**Showcasing the DNR: Exploring the outdoors in 52 Michigan adventures**

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Last New Year’s Eve, before the twinkle lights, champagne and lyrics of “Auld Lang Syne” carried us into 2021, I found myself in the quiet, cloudy woods at Sleepy Hollow State Park in Clinton County.

Inspired by the popular [52 Hike Challenge](https://www.52hikechallenge.com/), I crunched down the trail, taking the first steps on a yearlong journey through Michigan’s outdoors. That holiday trek kicked off a series of 52 day-hikes where I would experience frozen forests, rolling coastal dunes, wildflower-filled fields and lush wetlands in different seasons throughout the year.

I’ve always loved watching nature, ever since I could point a tiny finger at my grandparents’ bird feeder, squealing, “chicken-dee! chicken-dee!” at the visiting black-capped chickadees.

Committing to the challenge of intentional, weekly hikes helped me encounter the outdoors in a new way. With close and frequent observation, I perceived the changing of nature’s details in each season, week and even time of day.

Starting in the austere winter landscape, monochrome and overcast, my first hikes took me through snow-flocked trees and along icy trails.

One of my early adventures sent me sliding down a steep, slippery bridge, nearly bowling over my hiking partner on the other side (I express-ordered traction cleats as soon as I got home).

Winter sunsets arrived early and fast, like a door slamming shut. When I managed to sneak in short hikes after work, I found myself hustling back to the trailhead, racing the sun retreating below the horizon.

Spring was heralded by the emergence of fantastical-looking skunk cabbages – wetland plants that make their own heat – blazing up through lingering crusts of snow. May-apple blooms, jack-in-the-pulpits and songbirds soon followed, filling the quiet woods with new life and energy.

With more miles on my boots and a floppy hat swapped for insulating fleece, the summer season introduced a leafier landscape and soaring temperatures.

I paused often under the scorching sun to collect wild black raspberries that dyed my hands purple (and then fled when clouds of hungry mosquitos caught up with me). [Learn about foraging for wild berries and mushrooms](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79119_104319---,00.html).

I completed a memorable autumn hike in October with the [Michigan Department of Natural Resources Outdoor Skills Academy](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79135_79219_81143---,00.html). After a morning of archery practice, local mushroom experts led participants on a group hike to peer into the brush for edible woodland treasures. We learned to spot cinnabar-red chanterelles, dusky trumpet mushrooms and craggy-textured chaga in the damp, musky-smelling autumn woods.

My adventures took me to local parks managed by city, county, township or nonprofit organizations and to the 4.6 million acres of parks, forests and recreation areas the DNR manages; all of them on public lands open for everyone to explore and enjoy.

Finding a trail to explore each week reinforced how important it is to have nearby access to the outdoors.

Public lands are not just important for hikers, snowshoers, mountain bikers or other recreational users like me – they’re also important for wildlife, and for healthy waters that people, animals and plants all need. Forests clean the water that ends up in our homes, starting as underground springs or a rush of snowmelt and filtering through wetlands, eventually traveling to rivers, streams and lakes.

Some of the highlights of my hikes were moments where I got to see wildlife up close. Walking with quiet footsteps, I saw white-tailed does shoving each other for a choice bite of grass, painted turtles scuttling across the trail and a fierce red-tailed hawk snatching a meal in open grassland and heard the rattling bugles of sandhill cranes before seeing their broad wings as they swooped low above me.

Through the year, I didn’t keep up with the hike challenge just because I wanted to finish. I also kept moving because it made me feel great.

After a year of day hikes, I got better at navigating, incorporated more outdoor activity into my life and enjoyed the peace and mental health benefits of being in the outdoors.

Now, within minutes of leaving sight of the trailhead, I feel a sense of ease. I’m also more comfortable going out in cold weather or on drizzly days when I might have stayed inside before.

For anyone just getting into hiking, there are a few practical things to think about before heading outside. Always check the trail map and conditions ahead of time, and let a trusted friend know where you’re going if you’ll be alone, and when you intend to be back.

The gear you bring doesn’t have to be fancy, but it’s important to carry [outdoor essentials](https://www.nps.gov/articles/10essentials.htm) to be prepared for a surprise rainstorm, the sun going down before you’re back to the trailhead (looking at you, December hikes!) or scrapes and stings.

Even for short hike, I always carry a whistle, water, small first aid kit, flashlight, hat, packable raincoat and snack. In winter, wearing layers and water-resistant gear keeps me warm and dry. In summer, bug-spray, sunscreen and a brimmed hat ward off sunburn and pests. A fire starter is also a good thing to carry, along with a compass and a map.

As you begin thinking about 2022 goals, how do you plan to experience Michigan’s outdoors? You might get started by joining the national [First Day Hikes](https://www.stateparks.org/special-programs/first-day-hikes/) event on Jan. 1, or find other fun ways to motivate yourself to get outside throughout the seasons.

If you’d like to tackle the official [52 Hike Challenge](https://www.52hikechallenge.com/), there are online resources that provide motivation, community support and a fun completion patch.

I’m looking forward to a 2022 full of [rewarding hikes, scenic adventures and new wild places to explore across Michigan’s public lands](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79119_79151---,00.html).

I hope you’ll join me!

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