**Showcasing the DNR: New services coming to Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park**

**By JOHN PEPIN**

**DNR deputy public information officer**

At the conclusion of a cooperative and productive partnership with Gogebic Community College that spanned 10 years, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources will now again operate the popular downhill winter sports complex at Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in Ontonagon County.

In addition, after more than three decades, the DNR has also contracted with a new concessionaire to run several business enterprises familiar to park visitors, as well as provide new park amenities the DNR hopes will enhance the ski hill and park operations on a year-round basis.

Park shuttles, sea kayak rentals and more are coming soon.

Across Michigan, the DNR partners with businesses and outside organizations to enrich visitor experiences at state parks. Concessions contracts cover numerous features, including park stores; kayak, bike and other rentals; food and water parks.

In 2021, a total of 76 concessions contracts were in place for DNR operations across Michigan. The revenue statewide from those concessions, leases and operating agreements totaled $2.2 million.

At the Porcupine Mountains, home of Michigan’s largest state park, a ski hill has been operated since the 1940s, along with a lodge concession, ski rentals and, more recently, a Frisbee golf course during summertime.

The park also offers fall color ski lift rides and maintains a store at the site of a historic park headquarters and a store at the park’s visitor center.

In addition, in 2006, the DNR entrusted the local volunteer group Friends of the Porkies to develop three programs at the park, which have proven successful. They include the park’s Folk School, annual music festival and Artist in Residence program.

In 2012, Gogebic Community College took over the use agreement at the ski hill, including the winter food and the ski shop facilities.

This arrangement would remain in place until September 2020, when college President George McNulty contacted the DNR to announce the facility’s intention to discontinue management of the ski hill.

“At the start of this partnership, Gogebic’s vision was to assist the State of Michigan in rebuilding the Porkies’ operations and facilitating economic development and/or stability in the region,” McNulty wrote in a letter to the DNR. “Over the last eight years, the college now believes that we have accomplished this vision.”

The DNR asked the college if it would continue operations through the 2021-2022 season. The department had also granted contract extensions to a concessionaire who had been operating at the park for more than three decades to help provide a smooth transition.

“The college is committed to the prosperity and growth that was achieved over our tenure, and if needed, is more than willing to collaborate and to be a resource for the new vendor in keeping the Porkies successful,” McNulty wrote.

Doug Rich, DNR western U.P. Parks and Recreation Division district supervisor, said the relationship with the college has been beneficial, acknowledging the college’s contributions to stabilizing operations at the ski hill.

“GCC set us up for future success,” Rich said.

In fall 2020, the DNR requested bids for combined summer-winter management at the park, including all ski hill operations, chalet, cafeteria, park stores and vending machines.

Two bidders submitted proposals, including the prior concessionaire, but neither met bid qualifications.

The DNR took several months to consider its options, deciding in fall 2021 on a cooperative approach, which would see DNR Parks and Recreation Division staff operate the outdoor ski hill functions year-round, while a concession contractor would operate the indoor chalet, cafeteria, park stores, retail sales and rentals, vending machines, disc-golf course and events.

The contractor, Friends of the Porkies and park staff would collaborate for major events at the ski hill.

“We are prepared to once again take on this important role in partnership with our concession contractor,” Rich said. “In doing so, we plan to fulfil the DNR Parks and Recreation Division’s mission to acquire, protect and preserve the natural and cultural features of Michigan’s unique resources, and to provide access to land- and water-based public recreation and educational opportunities as implemented through the division’s Strategic Plan.

“Having a sustainable management system in place will help ensure the stability of this important component of the entire park resource.”

The DNR began a second bidding process in alignment with Michigan law and the DNR’s commercial use policy.

In 2021, Simple Adventures – an Auburn Hills company with 11 managers and more than 75 employees – secured contracts with the DNR to operate a concession at Interlochen State Park in Grand Traverse County and Fort Custer Recreation Area in Kalamazoo County.

The firm invested a total of $11,000 in those two facilities, resulting in revenue increases of 45% and 20%, respectively.

The competitive bidding process at the state park in the Porcupine Mountains included advertising for bids and a sealed-bid-opening before evaluation of proposals by a panel that independently scores each bid. An optional pre-bid meeting was held prior to the 2020 bid request.

“This process requires applicants to provide their best proposal, including everything they are willing to offer and can demonstrate they can provide,” Rich said. “…One of the long-standing goals was to provide an enhanced variety of recreational opportunities to make the ski area more of a year-round destination and to encourage visitors to stay longer in the area.”

According to the bid specifications, the DNR wanted the contractor to develop previously unavailable warmer-weather activities.

Some expansion ideas contemplated by the DNR included: installing a second ski chairlift, developing park shuttle service between Memorial Day and mid-October, building fat tire and mountain bike trails around the ski hill area, creating alternative lodging for guests or staff, and acquiring a liquor license at the ski hill cafeteria.

At a minimum, the prospective contractors were also expected to provide firewood sales and sea kayak and bicycle rentals.

Simple Adventures offered added amenities, including year-round food at the chalet, shuttle service to the Lake of the Clouds Scenic Overlook and the Presque Isle Unit of the park, online food ordering and equipment rentals.

Specialized services beyond concession management were also offered, like mountain biking and sea kayaking services to park guests. Simple Adventures and the DNR are currently hiring workers at the park.

The new services are expected to be welcome additions to the visitor experience at the 59,020-acre state park.

From the heights of a pronounced escarpment overlooking the Big Carp River and at Summit Peak, to the shimmering beauty of Lake Superior at Union Bay, the waterfalls of the Presque Isle River at the park’s west end and the heart of the territory, marked with dozens of hiking trails, the [Porcupine Mountains](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?type=SPRK&id=426) are a fabulous destination visited by more than half a million people every year.

Find out more on job openings with the [DNR](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/careers) or [Simple Adventures](https://www.simpleadventures.net/).

###