**Showcasing the DNR: Biking, horseback seasons offer new ways to go off-road at Silver Lake sand dunes**

**By CASEY WARNER**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

Situated along 3 miles of stunning Lake Michigan shoreline, with nearly 2,000 acres of dunes and the only sand dune off-road vehicle riding opportunity east of the Mississippi River, [Silver Lake State Park](https://www.michigandnr.com/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?type=SPRK&id=493) and its ORV area have long been a popular destination for outdoor adventures.

Now the park, located in Oceana County, offers new ways to experience the dunes, with a fall shoreline horseback riding season and a winter fat-tire biking season.

## **Exploring the shore, ‘Black Stallion’ style**

Elissa Buck, a Commercial Services and Land Use Program administrator in the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Division, recalled how both seasons came together.

Buck was first approached by Jenny Cook, the Michigan equine trails representative on the DNR’s Michigan Trails Advisory Council and member of its Equine Trails Subcommittee, while working at a DNR booth at the Michigan Horse Expo in 2011.

“She had gone on a shoreline ride in another state and had a dream of bringing the opportunity to Michigan. As a fellow equine enthusiast, I could see the appeal,” Buck said. “I myself watched ‘The Black Stallion’ and other horse movies with iconic scenes of horses running along a shoreline and had envisioned what that would be like in Michigan.”

While that initial conversation 12 years ago resulted in Buck responding that she was unaware of any opportunities that existed at the time, the seed was planted.

“Fast-forward to 2017, and I was now a full-time employee who helped staff facilitate event permits sitting in a meeting with our Equine Trails Subcommittee, and there was Jenny Cook proposing the idea of a shoreline horseback riding season,” Buck said.

Buck was asked to help explore the idea and, if possible, conduct a pilot program that would be permitted using the DNR’s annual use permits to explore some potential locations.

“Little did I know we would end up focusing on Silver Lake State Park, one of the parks I had gotten my start in at the DNR,” she said.

The group looking into shoreline horseback riding opportunities initially conducted a review of all the state parks with Great Lakes shoreline. They reviewed the shoreline for distance – looking at locations with at least 1 mile of shoreline to ensure enough distance for an enjoyable ride and terrain that was safe to travel via horseback, ideally sandy rather than rocky shorelines. The group also looked into any environmental concerns/protections or land purchasing restrictions.

They narrowed their search down to five or six locations and invited members of the Equine Trails Subcommittee to visit the sites to determine if they would be a good fit for the activity, looking at parking lot size for large horse trailers and other facility concerns.

“Silver Lake was a great fit due to its beautiful 4-plus miles of shoreline. We explored multiple ways to access the shoreline but discovered the only permissible way would be through the ORV area, which was already in use from April through October,” Buck said.

The group decided to do a pilot ride at Silver Lake in November, with the help of Grace Adventures, a local organization that provided some horses for the public to ride for a one-day event.

That ride was a huge success, so the following year the park hosted a larger pilot program offering people the opportunity to bring their own horses to ride for a one-day event. It proved extremely popular.

“Both of these first two events helped us identify challenges and brainstorm solutions. It also got us thinking that equestrians would probably love an extended period to ride,” Buck said.

For the final pilot program at Silver Lake, the DNR partnered with the Michigan Horse Council to host a two-week season with a registration process to ensure the number of people coming on a single day would be manageable and all participants could have a quality experience.

“That season was met with so much enthusiasm and really helped us lay the groundwork for opening up the Sliver Lake ORV Area for equestrian use this past November,” Buck said.

All three pilot programs had volunteers assisting with manure clean-up, and it was determined a regular season would be possible with the continued support of volunteers.

During the first shoreline horseback riding season at Silver Lake State Park in November 2022, there were over 2,000 parking reservations sold.

“Many of the days in the first two weeks of November and most weekends were sold out, indicating a robust interest,” Cook said. “There were participants from Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Wisconsin who traveled to Michigan to enjoy these unique opportunities.”

It’s an experience Cook said horseback riders have described in ways such as “A dream come true,” “Best ride of my life!” and “Definitely a day to remember!”

The [shoreline riding season at Silver Lake State Park](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnr%2Fthings-to-do%2Fhorseback-riding%2Fshoreline-riding&data=05%7C01%7CWarnerC1%40michigan.gov%7Ca9ba349c807c4455157908dafaedcbf1%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C638098196499048038%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=MUhV7LdepncBDj4ePve6VBDizBlZAKLXEpeBSu5DgRg%3D&reserved=0) runs Nov. 1-30, and registration opens in September. A [predetermined riding route](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnr%2F-%2Fmedia%2FProject%2FWebsites%2Fdnr%2FDocuments%2FPRD%2FMisc%2FSilverLake_GLShorelineHorsebackRide.pdf%3Futm_campaign%3Dnews%2Bdigest%2Baugust2022%2Bweek4%26utm_medium%3Ddigest%26utm_source%3Dgovdelivery&data=05%7C01%7CVanAntwerpA%40michigan.gov%7C46a3d8bae34a41958ae708da8c2b5793%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C637976415027041337%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=%2F31uVcWHnJo5ES0rBjD4W9GW9eSLVv5SV28J%2BXW4KRQ%3D&reserved=0) has been established.

**Biking the dunes**

At the same time that the pilot program for the equestrian riding season was taking place, Brad Parsons – DNR media production specialist and mountain bike enthusiast –was inspired by park staff to coordinate a fat-tire biking pilot ride at the frozen dunes with local riders.

West Michigan volunteer groups Michigan's Edge Mountain Bike Association and Shoreline Cycling Club collaborated with DNR staff to host permitted pilot rides in March 2020 and March 2021, using the Silver Lake ORV Area.

"The goal was to test how fat-tire bikes maneuvered on the wintery sand, examine safety concerns and provide valuable feedback for park staff. Enthusiastic volunteers and park staff played a significant role in helping this unique winter recreation opportunity come to life – it was a collaborative effort," Parsons said.

Like the Silver Lake equestrian programs, the pilot fat-tire bike rides were met with a lot of enthusiasm.

“With fat-tire bike riding growing in popularity each year, we realized this was an opportunity to usher in a new way to experience the dunes,” said Jody Johnston, Silver Lake State Park manager.

The [fat-tire biking season at Silver Lake ORV Area](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/winter/bike/silver-lake-fat-tire) takes place Dec. 15-March 15 from 8 a.m. to dusk each day. No reservations or preregistration are needed, but a Recreation Passport is required for vehicle entry into the pedestrian parking lot, located at 8890 West Shore Drive in Mears. A Recreation Passport self-pay station is available at the lot entrance.

Riders will enjoy 450 acres of open sand dunes, elevation changes of 80-100 feet, access to Lake Michigan and sunsets over the lake from the top of the dunes.

Andy Klevorn of the Shoreline Cycling Club said he hopes bikers from across the state make the trek to Silver Lake in the winter.

“It is just as beautiful but more peaceful without the hustle and bustle of Silver Lake in the summertime,” he said. “The thing that makes riding there interesting is the wide open spaces, the scenery and when the sand is really frozen it's very much like riding a place in Utah called Slickrock.”

Comparing it to a ski hill, Klevorn said, “I love making that first climb up and then sort of bombing down to the lake and then enjoying the riding along Lake Michigan before trekking back up to the top and then back down to the bottom and then back up to the top.”

The fat-tire bike season idea coming about while the shoreline horseback riding season was just getting off the ground was serendipitous, according to Buck.

“Timing was perfect, as we were able to amend DNR land-use orders to allow the equestrian and fat tire biking seasons at the same time, making Silver Lake in to a four- season destination,” she said.

Johnson agreed.

“We recognized the ability to accommodate both activities at Silver Lake and are glad that we could provide each of these at a time of the year when there hasn’t been a lot of use at the park,” he said.

Getting the two new seasons up and running took a team effort – including the various organizations that sponsored and supported pilot rides and the volunteers who came out to help make them a success – according to Johnson.

“Park staff also were asked to take on additional responsibilities, including the development and installation of additional signage and additional bathroom facility maintenance during a time when many of our staff were on seasonal layoff,” he said.

Kasey Cline, district supervisor with the DNR Parks and Recreation Division, also attributed the success of the new Silver Lake activities to the work of staff and volunteers.

“Many have helped to make the necessary accommodations to support these new recreational opportunities and assist our visitors," Cline said. “With the creation of a fat-tire bike season in the dunes and a horseback riding season along the Lake Michigan shoreline, the DNR is proud to introduce and expand four-season opportunities in one of Michigan’s most unique state parks.”

For more information on recreation opportunities at Silver Lake State Park, visit [Michigan.gov/SilverLake](https://www.michigandnr.com/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?type=SPRK&id=493).

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