

RP Outdoors: Wyalusing State Park and Kettle Moraine Northern Unit

For many college students, spring break is a time to get out, enjoy the sun, relax and forget about homework.

Wisconsin, true to form, crapped all over that idea with temperatures reaching barely over 40 degrees and 10 inches of snow covering areas of the state for the majority of the week.

That did not, however, stop me from making some time to go hunting for trails that I have yet to explore. Thankfully, Wisconsin always indulges my wanderlust with its veritable maze of trails stretching from every corner of the state.

Over “second-winter break,” I set out to explore Wyalusing State Park near Prairie du Chein, right near where the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers meet, as well as portions of the Kettle Moraine Northern Unit, which is about 45 minutes north of Milwaukee by Highway 67.

My first trip was to Wyalusing to see if I could find any eagles. I had heard portions of Wisconsin got 10 inches of snow, but I didn’t take the time to find out specifically where. So to the surprise of no one, Wisconsin dumped the snow right where I wanted to be.

Nevertheless, I made my way through the snow with all the grace of a drunken wendigo in pursuit of my prize: a stellar photo of the eagles as they flew past. A map and a helpful park worker directed me to Point Lookout, a cliff above the Wisconsin River as it flowed into the Mississippi.

Being the naive photographer that I was, I hadn’t taken into account the wind, which whipped around me as I stood waiting for a good picture, as well as the sun suddenly remembering that now was its time to shine. While I caught a glimpse of the majestic birds in flight, the wind buffeted them as hard as it was me, and the angle of the sun shone light right into my lens, making a good photo impossible.

A path from Point Lookout went parallel the cliffs to other places a sightseer could stop and take in the view below, which included the Wisconsin River as it flowed to the Mississippi. A sign partway down the path pointed to what it called a “treasure cave.”

Intrigued, I made my way down the steep path to see what kind of treasure there was. After a slippery trip down some rather steep steps, I found the cave, which was no bigger than a small office. Thankfully, the cave was devoid of any man-eating wendigos.

The weather, being what it was, prevented me from exploring more of the park, but a quick perusal of the map told me there are many more trails and caves to explore, including the Mississippi Ridge Trail, which follows alongside the great Mississippi as it flows south.

While my search for the perfect shot of an eagle and my exploration of the park were hampered by winter weather, the park promises to offer many more fantastic vistas once Wisconsin remembers what time of year it is.

Following that trip, I decided one day on the trails wasn't enough, so I went to explore another park I have yet to see: the Kettle Moraine North Unit.

Wisconsin weather, indecisive as it is, felt a lot like fall during my time up there, but evidence of spring were still present.

One of my first stops at the northern unit was the forest headquarters near Mauthe Lake. The Tamarack Circle Trail wraps around Mauthe Lake, so I parked my car and started hiking.

A portion of the trail goes through White Cedar Swamp, which was just now freeing itself of the winter ice and hard ground. One sign I ran across during my hike talked about the swamp and its residential flora, including white cedar trees, tamarack trees (for which the trail was named), mosses and other plants.

Another portion of the unit I explored was the Parnell Tower Trail. As evening approached I was unable to explore the entirety of the trail, but I was able to reach Parnell Tower to get a view of the surrounding forest.

From the top of the 60-foot-tall Parnell Tower I could see Holy Hill, Dundee Mountain and miles of forest.

With spring nearly here, I look forward to visiting more of Wisconsin's parks, including the Horicon Marsh, and making a return to Wyalusing in pursuit of my perfect eagle photo.

While Wisconsin's weather proved uncertain during all of "spring" break, it did little to dampen some of the magnificent views one can see from some of the state's numerous parks and forests.