# **Showcasing the DNR: Cold-weather camping in the UP**

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Our plan was to arrive early enough to pitch our tent before nightfall, and as we made our way north and crossed the Mackinac Bridge – the gold, scarlet and tangerine leaves increasingly colorful and more vibrant with each mile – we were right on schedule.

But then came the Brevort beaches and a most stunning Lake Michigan sunset.

“We have to stop!” I told my husband Joe, who was in no way surprised by my enthusiastic declaration while driving us toward Hog Island Point State Forest Campground for the night.

Joe knows all too well of my obsession with Great Lakes beaches and sherbet skies (all the better when they’re combined). And, yes, also my long-held tradition of stopping along this sandy stretch of U.S. Highway 2 whenever traveling in the Upper Peninsula, usually to jump in the lake quick.

We did indeed stop to soak up the view – and battle a fierce, early October breeze as we walked over the wind-swept dunes toward the shoreline to snap a few photos of the glowing orange sun slipping below the horizon – but then we were off, no dip in the water this time around.

With another 20 minutes or so to go to get to the campground, we knew our window of daylight was closing quickly.

## The magic of colder-weather camping

Camping is a quintessential summer activity, and over the years our family, like many families, has created lasting memories at a number of the 103 state parks all across Michigan, from the westernmost region of the U.P. and along the Straits of Mackinac to less remote areas in the southern Lower Peninsula and in more urban spots near lakes Huron and Michigan. We’ve also savored s’mores-making around campfires at parks situated on a number of inland lakes.

But camping in autumn, and in a tent?

This is a newer development for us, as semi-empty nesters, and we’re digging it – even as we’re also learning a lot about what works best when it comes to planning for this kind of “off-season” trip that entails bundling up and sleeping in a tent for several nights. (One important takeaway: clothing layers, and probably an extra-warm coat and cozy hat, are essential.)

What we’ve discovered over the past couple of years of tent camping in September and October: There’s something uniquely special about getting away in nature this time of year, when the cooler weather means way fewer crowds (and less or zero bugs, thank goodness) and entirely different scenery (the kaleidoscope of autumn hues is simply spectacular).

For all these reasons, we decided to head north earlier this month for four nights of tent camping at both state forest campgrounds and one state park campground. It was, we determined, a fitting way to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary, especially since it was nearly three decades ago when we first traveled to the U.P. together and a quarter-century ago when we honeymooned in Paradise on Lake Superior’s Whitefish Bay.

## Outdoor adventures abound

Camping opportunities are plentiful in Michigan’s state parks, and each park offers something special. You can camp by the water or in the woods, in a tent, RV, yurt, cabin and more.

If you're looking for a more rustic camping experience, we have 140-plus state forest campgrounds located throughout Michigan's Upper and northern Lower peninsulas.

Each state forest campground is located on a river or lake, providing excellent access to fishing, boating and paddling. A handful are open year-round for anyone who would like to enjoy [a winter camping adventure](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/winter/camping). (Don’t forget, vehicle entry into all state parks, recreation areas and state forest campgrounds requires a [Recreation Passport](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/rec-pp).)

Speaking of park operation dates, that’s an important consideration, depending upon your destination. You can download the [state park camp and overnight lodging rates and operating dates schedule](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/-/media/Project/Websites/dnr/Documents/PRD/Rates/StateParkCampgroundOpDatesRates.pdf?rev=4f851a59078746d59255d6df8c5401d5&hash=D780B22DF22EB05EBA404FF702EB8865) to know when some close for the season and also to find campgrounds open year-round. Just remember that some locations have limited restroom and shower access during the winter.

For state forest campgrounds, which offer a more rustic camping experience, download the DNR’s [state forest campground matrix](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/-/media/Project/Websites/dnr/Documents/PRD/Rates/StatewideSFCGFacilityandAmenityMatrix.pdf?rev=b70a8c474aed4a9dbf031ab9f5203e7c&hash=81B5907BC931CA6B93B17F2850D9A2F2) and find locations marked "open all year." It’s recommended to check out roads that are plowed (depending on your vehicle). Also, the majority of these campgrounds are first come, first served.

## Making new memories

Having not previously camped at a state forest campground – we’d only ever camped as a family and as a couple at modern state park campgrounds – we decided to incorporate a couple of these locations into our itinerary.

Since we were coming from Traverse City and eventually landing in the northeastern U.P., at Muskallonge Lake State Park, we decided a night at [Hog Island Point State Forest Campground](file:///C:\Users\durocherh\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\5DHK2ZS5\Hog%20Island%20Point%20State%20Forest%20Campground%20Detail), about 8 miles east of Naubinway in Mackinac County, would be a great option as we began our trip.

This 42-site rustic campground is situated on Lake Michigan, with most campsites having direct access to the lake. Part of the shoreline is composed of large rocks, but it can be hiked with caution, which is what we did, with steaming cups of coffee made over our campfire, the morning after we arrived. Campground amenities include vault toilets and potable water from a hand-pump well.

That next morning, after breaking down our tent and packing up – and also driving slowly through the campground to check out the (mostly vacant) sites and day-use picnic area – we continued on with our road trip.

We made sure to stop by the Bay View Inn in nearby Epoufette (I highly recommend their breakfast pasty), which offers a gorgeous view of Lake Michigan from the dining room.

Next up: two nights at Muskallonge Lake State Park in northern Luce County, followed by one night at Pretty Lake State Forest Campground, which is one of eight state forest campgrounds managed by Muskallonge, all within 10 miles of the state park.

Here are a few highlights and lessons learned from our time at these two spots, and also things to keep in mind if you decide to plan a fall or winter camping adventure:

* **Prepare for the weather**. As Michiganders, we understand how quickly the weather can change on any given day, especially come fall. As Jim Dzelak, unit supervisor at Muskallonge Lake State Park, reminded us during our visit, camping near Lake Superior means temperatures can vary widely. “It could be 70s during the day and much colder, in the 40s or lower, at night,” Dzelak said. During our two-night stay at Muskallonge, the temperatures dipped into the mid-30s at night, and winds were high – out of the north at 15-20 miles per hour during the day. Know before you go and prepare accordingly.
* **Pack the right gear**. Even during a beautiful fall, which we’ve had this year, it might rain or even snow. Be sure to bring along warm clothing, including rain gear, jacket, hat and gloves. “Bringing along extra protection for your tent, such as a vapor barrier for the bottom of your tent, is a good idea,” Dzelak said. For our stay, we packed an air mattress, two-person sleeping bag and lots of blankets. I’m so glad I brought my winter parka and hat, which I wore in the mornings as we sipped our coffees.
* **Connect with your friendly park staff (and available campground hosts, depending upon the location)**. Thanks to Dzelak and his staff, we learned about the various state forest campgrounds in the vicinity, great hiking trails nearby and other interesting tidbits about the park and surrounding area. Some parks, like Muskallonge, have campground hosts who can offer this kind of information, too. This was a new-to-us state park, and it was especially interesting to learn about the recent improvements – a new bathroom and shower building – and in-progress accessibility upgrades like adding a track chair for park visitors and revamping the Lake Superior overlook and pathway to the water, the latter of which is a project Dzelak is particularly passionate about. “I’ve wanted this since I started here at this park 16 years ago,” he said. “I am pretty pumped. There are not many, if any, accessible features on Lake Superior.” This project is estimated to be complete in June of next year.
* **Explore the area**. We love to hike and couldn’t wait to check out nearby trails. Park staff suggested the [Blind Sucker Pathway](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=359&type=SFPW), a 7.3-mile-long trail that takes you through a beautifully dense forest along the Blind Sucker River and the Lake Superior coast. (You can expect some steep hills and sections of sand.) The trail can be accessed at [Blind Sucker No. 1](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=669&type=SFCG), [Blind Sucker No. 2](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=670&type=SFCG) or [Lake Superior](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=668&type=SFCG) state forest campgrounds. During fall, if you stay at Muskallonge, be sure to ask about checking out – at no cost – an explorer backpack filled with wildlife and nature guidebooks that you can use for a walk on the pathway.
* **Be good-natured**. It's critical that we all do our part to protect our places and resources so that we all can continue to enjoy them now and for years to come. From carrying out all trash and recyclables and [not moving firewood](https://www.michigan.gov/invasives/laws/dont-move-firewood), to [knowing your trail etiquette](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/places/state-trails/trail-etiquette) and [being safe while outdoors](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/education/safety-info), [recreating responsibly](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/rr) will ensure you have the best experience possible.

Our final camping night found us at [Pretty Lake State Forest Campground](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=672&type=SFCG), an incredibly picturesque spot located 25 miles northwest of Newberry in Luce County. We had our pick of the campground’s 18 sites and selected one just steps away from Pretty Lake.

We positioned our tent so that the opening faced the water, giving us the most beautiful views of this tree-lined, quiet body of water – glass-like and mist-covered in the early morning and reflecting the fall colors and sunset later in the day.

This rustic campground is part of the designated Pretty Lake Quiet Area, allowing for unmotorized use only, including on Pretty Lake and any lakes in the surrounding area. Pretty Lake is the northernmost lake in a chain of seven lakes. The [Pretty Lake Pathway](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=420&type=SFPW), which leads to the walk-in campsites, can be accessed on the west side of the campground.

As we reluctantly left this serene rustic campground, occupied by just us and a couple of other campers, we talked about how much we enjoyed our fall tent-camping excursion. We discovered a new love of state forest campgrounds, and we even shared with each other that maybe, just maybe, winter tent camping might be our next outdoor adventure.

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