

Traveler

List of parks to conquer makes for happy hopping

Visit every Wisconsin state park in one year? Oh, you betcha!

Story and photos by Nate Ewanowski and Chelsea Plamann

We are Nate and Chelsea, high school sweethearts and Wisconsin natives. Becoming Wisconsin Badgers always seemed to be the ultimate goal. As we became UW-Madison alumni and landed dream jobs, “settling down” was never part of the plan. We craved adventure and pined for the gratification of something big to work toward. We needed a purpose, a new goal. We needed to get outside — together.



In warmer weather, Door County locations like Peninsula State Park are fun to explore by bicycle, while winter brings its own beauty to places such as Devil's Lake (below right).

The journey began on Jan. 3, 2016, with a cold, snowy hike through **New Glarus Woods State Park**. (W5508 CTH NN, New Glarus; 608-527-2335) The forest was quiet, the snow was crisp and the wind was nippy. We celebrated that first park outing with a tour and a pint at the adjacent New Glarus Brewing Co., a pleasant end to the first of what would be many exciting state park adventures.

Yes, we went to all of them — 50 to be exact. To prove it, we took a picture in front of every state park entrance sign. Our journey spanned the entire year. It included visiting some parks on warm summer days with friends and family, and seeing others in the dead of winter when we shared the park with

only the wildlife. Sometimes we camped in the park if time permitted, and other times we made day trips.

Wisconsin's state parks have so much to offer, no matter what season you visit. Whether it's hiking trails, beaches, overlooks, fishing spots, canoe areas or historical artifacts, there is something exciting to see at every one.

We could go on forever with details of our many unique and wonderful travels. Instead, we will highlight some of our best and most recommended experiences from our 2016 trips.

Winter wonderlands
Blue Mound State Park, Jan. 17: The highest point in south-



Canine friends can enjoy Wisconsin's many state parks, including Hartman Creek in Waupaca.

ern Wisconsin is breathtaking, literally, when there is a minus-22-degree wind chill. Smart to be out there then? Probably not. Memorable? No doubt. Climbing both of the park's lookout towers was all we had in us for that frigid trip. (4350 Mounds Park Road, Blue Mounds; 608-437-5711)

Ice skating on **Devil's Lake**, Jan. 23: It can be tricky to coordinate, considering conditions need to be just right — cold enough without snow, or a recent rain followed by a freeze. Devil's Lake State Park is well-loved in the summer for its hiking and majestic rock cliffs. But try it in the winter. Aside from a couple of friendly ice fishermen, it was just the lake and us. Incredible. It was one of the best moments of the year. (S5975 Park Road, Baraboo; 608-356-8301)



Roche-A-Cri State Park, Jan. 30: We noticed this park from miles out. It is the one hill in an otherwise pretty flat portion of the state. Walking into the park there is a prairie, followed by a woods and a pretty, little meandering creek. We spent several hours hiking here on a winter day and found a lot of evidence that the place was teeming with wildlife. There is an observation deck with a great view. The pictographs and petroglyphs were fascinating. This park is a must-see. (1767 State Highway 13, Friendship; 608-339-6881 summer, 608-565-2789 off-season)

Governor Dodge, Feb. 6: Did you know you can climb an ice waterfall at this state park? Yep. You can. (4175 State Highway 23 N, Dodgeville; 608-935-2315)

Biking Door County

In late May, we went on a five-day, self-sustained bike tour of Door County and visited all five of the state parks located in Wisconsin's thumb. We averaged about 30 miles of biking per day. Our family joined us and we met some new friends along the way.

No need for fancy gear — we bought cheap panniers and used trash bags for waterproofing. The equipment we carried on our bikes included a tent, sleeping bags and pads, snacks,

bike tools, clothes, toiletries, daily essentials, sunscreen, water, flashlights, tarp, ropes, fishing poles and bricks. Kidding about the bricks, but it sure felt like it.

We started at **Potawatomie State Park** where we had driven and camped the first night. (3740 County Road PD, Sturgeon Bay; 920-746-2890) Granola bars for breakfast, then we set out on our great tour. We rode on Bay Shore Drive (County Highway B) for most of the day. This was one of the better bike-friendly roads on the trip and a highly recommended route.

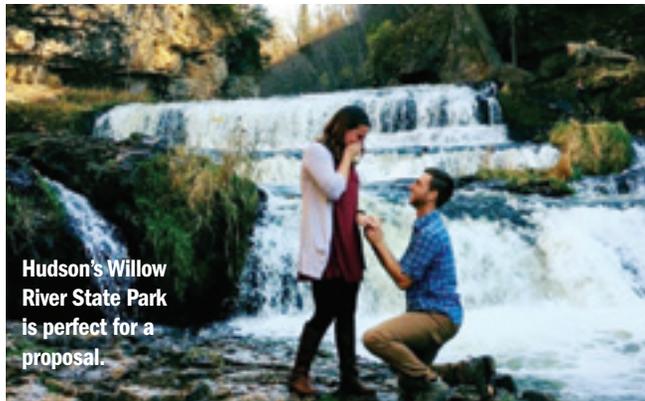
Next stop, **Peninsula State Park**. (9462 Shore Road, Fish Creek; 920-868-3258) We popped in at Julie's Café for coffee before setting up camp at Peninsula. Julie's is a great and friendly little spot where you can get some of the best java around. Wild Tomato was our restaurant choice for dinner, a neat place with delicious pizza.

The next morning, we set out on our bikes and headed for the top of Door County. We island-hopped via ferry, first to Washington Island (where we had to leave our bikes), then to **Rock Island State Park**. (1924 Indian Point Road, Washington Island; 920-847-2235)

Rock Island is such an amazing place! It has Viking-style buildings, a spectacular boat-house, a historic lighthouse, rugged hiking, backpacking, camping and more. No bikes, cars, skateboards or even your favorite Segways are allowed on the island. But that lack of transportation gives it a nice rustic feel.

After a long day of biking and hiking, we ferried back to Washington Island and had a massive dinner at Nelsen's Hall Bitters Pub. We then biked back to our campsite at the Washington Island Campground for the night. We managed to have a site near a farm and were lulled to sleep by soft horse neighs.

In the morning, we bid the horse farewell and took the ferry with our bikes back to the mainland. Once on shore, we biked down to **Newport State Park**. (475 County Highway NP, Ellison Bay; 920-854-2500)



Hudson's Willow River State Park is perfect for a proposal.

Although Newport is known for some of the best rustic camping, there were no available spots at the time of our trip — so remember to reserve early. We headed back to Peninsula for night No. 4.

On our final day, the agenda featured **Whitefish Dunes State Park** (3275 Clark Lake Road, Sturgeon Bay; 920-823-2400), along with Cave Point County Park. Both parks offer beautiful views of Lake Michigan.

When our trip came to an end, we had more than 100 miles on the bikes. We also had sunburns, wet gear, sore rear ends — and fantastic memories. Even if it's just for a day, biking in Door County is a highly recommended activity.

Summer and fall

Copper Falls, June 27: There is a hiking loop with a waterfall around every corner at this park, one of the most rustic

in the state. (36764 Copper Falls Road, Mellen; 715-274-5123)

Lake Kegonsa, Aug. 20: We adopted a sweet dog named Sparrow, and this was his first state park. He trotted through the forested paths and checked out the dog beach — an area adjacent to the actual state park beach. (2405 Door Creek Road, Stoughton; 608-873-9695)

Amnicon Falls, Sept. 24: The scenic rapids and waterfalls are easily accessible by car and absolutely beautiful! (4279 South County Highway U, South Range; 715-398-3000)

Wildcat Mountain, Oct. 15: We canoed the Kickapoo River and ended in Wildcat Mountain State Park with family. There are several canoe outfitters that are ready to provide a great water experience. We went up the mountain to take in the fall colors from above. It is a wonderful park with much to offer. (E13660 State Highway 33, Ontario; 608-337-4775)



An old quarry filled with water is one of the hidden secrets of Harrington Beach State Park, on Lake Michigan south of Sheboygan.

Fantastic foursome

In early November, we headed to northwest Wisconsin and were able to hit four great parks in one day. At **Straight Lake State Park**, we planned a sunrise hike on the Ice Age Trail that runs through the park. The way the sun gleamed through the fog on the glass-smooth lake was a truly amazing sight. (About 12 miles northeast of St. Croix Falls; 715-483-3747)

At **Interstate Park**, we hiked the Pothole hiking trail, discovering really neat geology and great views of neighboring Minnesota. (1275 State Highway 35, St. Croix Falls; 715-483-3747) We also spent some time at **Kinnickinnic State Park**. (W11983 820th Ave., River Falls; 715-425-1129)

The best stop of the day, though, was **Willow River State Park**. (1034 County Highway A, Hudson; 715-386-5931) This is our favorite state park, for good reason. Nate proposed in front of the waterfall and Chelsea said yes — we are getting married next year! It was a picture-perfect engagement.

December to-do list

Snowshoeing at Buckhorn, Dec. 11: One of our last park trips of the year took us to Buckhorn State Park, which lies on the banks of Castle Rock Lake. The park was empty, just the two of us and the soft plop of our snowshoes on several inches of fresh powder. We thought we were totally alone until we noticed the deer, about a half dozen of them, silent and observant. Nothing clears and refreshes the mind like a quiet, snowy forest. (W8450 Buckhorn Park Ave., Necedah; 608-565-2789)

We ended our journey on Dec. 30 at **Merrick State Park** (S2965 State Road 35, Fountain City; 608-687-4936), knowing Wisconsin state parks are wonderful treasures that deserve our utmost respect, love and support. We are all shaped by our experiences and by the people we choose to share them with. Life is an adventure, and Wisconsin is beautiful. Get out there and explore! 🌲

Nate Ewanowski and Chelsea Plamann live in Fitchburg and enjoy a variety of outdoor pursuits throughout the state.