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Snow Means Go at Erie's Wonder Isle

by Randy K. Ferguson

During the scorching hot days of summer, many families head to the nearest beach and cool water. For many Pennsylvanians, Erie's Presque Isle State Park is a particular favorite.

But what about the dreaded cold days of winter, when we suffer the "blahs," and it seems there is nothing enjoyable to do? Most people are aware of the peninsula at Erie, but it may come as a surprise that Presque Isle is still a great choice for families or individuals who want to get away on a wintry escape.

The 3,200-acre natural area state park, purchased from the federal government in 1792, juts seven miles into Lake Erie. More than four million people flock to this northern-most Pennsylvania recreation area every year (a greater number than visit Yellowstone National Park).

Winter transforms the sights that greet visitors to the peninsula in the summer into a brilliant white

A family cross-country skis on the beach they picnic on in the summer.

blanket of snow and silvery glaze. It is a different world with an entirely new list of recreational opportunities.

On the frozen bay waters you can enjoy ice skating and ice boating. Many folks choose to skate on the various bays, enjoying the sights and quiet sounds as they glide over the frozen water. Others like to play hockey on the all-natural surface.

As the calm waters freeze hard over sites such as Presque Isle Bay, Misery Bay and Horseshoe Pond, the ice anglers have their sport. Perch and steelhead congregate in these areas, offering plenty of action for the winter angler. The winds blow cold through these areas, and most who venture onto the ice dress warm-



The natural terrain of Presque Isle draws many locals as a relief from the cabin fever of winter.



ly and exercise extreme caution.

Fishers and skaters co-exist on the bays since the fishing is generally congregated in specific hot spots and skating is performed in others.

Ice boating is a beautiful activity, both to watch or take part in. Much like sailboating, the vessel rides on blades (somewhat resembling large ice skates). This sport requires a fairly large and smooth surface, a hard freeze and adequate wind for propelling the boat. These enthusiasts must bring their own boats since the park has no ice boat rental facilities.

An increasingly popular sport on the frozen inlets is kite skiing—a form of fast skiing—using the wind for propulsion. A skier is strapped into a harness attached by guide ropes to an oversized kite with handles for controlling the tilt. With appropriate winds, the aloft skier can have quite a speedy ride. There are active kite skiing clubs in the area which can be reached through the Erie Area Chamber of Commerce.

The park police do not usually regulate activities on the ice. Skaters, anglers and boaters alike must clear their own area on the ice and gauge the safety of the surface.

The authorities do caution visitors to stay away from ice dunes. These natural wonders are formed by the freezing of water as it continually pounds the lakeshore. As the water recedes, these dunes form attractive crystalline structures that lure those unfat-

A pet owner exercises her dogs near the memorial to Commodore Perry at Presque Isle.



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Kite skiing and sailboarding are becoming extremely popular on the ice at Presque Isle.

miliar with them. However, hollow and often weak, they can cave in at any times. These formations can also mislead one in judging the true edge of the shore.

A 5.8-mile multi-purpose trail threads its way through the park. It is seldom empty during any of the four seasons. Walkers are still welcome here when the cold winds blow, and many visitors bring their dogs out for exercise. Users observe care because the trails are not shoveled or salted, but people who jog this area in the summer often do so in the winter.

Cross-country skiing is another popular Presque Isle sport. New skiers and pros alike can rent equipment at the ski rental building adjacent to Beach #7, located on the eastern side of the peninsula. Serving as the lifeguard headquarters during the summer months, in the winter, this location has a concession where visitors can warm up with a cup of coffee.

A hiker or skier can spend all day in the woods on a popular seven-mile trail network. It is possible to travel for hours and never see another human.

Wildlife, though, is often sighted since Presque



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A young kite skier takes warm refuge from the cold of the ice-covered lake.



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Hockey and recreational skaters use the frozen waters of the various bays at Presque Isle.

Isle has more than its fair share. Red foxes are seen in the early morning and dusk hours, roaming about in search of food. They will sometimes come close enough for a picture. It is important to note that visitors may not feed these wild animals. It lessens their natural instinct to forage. Other critters you may see on the peninsula include squirrels, rabbits, deer, beavers (in the various ponds within the peninsula), and myriad land and water birds.

Environmental education programs are also offered on Presque Isle during the cold months. One example is an activity called Owl Prowl, which usually takes place on an evening in early February.

Numerous rentable picnic pavilions are scattered around the peninsula. Providing protection from the elements for a family or group get-together, they are equipped with fireplaces to warm at before venturing back outside.

Presque Isle can also be appreciated by visitors who have physical handicaps. Beach #7, as well as various boat landings and paved trails, is accessible to those



EVELYN ANDERSON

The serene beauty of Presque Isles' landscape is defined in winter.

restricted to wheelchairs. The park personnel are continually devising and implementing other ways to serve all visitors.

And to end your winter days at Presque Isle, position yourself on a ramp at Beach #7, which is one of the best places for views of the spectacular sunsets. Ice crystals in the atmosphere generate a great refraction of light, often obscuring the form of the sun itself, but providing a splendid display of orange and purple colors. If present, ice dunes form suitable foreground for the spectacle. As the sun sinks on the west side of the peninsula, the moon rises over the Erie skyline on the east side and the glittering lights of the city reflect on the still bay water. ♦

A former Erie freelance writer, Randy Ferguson is now editor of Wildlife Photography in Greenville.

Evelyn Anderson, a frequent freelance contributor, lives in Erie and promotes the environmental preservation of Presque Isle.

Visitor Information

Visitors to the Erie area can find lodging from motels and hotels to condominiums and campgrounds, all within five to 10 minutes of the peninsula. The nearest of these facilities are within a snowball's throw of the park's gates. Due to the importance of the park and the volume of visitors, lodging facilities are competitively priced and well-maintained year 'round. Fast food and ethnic restaurants are also numerous.

For detailed information about Presque Isle, contact: Presque Isle State Park, P.O. Box 8510, Erie 16505. (814) 871-4251.

Members of a variety of organizations and school groups of all ages use the park facilities. To discuss group tours and scheduling, contact M. Frances Stein, Environmental Education Specialist at Presque Isle State Park.

The Presque Isle Chapter of the National Audubon Society meets regularly and uses the peninsula for many of their functions, such as the annual Christmas bird count. Contact Lisa Danko, Field Trip Chairwoman, 6580 Harbortown Rd., Erie 16510.

For information about other organizations near the park that may interest you, and answers to questions about lodging and attractions, contact the Erie Chamber of Commerce, 1006 State St., Erie 16501. (814) 454-7191.



EVELYN ANDERSON



Presque Isle Audubon Society members prepare to participate in the annual Christmas bird count

Cross-country skiing is one of the various winter sports at Presque Isle.

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