A number of locations put on harvest festivals, often in conjunction with our local friends groups. People decorate their campsites and families enjoy the self-contained area for kids to trick or treat.”

The harvest festivals that many state parks host are so popular that campgrounds at these parks often fill up on festival weekends.

“Many of our state parks offer a variety of fall festivals that can range from traditional fall activities like hayrides with donuts and cider to a spookier approach with haunted trails and trick-or-treating,” said Elissa Buck, event coordinator in the DNR Parks and Recreation Division. “Due to their popularity, some events are limited to campers only and will require camping reservations that may be made six months in advance.”

A schedule of state park harvest festivals is available at [Michigan.gov/HarvestsAndHaunts](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205_84073---,00.html).

**Falling for falls**

Beyond scheduled events like harvest festivals, Mother Nature offers abundant opportunities to enjoy the outdoors at state parks.

For example, it’s a great time of year to see one of Michigan’s many waterfalls, such as Bond Falls and Ocqueoc Falls.

Bond Falls, located in a day-use park in the western Upper Peninsula, is a scenic waterfall created as the middle branch of the Ontonagon River tumbles over a thick belt of fractured rock, dividing it into numerous small cascades. Roadside parking and picnic tables are available near the top of the falls, and there’s an accessible boardwalk with six viewing locations.

“It may take some time to get there for those who are coming from downstate, but it’s worth the trip,” said Stephanie Yancer, social media coordinator for the DNR Parks and Recreation Division. “If you can’t get there, visit [Michigan.gov/BondFalls](http://www.michigandnr.com/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=412&type=SPRK) to see the 360-degree view of the falls.”

Ocqueoc Falls, near Rogers City in Presque Isle County, is the only publicly accessible waterfall in the Lower Peninsula. It’s located across the road from a rustic campground, which is open May through November, along the Ocqueoc Falls Bicentennial Pathway. The pathway, with four loops from 3 miles to 6 miles in length, also offers opportunities for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing. Learn more at [Michigan.gov/OcqueocFalls](http://www.michigandnr.com/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=51&type=SFPW).

**Eyeing elk**

Fall also is the best time of year to see elk, one of Michigan’s most sought-after species for wildlife viewing.

“The most popular time to view elk is during the breeding season in September and October, when they are feeding in open grassy areas and bulls are bugling,” Yancer said. “Atlanta, Michigan, home to Clear Lake State Park, is a great destination to see elk in the fall.”

[Find more information about elk viewing](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/DNR_Elk_Brochure_401828_7.pdf).

**Seeing stars**

For those who prefer stargazing, six Michigan state parks are home to dark sky preserves – Lake Hudson Recreation Area, Negwegon State Park, Port Crescent State Park, Rockport Recreation Area, Thompson’s Harbor State Park and Wilderness State Park.

“These parks are farther removed from big-city light sources and have limited light pollution,” said Yancer, who added that there are some [meteor showers coming up in October, November and December](https://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/meteor-shower/list.html).

There also are plenty of excellent night-sky viewing opportunities across more than 15,000 square miles in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

For more information on stargazing in state parks, visit [Michigan.gov/DarkSky](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205_84074---,00.html).

**Leaf peeping**

Perhaps the most popular outdoor sight in state parks this time of year is fall color. As one of the most wooded states in the country, with more than half of its 36 million acres of land forested, Michigan offers plenty of opportunity to see fall foliage.

One notable example is Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in Ontonagon and Gogebic counties, where visitors can take in some of the Upper Peninsula’s best autumn views in a unique way – from chairlift rides at the park’s ski hill. Fall color chairlift rides are available Saturday and Sunday, noon to 6 p.m., at the [Porcupine Mountain Sports Complex](http://www.porkiesfun.com/).

See a fall color guide on the Pure Michigan website at [Michigan.org/Fall](https://www.michigan.org/fall).

**Hitting the trail**

Fall also is the perfect time to take advantage of the state’s many trail opportunities – more than 12,500 miles of designated trails – highlighted during [Michigan Trails Week](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79206_83612---,00.html), Sept. 22-29, and available all season long.

Whether it’s on foot, horseback, a mountain bike or an off-road vehicle – or even in a canoe – Michigan has a trail for all sorts of fall outdoor recreation. Many of these trails are in state parks and state forests.

“It’s unbelievable the number of trails available across the state,” said Paul Yauk, state trails coordinator with the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division. “They’re a great resource to help people stay healthy and active, explore history or just have fun.”

Explore fall trail adventures at [Michigan.gov/DNRTrails](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79206---,00.html).

**Searching for treasure**

This year, there are even more opportunities for fall fun in state parks as Michigan celebrates the state parks system’s centennial.

As part of the yearlong celebration, geocachers can get out in the parks by participating in the [Michigan State Parks Centennial GeoTour](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205_85747_86992_88875---,00.html).

“This gives geocachers an opportunity to find 100 caches that are new this year in honor of the centennial, in addition to others that have been hidden before the GeoTour,” Yancer said. “Over 15,000 logs have been submitted on the 100 caches. Visitors from as far away as Germany, Australia, Belgium, Belize, Ecuador, France, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Norway, Paraguay, South Korea, Canada and the United Kingdom have found caches that were hidden in Michigan.”

To find out more about the GeoTour and geocaching, and for more details about the state parks centennial, visit [Michigan.gov/StateParks100](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205_85747---,00.html).

**Hunting, fishing, fitness**

Hunters and anglers also can find places to go after game or cast a line in many state parks.

The parks give fitness enthusiasts a variety of scenic locations where they can exercise, too.

“We encourage you to get outside and find your own outdoor fun and utilize our great state parks system as your ‘Big Green Gym,’” DNR Parks and Recreation Chief Ron Olson said. “Walking, hiking, running, bicycling, cross-country skiing and paddling are all ways to stay in shape, while taking advantage of Michigan's great outdoors.”

Olson said that the $11 [Recreation Passport](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79134_79210---,00.html) – which offers year-round vehicle access to more than 100 state parks, thousands of miles of trails and other destinations – may be the most affordable gym membership available.

“The varied terrain just might help you burn more calories, and the natural scenery and fresh outdoor air may entice you to stay active longer,” Olson added.

To find a state park that offers the type of outdoor recreation you’re looking for, search under that activity in [Recreation Search](http://www.michigandnr.com/parksandtrails/Default.aspx).

**Finding forest fun**

In addition to state parks, Michigan has 4 million acres of state forest, laid in a patchwork across the northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula, to explore during the fall.

The [Pigeon River Country State Forest](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79204_93902---,00.html) – 106,000 rugged acres in the northeast Lower Peninsula and home to Michigan’s elk herd – is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, too. Look for elk, enjoy fall color and visit the recently opened Discovery Center, a historic log cabin now outfitted to tell the story of the Pigeon River Country. It’s free to visit and open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays and noon to 4 p.m. Sundays through Oct. 27. The Pigeon River Country also offers rustic camping and places to mountain bike, ride horseback, hike, kayak, hunt and fish.

Michigan’s other state forests also have plenty of fall color and fun possibilities. Check out “[A Tour of Michigan’s Forests](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79204---,00.html),” an interactive map that lists highlights for each state forest. Hike, run or ski on the popular and pretty Blueberry Ridge Pathway south of Marquette; take a scenic hike along the Vasa Pathway east of Traverse City; and explore the Midland to Mackinaw Hiking Trail, a historic Native American trade route.

Learn more about Michigan’s state forests at [Michigan.gov/Forestry](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79136_79237---,00.html).

**Setting up camp**

Whatever your favorite fall adventure, camping is a great option if you’re looking for a place to stay.

State parks and state forest campgrounds offer a variety of fall camping experiences, from modern and rustic campsites for tents, recreational vehicles and pop-up campers to lodging in the camper cabins, yurts, cottages and lodges available in some state parks.

To check availability or make a camping reservation, visit [MiDNRReservations.com](http://www.midnrreservations.com/) or call 1-800-44PARKS (1-800-447-2757).

From festivals to falls to foliage, this not-so-off-season is full of reasons for nature lovers of all stripes to put Michigan state parks on your list of “must see” destinations. But fall won’t last long, so get out and enjoy it before the snow flies.

Learn more about recreation opportunities in state parks at [Michigan.gov/StateParks](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79205---,00.html).

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