**Showcasing the DNR: Everyone can get outdoors to beat the winter blues**

**By CASEY WARNER**

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The colder, shorter days of winter – the time of year many Michiganders struggle with cabin fever and the “winter blues” – are now upon us. This year, with the need to avoid social gatherings and many indoor activities to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, winter may seem bluer than ever.

Many may be thinking about taking on new hobbies to get them outdoors and their minds off what is going on in the world, including activities that could involve family or friends while still maintaining social distancing and a healthy lifestyle.

Fortunately, Michigan offers ample antidotes to the winter blues in the form of outdoor recreation opportunities, with a variety of options for those of all abilities.

Here are some suggestions for accessible cold-weather recreation opportunities to stay active, engaged and in the outdoors this winter.

At the top of the list is the [Muskegon Luge Adventure Sports Park](https://www.msports.org/), located in Muskegon State Park. The [luge track](https://www.msports.org/muskegon-winter-luge-track/) – one of only four in the United States – and all other features of the sports park are accessible to people with disabilities. It was the first accessible luge created in the nation.

“We developed an accessible, year-round luge experience. You actually can luge if you’re somebody with a disability,” said Cindy Burkhour, member of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources [Accessibility Advisory Council](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79763_79900---,00.html), in a DNR video about accessible outdoor recreation released in November 2020 to mark the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The council provides guidance to help the DNR develop, manage and plan opportunities for accessible outdoor recreation.

“Michigan is absolutely at the forefront of creative, inclusive, universal design projects in the out-of-doors. Very unique things,” Burkhour added.

[Watch the video (1.5 hours) to learn more about accessible outdoor recreation in Michigan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGZmKEAnfcs&feature=youtu.be).

“Our park has made a commitment to providing accessible year-round recreation for all. Our team remains committed to working on solutions to make all of our guests’ visits to our facility enjoyable and meaningful,” Jim Rudicil, executive director of the Muskegon Luge Adventure Sports Park, said. “This includes making sure we have adaptive equipment and solutions in place that can assist persons with disabilities in the winter sports of luge and ice skating.”

In addition to the luge track, the adventure park offers adaptive equipment for ice skating and a track chair, an off-road, electronic chair that can easily handle trails, snow, sand and up to 8 inches of water. With the track chair, available to reserve on a first-come, first-served basis, visitors can explore areas traditional wheelchairs might not be able to reach.

People should contact the sports park in advance at 1-877-TRYLUGE (1-877-879-5843) to check conditions, make sure accessible luging and other activities are available and to reserve adaptive equipment.

If you would like to take a wintry stroll, possibly with family or friends, to enjoy snow-covered landscapes and hopefully see some wildlife, other state parks that offer the use of their [track chairs](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79782_94094---,00.html) at no cost year-round are [Island Lake Recreation Area](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/Publications/PDFS/RecreationCamping/islandlake_track_chair.pdf), [Tahquamenon Falls State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/Publications/PDFS/RecreationCamping/tahquamenon_track_chair.pdf) and [Waterloo Recreation Area](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/Publications/PDFS/RecreationCamping/waterloo_track_chair.pdf).

Talking about the track chairs, Kristin Wildman, DNR Accessibility Team member and biologist with the Wildlife Division, said, “I’ve seen them in action, and they really are amazing. Track chairs are not considered a vehicle so you can use the track chair effectively wherever you want on appropriate terrain for that piece of equipment.”

There are also select state parks and game areas that allow the use of their accessible hunting blinds during the winter for wildlife viewing or photography. They include [Sleepy Hollow State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?type=SPRK&id=495), [Pinckney Recreation Area](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=484&type=SPRK), [Rifle River Recreation Area](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=489&type=SPRK), [Holly Recreation Area](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=459&type=SPRK), and the Gladwin and Sharonville state game areas (see list of [state game and wildlife areas](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79119_79147_81529_82090-31657--,00.html) for contact information). It’s best to contact the park or state game area if you want to reserve a blind for a specific date and time, but they are available on a first-come, first-served basis when not already reserved.

In the DNR’s 2020 video on accessible outdoor recreation, Wildman talked about a variety of opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in wildlife-related recreation like hunting, trapping and wildlife viewing.

“Our goal is to reduce any kind of barriers to your participation in hunting and wildlife-related recreation,” Wildman said. “You can always contact the land manager for a state game area, state park, state wildlife area and just talk to them. Let them know what you want to do, what kind of things are keeping you from doing it, and maybe there’s something we can do to help.”

Hunting seasons currently open include rabbit, squirrel, crow and other small game. [Learn more about hunting locations with accessible features](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79782_82096---,00.html).

For those who would like to hone their shooting skills, DNR shooting ranges – many open throughout the winter – offer accessible features, including wheelchair-accessible shooting lanes.

“Over the past five years, the Michigan DNR has really increased our range renovation and development across the state. Many of our facilities offer paved pathways that extend from the parking areas to the firing and target lines,” said Lori Burford, shooting range/facilities specialist with the DNR Finance and Operations Division.

[Learn more about accessible features at DNR shooting ranges](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79782_94678---,00.html).

For a scenic getaway, several state parks have accessible lodges available in the winter. These include lodges at [Cheboygan State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=550&type=SPCG), [Fayette Historic State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/details.aspx?id=480&type=SPCG), [Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=476&type=SPCG), [Tahquamenon Falls State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=519&type=SPCG) and [Traverse City State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=520&type=SPCG). If you’re interested in booking a stay, please check with the park to make sure pathways will be cleared to allow winter access to the lodges.

Lodging options also include [RV rental service](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79119_79145_81213_81219-531116--,00.html), with some rental companies and some state parks participating year-round.

[Ice fishing](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79119_79734_83630---,00.html) is another great way to get outdoors and enjoy Michigan’s winter. Before heading out for a day on the ice, it’s wise to check with local bait shops to make certain the spot you’ve chosen is adequately ice-covered and at the thickness needed and to review all [ice safety tips](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79135_81057_91749---,00.html).

[Michigan Ski for Light’s annual weekend of cross-country skiing for people with vision or mobility disabilities](https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDNR/bulletins/27cae07), held at the DNR’s Ralph A. MacMullan Conference Center in Roscommon, has been cancelled for this year due to concerns about COVID-19 but is being planned for 2022. Learn more about the event at [MSFL.org](https://msfl.org/).

These are just some of the options for getting outside and beating the winter blues. The DNR continues to work to find more ways to make outdoor recreation accessible to everyone of all abilities in every season.

“For those of us who don’t own hundreds or thousands of private acres, we need to realize we still own a portion of the outdoors in the state of Michigan like the state parks. Getting outdoors again and being reunited with nature for people with disabilities is made possible through integration and accessibility,” said Billy Vickers, Accessibility Advisory Council member who works in business development for Rehab & Mobility Systems. “The state of Michigan and the DNR has gone to great lengths to make it possible to ensure everyone of all abilities can enjoy our great state. We have lots of opportunities, even more resources, so there’s no reason why we can’t get back to the outdoors to truly enjoy our great state.”

**If you’re interested in pursuing any of these outdoor recreation options, please contact the facility first to check on conditions and ensure all features are available and accessible.**

Learn more about accessible outdoor recreation opportunities at [Michigan.gov/DNRAccessibility](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79782---,00.html). Find information about other attractions and destinations with accessible features around the state on the Pure Michigan accessible travel webpage at [Michigan.org/Accessibility](https://www.michigan.org/accessibility).

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](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNR).