

Promises of Solitude

Metro-Detroit's State Recreation Areas



Northern Outings

by Erin Fanning

Snow burst around me with a loud whoosh. Through a white haze, I looked up at the laden branch as it released more of its load. Icy crystals pricked my cheeks and ran down my back. Ahead of me, unaware that I hesitated, my husband Keith broke trail through a half-foot of snow. Wiping flakes from my eyes, I saw his red-and-black cap bounce through the woods and vanish down a hill. I hurried to catch up, jogging with my snowshoes as snow stuck to their bottoms, creating a sensation of walking on platforms.

A light wind whispered through the trees, and deer tracks peeled off to the right. Snowmobiles whined, sometimes nearby, but I never saw them. Oak trees threatened again with their snowy bundles, and I stopped at a frozen lake to catch my breath before rushing after Keith, still unaware that I straggled farther and farther behind.

Livingston County's 4,900-acre Brighton Recreation Area beckoned with a frozen finger, surprising me, and my northern Michigan snobbery, with its promises of solitude. I certainly hadn't expected to be alone, only a few miles from one of metropolitan Detroit's busiest suburbs, but alone we were, except for the deer hiding in the woods and the occasional buzz of a snowmobile. We followed the five-mile Torn Shirt Trail, often losing it and simply wandering in the snowy day, as it wound through dense forest.

Better known for their mountain biking and hiking trails, the state recreation areas in Livingston, Washt-

enaw, and Oakland counties provide a winter escape from the bustle of metro-Detroit/Ann Arbor. Whether it be snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, or just a winter walk, the areas are, for the most part, a quieter version of their summer selves, where one can study the geometry of a snowflake and make your own tracks through miles of ungroomed woods. The following is just a sampling of greater-Detroit recreation areas, a taste to make you hungry for a full helping in person.

Holly Recreation Area

With about 375,000 annual visitations, the 7,800-acre Holly Recreation Area seems a strange place in which to seek solitude. Yet, on a crisp winter morning, it is possible to find yourself alone on its 10 miles of cross-country/hiking trails. Brushing up next to McGinnis, Wildwood, and Valley lakes, the trails roll through hilly terrain. Split by Interstate 75, Holly's cross-country trails are found in its east unit with about 25 miles of mountain biking trails to the west of I-75. Featuring three distinct loops, these narrow trails ramble next to small lakes, and one even sidles up to the interstate, a reminder that civilization is always nearby. Keep in mind, though, that snowmobiles are allowed in this section of the park.

Bald Mountain Recreation Area

Like Holly, 4,600-acre Bald Mountain is split into two distinct units. Cross-country skiers are advised to head to the north unit, where they will find eight miles of trails, while the south unit, although home to an additional seven miles of rolling loops, is open to snowmobiles. Marked, like most recreation-area trails, with numbered posts and maps, the north loops dip and climb, sometimes steeply, past several of the park's numerous lakes and through groves of tamaracks and oaks.

Highland Recreation Area

Home to one of southeastern Michigan's most difficult mountain biking trails, 5,900-acre Highland unfolds with meadows, hills, and trees packed tightly into hardwood forests. One winter, as snow caressed the earth, erasing all evidence of mountain bikes, we snowshoed across the rolling terrain, leaving the main trail behind. We clambered to a lookout of snow-shrouded treetops as the wind rushed overhead. Official hiking/cross-country trails can also be found closer to the recreation area's main entrance, near the 721-acre Haven Hill Natural Area, which has been left mostly untouched for the past 75 years and hosts all of southern Michigan's main forest types.

Waterloo Recreation Area

On the border of Washtenaw and Jackson counties, Waterloo, the largest park in the Lower Peninsula, stretches for 20,500 acres. Trails crisscross the area, ranging from short 1-mile jaunts to the 36-mile Waterloo-Pinckney Trail, which connects to the Pinckney Rec-

Traveler's Notes



The Michigan DNR website—<http://www.michigandnr.com/parksandtrails/parkmap.aspx>—is perhaps the best place to find information about state recreation areas. It is wise, however, to call each area before visiting for current trail conditions and where to avoid snowmobiles, which are allowed in most of the recreation areas (**Brighton:** 810-229-6566; **Holly:** 248-634-8811; **Bald Mountain:** 248-

693-6767; **Highland:** 248-889-3750; **Waterloo:** 734-475-8307; **Pinckney:** 734-426-4913). For more winter escapes check out greater-Detroit's Huron-Clinton Metroparks—www.metroparks.com.

recreation Area. During a winter visit, we explored the trails that wrap around Waterloo's Gerald E. Eddy Discovery Center. Open all year, the Center combines geological displays with an introduction to the natural features found in Waterloo. Outside, we followed a snow-draped pathway that climbed past oak and hickory trees. My skis glided in tracks left by a previous skier, and as we returned to the Center, snow began to fall until our path disappeared, leaving the forest as white and blank as a painter's canvas.

Pinckney Recreation Area

Boasting 11,000 acres, Pinckney offers cross-country skiers and snowshoers about 26 miles of loops. It is a place where escape comes easy, and, although popular during warmer months, it breathes solitude in the winter. The rugged, narrow trails wind past inland lakes and across footbridges, climbing and dipping over sandy hills and soaring through open meadows.

Once, on a New Years Eve morning, as the world slept in, we clambered onto our mountain bikes and explored Pinckney's Potawatomi Trail, the granddaddy of Michigan mountain biking routes. The ground was frozen, and ice crystals seemed to hang in the air but snow didn't fall. Beneath our helmets we wore

caps that hung below our ears and mittens hid our hands. But even with the extra clothing, the cold bit in like a rabid dog and refused to let go.

Eventually, after a few miles of riding, the chill disappeared, yet the day never lost its crisp clarity: barren trees poking sharp fingertips into a gray sky; water lapping at frosty beaches; and the glimpse of a deer fleeing through the woods. Birds didn't sing and we barely spoke, concentrating on the path and staying warm. It was a rare stillness, even rarer that it took place in a major metropolitan area.

As we left Pinckney, our ride completed and bikes hurriedly stored on top of our car, we joined other vehicles on the surrounding roads until we eventually hit a highway, our car melding with the traffic, forming a river of rushing metal. But tucked away from the maze of highways and constant flow of people are the Pinckneys and Highlands, winter escapes, promises of solitude. 🏡

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Illustration by Rod Lawrence.