

WYALUSING CELEBRATES 100 YEARS OF
INCREDIBLE VIEWS AND BOUNTIFUL RECREATION.

A century of scenic GRANDEUR



Paul Holtan

Standing on the bluffs overlooking the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers 500 feet below, it's pretty easy to see why John Nolen recommended Wyalusing as one of four locations for Wisconsin's first state parks in a 1909 report to the State Parks Board.

In his report to the board, Nolen, then a renowned landscape architect who had studied under Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. at the Harvard School of Landscape Architecture, wrote of Wyalusing:

Judged by the point of scenery alone it is equal to any site under consideration. It would be a surprise to most people to wander through its exquisitely beautiful coulees and grottoes or to stand upon its heights and view the broad island-dotted, majestic scenery of the "Father of Waters."

It took eight more years, but in 1917 Wyalusing became Wisconsin's fourth

state park following Interstate in 1900, Peninsula in 1909 and Devil's Lake in 1911.

This June, the park and its friends group, the Friends of Wyalusing State Park, will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the park.

Due to its prime location at the confluence of two major river systems, the area where the park is now located has a rich history. Various Indian cultures occupied the region as early as 9,000 B.C. There is an outstanding procession of 28 Indian mounds along Sentinel Ridge overlooking the Mississippi River. Historically,

Native Americans considered the region near the mouth of the Wisconsin River a "neutral" land. At least 14 different tribes lived in the area or visited to trade.

The modern history of the area began in 1673, when Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet arrived at the Upper Mississippi River after a four-day journey on the Wisconsin River. A monument at Point Lookout is dedicated to the two explorers.

Nolen notes in his report that it "has been already suggestively termed, Marquette Park." But the park was actually first named Nelson Dewey State Park and changed to Wyalusing in 1937 after the present Nelson Dewey State Park, south of Wyalusing, was created in 1935. That park preserves the first governor's restored home.

According to park historian and friends group member Randall Paske, the name Wyalusing is an English version of a Native American word that means "where an old holy man dwells."

With the bluffs providing a significant landmark for the meeting of two major



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Spectacular vistas from atop the bluffs await visitors to Wyalusing State Park, located where the Wisconsin River joins the Mississippi in southwest Wisconsin. Those scenic views make Wyalusing's campsites some of the most coveted in the state park system.



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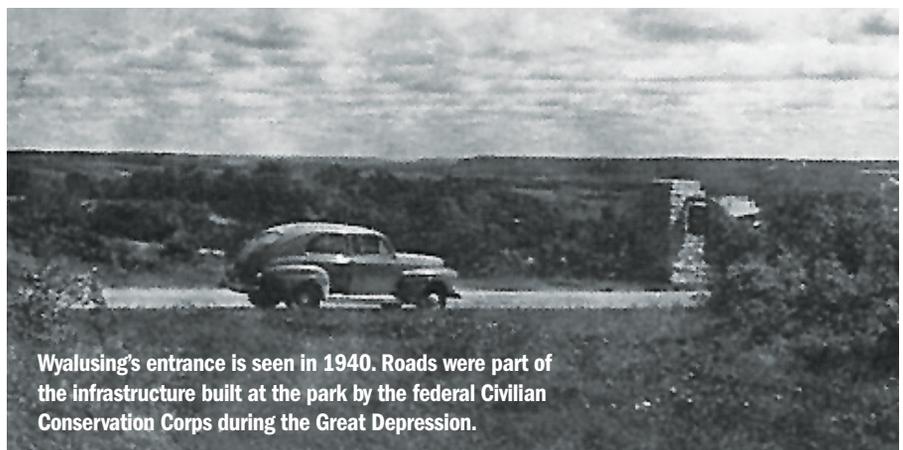
transportation corridors, the area near the park became a key trading location during the peak of the fur-trading period.

Wyalusing becomes a park

The State Parks Board recommended acquisition of the property, which the Legislature approved in 1912. Development of the property took a few more years and the park officially opened in June of 1917.

Unlike Devil's Lake State Park — which required acquisition of properties from multiple landowners and the removal over time of many structures — thanks to the Robert Glenn family, who settled on the land that would become Wyalusing State Park in the 1840s, the property was mostly intact as Nolen described in his report:

It appears to be the best Wisconsin site on the Mississippi for park purposes because of its large and well preserved groves of native trees and because the land required to form an accessible park is practically in the possession of one man. Mr. Robert Glenn, the owner of



Wyalusing's entrance is seen in 1940. Roads were part of the infrastructure built at the park by the federal Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression.

FRIENDS OF WYALUSING

the property, has held it intact for years in the firm belief that it would some day become a public park. He is unselfishly interested in the project and has shown himself ready to cooperate with the Board.

Some of the park's more iconic developments occurred during the Great Depression when the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, put more than 3 million youths and adults to work. There was

a CCC camp at the park that built park roads and trails and started the Peterson Shelter, which was finished by another federal program, the Works Progress Administration. They built stone fireplaces in shelters and picnic areas and the stone walls along Point Lookout and the four other lookouts that offer expansive views of the bluffs and rivers below.

A bronze plaque located in a large rock at the entrance to the Outdoor Group

Camp commemorates the Civilian Conservation Corps at Wyalusing State Park, and an original kiosk built by the CCC with information panels describing the “Days of the CCC” is located near the park’s original office.

Wyalusing also is home to the only monument in the United States dedicated to the passenger pigeon, a now-extinct bird that once flew over Wisconsin in such numbers that their passage would darken the skies. The last passenger pigeon died in 1914. The monument was unveiled at the 1946 Wisconsin Society of Ornithology convention with Aldo Leopold giving the dedication speech and was installed at the park at a dedication ceremony on May 11, 1947. WSO later restored the monument, which was rededicated in May 2014, in observance of the centenary of the pigeon’s extinction.

One of only two astronomy observatories located in Wisconsin state parks also is found at Wyalusing (the other is at Harrington Beach State Park on Lake Michigan). The observatory is situated on a knoll that affords an excellent view of the night sky and includes a 16-inch telescope with attached camera. It was built and is run by the Starsplitters of Wyalusing, a local nonprofit group of astronomy enthusiasts.

In addition to the observatory, the Starsplitters built the Lawrence L. Huser Astronomy Center, which was dedicated on June 8, 2003. It is named after Lawrence Huser, who worked as a park ranger at Wyalusing for 30 years. The center and observatory allow local astronomers to conduct sophisticated computer imaging and also provide space for group presentations and astronomy classes. The Starsplitters hold regularly scheduled astronomy programs at Wyalusing throughout the summer.

Recreational opportunities abundant at Wyalusing

With its spectacular views from atop the river bluffs, the Wisconsin Ridge campground has some of the most sought-after campsites in the state park system. The park also has the Homestead campground, offering a total of 114 campsites. The park has one of the few indoor group campgrounds in the state park system. The Hugh Harper Indoor Group Camp has four separate buildings, each accommodating 27 people with bunk beds and bathrooms with indoor showers and flush toilets. A separate building serves as mess hall and recreation hall, with modern kitchen facilities.

Wyalusing has more than 14 miles of hiking trails with varying difficulty. Steep climbs or descents and stairways may be encountered. Sand Cave trail travels past Big Sand Cave and Little Sand Cave, two of four caves located within the park. Both are washed-out areas of limestone with small waterfalls. A marked, 6-mile canoe trail winds through the backwaters of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The canoe trail starts at the boat landing — where boaters can also launch motorboats — and continues through the Mississippi River backwaters to the main channel. Canoes and kayaks can be rented from the park concession in season.

During winter, Wyalusing offers a number of cross-country ski trails for all levels of skiing abilities with trails groomed for classic and skate skiing.

While passenger pigeons may no longer fly over the park, Wyalusing remains a prime destination for bird watchers, with more than 90 bird species living at the park during the summer months and 100 more observed during spring and fall migrations. The area from Wyalusing to Nelson Dewey state parks is listed as one of the “Wisconsin Important Bird

Areas” by the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative, which notes:

This area supports high breeding populations of numerous high-priority species, including red-shouldered hawk, Acadian flycatcher, yellow-throated vireo, Bell’s vireo, cerulean warbler, Kentucky warbler, Louisiana water thrush, and, is one of the few breeding locations for the state endangered, yellow-throated warbler. Golden eagles use the area in winter and tens of thousands of landbirds and raptors pass through during migration.

The Mississippi and Wisconsin river backwaters offer excellent fishing for panfish, bass, northern pike and wall-eye. There’s an accessible fishing pier at the boat landing.

The park offers numerous picnic areas, three with reservable shelters, and two playgrounds. The park naturalist offers a variety of interpretive programs including guided bird walks and nature hikes, and guided canoe trips in the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Paul Holtan works for the DNR Office of Communications, editing the DNR’s weekly news and outdoor report packets and serving as public affairs manager for the Bureau of Parks and Recreation.



JOIN THE FRIENDS OF WYALUSING STATE PARK FOR 100TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

The Friends of Wyalusing was formed in the late 1990s with the mission of supporting the visitor experience by enhancing the connection between nature and the park visitor.

The Friends of Wyalusing and Prairie du Chien Area Chamber of Commerce along with the Department of Natural Resources will be holding a 100th Anniversary Celebration on Saturday, June 3. This coincides with Free Fun Weekend in Wisconsin, when entrance fees and trail passes are waived at Wisconsin State Park System properties.

The schedule includes:

- 9 a.m.: 5K trail walk, with registration beginning at 8:30 a.m. at the visitor center.
- 10 a.m.: Wyalusing History Hike, starting at Peterson Shelter, with Friends of Wyalusing.
- 10 a.m. to noon: Kids events with the Grant County Sports Alliance at the Outdoor Heritage Education Center.
- Noon: Guest speakers at the Peterson Shelter. Keynote speakers include DNR Deputy Secretary Kurt Thiede, Parks and Recreation Management Director Ben Bergy and Department of Tourism Secretary Stephanie Klett.
- 1 p.m.: Lunch at the Peterson Shelter.
- 2 p.m.: Wyalusing History Hike, starting at Peterson Shelter, with Friends of Wyalusing.
- 2 p.m.: Open house at the Lawrence L. Huser Astronomy Center with Starsplitters of Wyalusing.
- 3-5 p.m.: Music at the Peterson Shelter.
- 5 p.m.: History of the Passenger Pigeon presentation at the Passenger Pigeon Monument with Stanley A. Temple, University of Wisconsin-Madison Beers-Bascom professor emeritus in conservation and senior fellow of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.
- 6-8 p.m.: Music at the Peterson Shelter.
- 8:30 p.m.: Starsplitters of Wyalusing program at the Lawrence L. Huser Astronomy Center.

For updated times and changes check www.wyalusingfriends.org