

Ready, set, camp

Diehards beat crowds, enjoy quiet of early season

BY HEATHER JOHNSON DUROCHER
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Summer may be known as the ultimate time to camp, but plenty of people head for the woods and pitch tents as soon as the snow melts.

"It's a great time of year," said June Barnard, an avid camper who doesn't let the cooler spring weather prevent her from enjoying the great outdoors. "There's not as many bugs, there's not as many people. It's nice to have a crisp, cool night."

Barnard, manager at Backcountry Outfitters in Traverse City who often camps with her boyfriend or a group of friends, especially enjoys camping along the shores of Lake Michigan.

"The water is such a pretty color blue in the spring," she said. "Going up north toward Wilderness State Park is probably my favorite. I like hiking and kayaking along the shore.

Kayaking is a great way to get to a campsite without schlepping things on your back."

Whether you're interested in a more rustic experience — pitching a tent and possibly going without electricity and running water — or prefer more modern amenities, northwestern Lower Michigan is home to countless camping opportunities, from state parks to privately owned grounds to your own back yard.

Springtime can be ideal for many campers who can't wait to get outside after months of snow and ice. A bonus is having a more peaceful outdoor experience compared to summer camping.

"It's nice to get out and smell the fresh air after being cooped up all winter," said Scott Dice, Cadillac district supervisor for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Bureau. "And there's less crowds and you can have the site you want."

As Michigan's 96 state parks gear up for another summer season, officials

advise campers to call ahead for park-specific information. The reservation line is (800) 477-2757.

"It picks up between the first of April and the first of May. That's when it gets rolling, depending on the weather," Dice said. "The best thing is for folks to call their local state park office for updated information."

Campers already are enjoying Traverse City State Park, though staff continue to prepare for the busy season ahead, said Park Supervisor David Johns.

"We still have a lot to do, but people can certainly camp here and not notice we have things to do," Johns said. "We're prepared, we're ready."

Many of the park's spring-time campers are regulars who also enjoy fall camping, Johns said.

"Some people don't actually enjoy camping in the summer because it's too hot here. We see some of the same people in the spring and the fall. It's not only less crowded, it's certainly a lot less humid," he said.

Betsie River Canoes & Campground in



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

Bill Nicholls of Hazel Park with sons Billy, 14, and Bradley, 11, break camp after spending three days during the boys' spring break at Traverse City State Park.

Thompsonville also is open for the season.

"We're open for campers anytime they want to come in," said manager Mike Golosh of the 53-acre campground.

One thing to keep in mind when camping in the spring? Dress and pack accordingly.

"Especially if you're tent camping — you want to make sure you stay warm," Golosh said.

"Most people don't come prepared," Johns said. "I talked to a man this weekend who had left a sweat-shirt behind and only had a light jacket. He was just kicking himself for that."

Campgrounds around the region

Getting back to nature is as easy as choosing one of these campgrounds:

ALANSON

Camp Petosega 61 sites. (231) 347-6536.

Crooked River RV Park 17 sites. (231) 548-5534.

BEAR LAKE

Hopkins Memorial Park 30 sites. (231) 864-3281.

Kampvilla RV Park 92 sites. (231) 864-3757.

BEAVER ISLAND

Beaver Island State Forest 25 sites. (989) 732-7541.

Wagner Campground 22 sites. (231) 448-2505.

St. James Township Campground 12 sites. (231) 448-2505.

BENZONIA/BEULAH

Homestead Resort on the Betsie River 5 RV sites, 5-10 tent sites. (231) 882-4163 or (800) 686-4163.

Timberline Campground 189 sites. (231) 882-9548.

Turtle Lake Campground 59 sites. (231) 275-7353.

Vacation Trailer Park 100 sites. (231) 882-5101.

BOYNE CITY

Young State Park 240 sites. (231) 582-7523.

BUCKLEY

Traverse City South KOA 119 sites. (231) 269-3203.

CADILLAC

Birchwood Campground 33 sites. (231) 775-9101.

Cadillac Woods 52 sites. (231) 825-2012.

Camp Cadillac 115 sites. (231) 775-9724.

Long Lake (Wexford) State Forest 775-9727.

Mitchell State Park 221 sites. (231) 775-7911.

CEDAR

Leelanau Pines 182 sites, (231) 228-5742.

CHARLEVOIX

Fisherman's Island State Park 81 sites. (231) 547-6641.

CHEBOYGAN

Aloha State Park 285 sites. (231) 625-2522.

Cheboygan State Park 76 sites. 800-447-2757.

Waterways Campground 50 sites. (231) 627-7066.

COPEMISH

Healy Lake State Forest 24 sites. (231) 922-5280.

EAST JORDAN

East Jordan Tourist Park 100 sites. (231) 536-2561.

EASTPORT

Barnes Park 66 sites. (231) 599-2712.

Honcho Rest Campground 50 sites. (231) 264-8548.

Vacation Village Campground 80 sites. 264-8636.

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