

Harrisville State Park: Still a destination after 92 years

By Mary Weber
Staff Writer

Brightly colored tents, beach towels drying on clothes lines, the glimmer of deep blue water through lush green foliage, the unmistakable smell of a smoldering campfire and muffled sounds of people chatting and children laughing greet each summer day at one of the oldest state parks in Michigan -- the Harrisville State Park.

For 92 years the park has been a desired vacation spot for generations of families. Nestled on the shore of Lake Huron, the park offers campsites on the beach and is one of the only parks in the state with nearly a mile of beach access on a Great Lake.

When the park originally opened in 1921, it covered only six acres. Today the park generously spans 107 acres. It has 195 campsites and three cabins. "It's also one of the quietest and safest parks there is," boasted Eric Ostrander, unit supervisor for the park.

The park offers more than just a clean safe place for overnight campers as day users are welcome to utilize many of the parks amenities. Like the two mile interpretive Cedar Run Nature Trail and the paved multiuse heritage bike and foot trail. Pavilion rental is available and the beach includes a pet friendly area.

Day users may enter the park for free on foot or in a vehicle with a Michigan Recreation Passport. Non Michigan vehicles may enter the park with the purchase of a yearly passport or a day passport. The park is open to day users between the hours of 8 a.m. and 10 p.m.

While the campground portion of the park is closed during winter, the cabins remain open and the park is available for cross country skiing and snowshoeing.

Birding is also a popular activity at the park during

any season. A pair of merlins has built a nest atop a large jack pine tree at a camp site. This is the second year in a row for the merlins to nest at the park. They are not normally found nesting this far south and usually prefer to nest in the Upper Peninsula or Canada, according to Audubon instructor Frank Apsey who occasionally conducts free public bird walks at the park and a monarch tagging event at the park in August.

"One gentleman comes from Detroit and has put all three of his kids through the program. Parents are allowed to sit in on the program even if they already have certification," Ostrander said.

Last year Ostrander began a Halloween program at the park. Since annual October events have been popular in other parks, Ostrander is hoping to build Harrisville's more each year. There are activities for campers and Ostrander encourages com-

set.

Ostrander said about 35,000 day users visited the park last year and around 14,000 camp nights, where campers spent the night, were recorded last year. He expects about the same or more if the weather is good this year. "It's a busy park, but it doesn't feel like you're in a crowded area. We keep good occupancy especially in the dead of the summer... in July or August our occupancy rate can easily be 90

in the summer almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week," Ostrander said.

During the summer the park has 15 to 18 rangers on staff who do a little of everything to help the park run smoothly including maintenance. They also have three career rangers who are commissioned officers in addition to the unit supervisor and a secretary.

Campers Todd and Lindsay Witthuhn from Linton, Mich. said it was their first



The Harrisville State Park offers a mile of white sandy beach along the Lake Huron shoreline for the enjoyment of campers or folks who want to use it just for the day. Photo by Cheryl Peterson.

The park is also the site of hunter's safety education weekends which certifies youth and adults through the state hunter education program and the international bow education program.

community businesses to set up a haunted scene at campsites during this fall event. Last year the park staff decorated the heritage trail and participated in a scarier haunted theme for older children of all ages to walk through.

Events are planned throughout the summer at Harrisville State Park -- including an introduction to kayaking and introduction to stargazing. There was also a beach boot camp held in June.

A meteor and s'mores event on the beach will be held in August to give attendees a chance to explore the Perseids meteors in the sky over Lake Huron.

An explorer guide program is offered at the park. This is an interpretive program for campers and day users. This year's explorer guide is Samantha Allen. She does two programs a day from Memorial Day to Labor Day on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. The program is open to all ages but is usually geared toward the younger

to 95 percent every day of the week," Ostrander said.

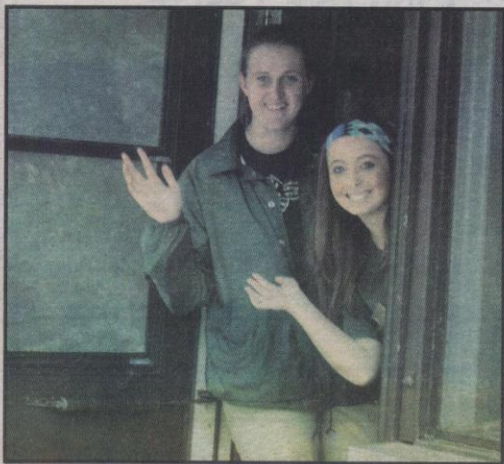
He thinks the biggest draw for the park is the beach access, as well as all the amenities the location offers. "The proximity to state and federal land entices campers, along with the restaurants and shops within walking distance. Just the area of Harrisville is appealing and not too crowded. Everything here (moves) at a slower pace. In areas like Traverse City things are just as busy as the city the campers may be trying to get away from.

"Many people who come to this park had grandparents who brought them here when they were children. Some have had great grandparents who brought them here. This park has very few major problems or issues. It's not the kind of park where you will have to deal with a lot of problem people near you. I can't say we don't have any problem people, we do get them occasionally, but they are usually small scale and we take care of the problem right away. We have staff here

time camping on the east side of the state and they were very pleased they came to Harrisville. "The camp grounds are very quiet and we were amazed at the beach," Todd Witthuhn said. His wife, Lindsay, said the drive up was very nice and she enjoyed being able to see so much of the water. The Witthuhn said they visited the winery in town and planned to go back and purchase some additional bottles to take home. They both agreed they would like to come back again.

For more information about the Harrisville State Park, visit www.michigan.gov/harrisville or call (989) 724-5126.

Michigan Recreational Passports can be purchased yearly for \$11, through the Secretary of State when licensing a motor vehicle or through the state park office. The purchase of the Recreational Passport allows access to any of Michigan's state parks, recreation areas and state forest campgrounds.



Newly hired this year, rangers Alleigh Sexton from Black River and Keturah Ashford from Harrisville are enjoying working at the Harrisville State Park. Photo by Mary Weber.