**Showcasing the DNR: Partnerships go a long way at Gourdneck State Game Area**

**By DON POPPE and RACHEL LEIGHTNER**

**Wildlife Division**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

Surrounded by family homes, thriving businesses and city traffic, Gourdneck State Game Area is the first designated urban state game area of its kind.

Here hunters and community members have an opportunity to connect with nature via a short drive or walk.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Division oversees more than 340,000 acres of public lands in southern Michigan.

This system of lands known as state game and wildlife areas includes more than 100 locations specifically managed for wildlife habitat and hunting opportunity that are open to public use for wildlife-based recreation.

Gourdneck State Game Area is nestled in the bustling city of Portage in Kalamazoo County. The area is divided into four distinct sections totaling over 2,293 acres. Almost entirely within the Portage city limits, Gourdneck is still a popular destination for hunters, and a hub for diverse wildlife populations and habitats.

## The first urban state game area

Gourdneck is unique among state game areas. It covers all the typical elements you might expect, good hunting, interesting terrain with lowlands, creeks and hills. But, where it shines is as a stronghold for rare plants, animals, and natural communities like prairie fens. It has the best of everything and is easy to get to for everyone from hunters to nature lovers.

A pioneer for its time, Gourdneck State Game Area was one of the first such places established in southern Michigan in 1941. Over time, the state game area has become uniquely urban as the surrounding areas have developed rapidly into a metropolitan center.

Despite the human development, the area has remained a quick escape into the quiet of nature and a sanctum for wildlife, supporting diverse habitats and populations of rare plant and wildlife species.

“Our favorite rabbit hunting spot is at Gourdneck State Game Area,” said Portage resident and hunter, Tim Bunch. “Our beloved rabbit spot is 1.2 miles from our house. Gourdneck is a goldmine of nature.”

The original intent of state game areas was twofold: manage the land for wildlife habitat and provide land for public hunting opportunities. While both these tenets are still priorities, considerations for how to manage the land have adapted to the growing needs of the area 80 years later.

The area offers good opportunity for small game and deer hunters.

In the wildlife conservation toolbox, hunting is comparable to the Phillips-head screwdriver – effective, efficient and almost always required to achieve your goal.

Hunting is critical for keeping the delicate balance intact between teeming wildlife populations and the available food and space wild animals require.

Deer hunters are especially valuable at Gourdneck, as they reduce the abundance of deer that indulge in the landscape offerings of planted hostas and rose bushes in nearby yards.

For neighboring homes, there are safeguards put in place to ensure hunting is done safely and responsibly, including a 450-foot safety zone near homes and buildings, where firearm hunting is prohibited.

Though providing hunting opportunity is a priority for the area, use and enjoyment for other visitors is a priority, too.

Hikers, birders, photographers, wildlife watchers and all those who seek a sliver of nature’s medicine are welcome. Special events are carefully planned to avoid conflict with hunters. Because this is a multiuse area, there are a few simple principles to keep in mind to respect fellow visitors and the wildlife that lives there:

* Stay on area trails and roadways. Most hunting will occur away from trails in solitary areas.
* Hunting seasons are year-round for various species. However, most hunting occurs during dawn and dusk hours. If you’re not hunting, consider visiting during the midday hours.
* Wear hunter orange or bright colors to easily signal your whereabouts.
* Respect the plants, wildlife and people you come across. This is a shared space with a common goal, to enjoy and appreciate the natural world.

# **City of Portage partnership**

With a unique combination of good hunting, wildlife species of great conservation need and its location in an urban environment, Gourdneck offers many opportunities. The DNR and the City of Portage have partnered through memorandums of understanding and agreement to promote the area as a model for an urban state game area to introduce metropolitan communities to hunting, wildlife and nature.

Both partners want to engage with the local community and provide improved access for hunters, wildlife watchers, outdoors enthusiasts, hikers, people with disabilities and volunteers alike.

The DNR’s partnership with the City of Portage was formalized with a signed 10-year memorandum of understanding in late 2019. In 2021, the partnership was further supported by an annually renewed memorandum of agreement.

City and DNR staff have regular meetings and share resources to communicate to the public about prescribed burning, timber sales and other work the DNR does to manage the habitat and access to Gourdneck State Game Area.

These resources have included mailings to neighbors, posts on the city’s social media platforms and stories in the Portager Newsletter, a citywide publication. The city of Portage also assists the DNR with sanitation and access to the area. The city provides garbage pickup services and planning solutions to difficult parking lot access.

“We have been very pleased with the work both the city and Michigan DNR have accomplished so far with the Gourdneck State Game Area, and we look forward to more collaboration opportunities to develop this unique environment for the community into the future,” said Kathleen Hoyle, director of parks and recreation for the City of Portage.

**Community focus**

A common goal this partnership is the desire to bring people to the state game area to explore and develop an appreciation for nature. To accomplish this goal, the partners have collaboratively organized a successful string of environmental education programs and activities for the public to attend.

These activities have been featured as part of the City of Portage’s Parks and Recreation activity series and have included invasive species stewardship days in partnership with Michigan United Conservation Clubs’ On the Ground volunteer habitat improvement program and the popular Hikes With a Biologist series.

Upcoming events include an amphibian hike on April 7 and an invasive species removal stewardship day on Sept. 9. [Learn more about future events](https://anc.apm.activecommunities.com/cityofportageparks/activity/search?onlineSiteId=0&activity_select_param=2&activity_keyword=stewardship&viewMode=list).

**Pardon our dust**

Improvements to the area, including installation of important infrastructure, are slated to begin this year. The DNR has been successful in securing two [Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund development grants](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/Buy-and-Apply/grants/rec/mnrtf) to improve access and infrastructure at the state game area.

A $113,000 grant will improve the west entrance along Angling Road and upgrade a parking area to be compliant with the [Americans with Disabilities Act](https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/#:~:text=The%20Americans%20with%20Disabilities%20Act%20%28ADA%29%20is%20a,race%2C%20color%2C%20sex%2C%20national%20origin%2C%20age%2C%20and%20religion.), provide a comfort station and create a wheelchair-accessible trail, complete with resting stations and benches to overlook the Hampton Creek wetland.

A $300,000 grant will include similar improvement to parking features for the Hampton Lake Trail, in addition to installing a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk, kayak launch and fishing platform on Hampton Lake.

These projects are currently in the engineering and design phases. The improved parking infrastructure will support larger vehicles, such as school buses, to help in connecting students and community organizations with wildlife and the outdoors.

The community support and interest in connecting with nature at Gourdneck State Game Area is encouraging and indicates a bright future of partnership opportunities there.

The DNR and the city look forward to involving the community in shaping what is possible at the state game area in the future, while continuing to balance the priorities of providing hunting opportunity and wildlife habitat.

For more information, contact DNR wildlife biologist Don Poppe at [PoppeD@Michigan.gov](mailto:PoppeD@Michigan.gov) or call or text at 989-965-3333.

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNRStories). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNREmail](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNREmail).

###