

Hiking trails varied

By CLEO ISBISTER
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When it comes to hiking there are two schools of thought. The first asserts that it is a prime challenge for physical conditioning. The second insists on pausing to smell the flowers.

You'll find advocates of the first on the 220-mile Michigan Riding and Hiking Trail that stretches from East Tawas to Empire. Backpackers pack in sleeping bags and sometimes a pup tent and stay overnight at designated campsites along the way where they spend the evening spinning yarns with other hardy hikers and trail riders around a campfire.

They average an arduous 15 to 20 miles a day and the trip is recommended for only experienced hikers in good physical condition, says Mike Whelan, field worker for the Department of Natural Resources.

For this and other trails, maps are available at the DNR field office, 404 W. 14th Street, in Traverse City.

Hikers seeking less strenuous exercise, along with nature appreciation and congeniality, often sign up for hiking classes conducted by Betty Carden of Northwestern Michigan College.

Usually 15 to 20 people enroll in the spring and fall hiking classes and the winter snowshoe classes. They travel in a van to arrive at spots approximately a 25 minute drive from campus. College students may be taking it for credit, sometimes in conjunction with a photography class. Community Services enrollees are likely to be toting guide books and field glasses. The interaction and exchange of information is valuable as well as "great fun" says Carden.

Their favorite trail is at Empire Bluffs, high above Lake Michigan, often the site of hang gliding, and in winter a cross-country ski trail. A spectacular view caps the hour's trek to the bluffs and back.

"One time at Empire we saw thousands of fish about 100 yards offshore, swimming in schools," recalls Carden.

The Pierce Stocking Nature Trail near Leland also offers prime hiking plus an educational stop at the Visitors Center.

Closer to home, the marked trail at Old Mission Lighthouse combines beach and wooded areas and a plentitude of wild flowers like lady slippers, trillium and the engaging little dangles called "Dutchmen's Breeches."

Another favored trail is along a steep bluff of the Manistee River in the Fife Lake State Forest where evidence of

beavers abounds and a high log rollaway evokes Michigan's past.

Occasionally hikers glimpse a deer or disturb a partridge into a startled "whirr" of wings or come upon a fox or woodchuck's hole.

"I have magic," declares Carden solemnly. "Every day we are hiking the sun comes out. It can be raining all week but the sun comes out on hiking day. They tease me about it. One lady declares she signed up for my class just so she'd know the days to work in her garden."

She advises her students to dress in layers so they can shed a jacket or sweater and recommends hiking boots, good solid sneakers or ties without heels.

"Never wear nylon stockings if you don't want sores on your feet," she cautions.

The close-in home trail that's the favorite of local hikers is the Grand Traverse Natural Education Reserve. Situated on 370 acres and operated by the county, it meanders for almost five miles along the Boardman River. Originally a project sponsored by the Audubon Club, whose members still assist with maintenance, it has four access and parking areas — Sabin Dam and Boardman Dam off Cass Street and Pine Tree Site and the Oleson footbridge off Keystone Road. Maps are available from the county recreation department office at the Civic Center in Traverse City.

"It's sometimes very wet in the spring if the water level is high, but it's a gorgeous walk," says Carden.

It was there hikers found evidence of a pileated woodpecker and stopped to sniff fragrant spearmint and wintergreen.

State forests and state parks abound with trails, many of them marked at points of special interest. At Interlochen State Park, where birdsong and pine fragrance conspire to enchant visitors, the trail winds through towering pines and skirts Duck Lake. It's the same trail that beckons cross-country skiers in the winter. Most of the trails on state lands serve the same dual purpose.

Further afield, almost every hiker has his or her favorite path based on proximity and the challenge it poses.

It may be the Sand Lakes Quiet Area along the North branch of the Boardman River, or the Betsie River or Lost Lake Pathway in the Pere Marquette State Forest, or the Chain O'Lakes Pathway in Benzie County or the Grass River Natural Area in Antrim County.

So whether one chooses challenge or flower sniffing, opportunities abound.

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