

*Your seasonal guide to the wonders of West Michigan*

# LAKESTYLE

SUMMER 2026



# contents

# contributors



**4**

**BLUE LAKE FINE ARTS CAMP AT 60**  
*A legacy of art, music and transformation*

**8**

**HALTING THE INVASION**  
*Regional efforts to curb invasive species*

**12**

**TREASURE HUNTER'S PARADISE**  
*LakeStyle shoreline home to plethora of trash-to-treasure stores*

**16**

**A PLACE TO BREATHE**  
*Wilwin Lodge offers veterans peace by the water*



**20**

**MOTORSPORTS ALONG THE LAKESHORE**  
*Dirt tracks, drag strips and the enduring roar of summer in West Michigan*

**24**

**'TROUBLE' FOUND WWI SUBMARINES**  
*like the one moored in Muskegon*

**28**

**INTO THE FOREST**  
*How a Michigan music festival became something more*

**36**

**FAMILY-FRIENDLY WEST MICHIGAN TREASURE**  
*John Ball Zoo, a cozy 140-acre wondrous wildlife kingdom of more than 2,000 animals*

Cover photo by **STEVE BEGNOCHE**



**David L. Barber**  
David is a retired journalist who has been published in several state and national newspapers and magazines. He lives in Manistee County with his wife Jeanne, and their two cats, Kit and Kaboodle.



**Jeanne Barber**  
Jeanne is a freelance photographer from Manistee County. Her photos have been published in several Michigan newspapers and magazines. She currently serves as executive assistant at the Manistee County Council on Aging.



**Steve Begnoche**  
Steve has focused on photography since retiring from the managing editor's position at the Ludington Daily News. He's an avid kayaker, angler and outdoors enthusiast. His community involvement seeks to enhance appreciation of our area's natural qualities.



**Shanna Avery**  
Shanna is new at the Ludington Daily News, but has loved working in journalism for other area newspapers in the past, and is glad to be back at it. Living with her family at Chase, she loves nature, painting, music and has a great passion for local area history and all the great people around here today.



**Cristina Juska**  
Cristina has a background in marketing and is pursuing a master's degree in library science. She lives in Hart, MI with her family as well as a cat, four chickens and two ducks.



**Lois Tomaszewski**  
Lois is the Executive Editor for all Shoreline Media publications. She is an award-winning career journalist and photographer. She lives in Ludington.



**Kate Babel**  
Kate is a graduate of Ferris State and is a staff writer for Shoreline Media.

**LAKESTYLE**  
published by  
**SHORELINE MEDIA**  
LUDINGTON DAILY NEWS  
OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL  
WHITE LAKE BEACON  
www.shorelinemedia.net

**Interim Publisher:**  
Paul Heidbreder

**Sales:**  
Shelley Kovar, Monica Evans

**Graphics:**  
Judy Lytle, Julie Eilers, Madelyn Kerbyson

**News:** Lois Tomaszewski, Shanna Avery, Alexis Settler, Cristina Juska, Sean Chase, Larry Launstein Jr., Kate Babel

**Circulation:**  
Jerian Steiger

**Ludington Daily News**  
202 N Rath Ave.,  
P.O. Box 340,  
Ludington, MI 49431  
(231) 845-5181  
(231) 843-4011 fax

**Oceana's Herald-Journal**  
123 State Street,  
PO Box 190,  
Hart, MI 49420  
(231) 873-5602  
(231) 873-4775 fax

**White Lake Beacon**  
PO Box 98  
Whitehall, MI 49461  
(231) 894-5356  
(231) 873-4775 fax

© Copyright 2026 Shoreline Media



## BLUE LAKE FINE ARTS CAMP AT 60:

# *A legacy of art, music and transformation*

### BY CRISTINA JUSKA

Shoreline Media Staff Writer

Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Twin Lake began in the summer of 1966 with a mission to inspire young artists to discover their potential as musicians, dancers, writers, actors, artists and — perhaps most importantly — individuals.

Sixty years later, the camp continues to follow the guiding principles of its founder, William “Fritz” Stansell, offering a unique, world-class opportunity to study the fine arts in West Michigan.

### BY THE NUMBERS

Blue Lake sits on a 1,600-acre campus in the Manistee National Forest in Muskegon County, providing fine arts education for all ages. Major areas of study include band, orchestra, choir, jazz, theater, dance, visual arts, creative writing, piano and harp.

In 2025, the camp hosted 4,000 students, 300 lifelong learners and more than 450 staff and faculty. While 72%

of campers come from Michigan, the camp has welcomed participants from 42 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and 12 other countries over the past five years. In 2024, counselors, faculty and support staff represented 40 states and six countries.

Nearly 85% of campers receive a scholarship to help them attend. Blue Lake was among the first organizations in Michigan to obtain nonprofit status and has awarded millions of dollars in tuition assistance since its founding.

Today, the property includes two 750-seat theaters — one modeled after an Elizabethan playhouse — and the William Stewart Memorial Music Shell, which seats nearly 4,000. More than 150 performances take place each year during Blue Lake’s Summer Arts Festival, with most events free and open to the public.

Blue Lake also offers an international exchange program, founded in 1969 by Fritz’s wife, Gretchen Stansell, as well as

a Suzuki family camp for families with young children. Its classical and jazz radio station, Blue Lake Public Radio, has been on the air since 1982.

### BACKGROUND

Fritz was born in Ohio in 1932. His father was a musician and educator, as was his maternal grandfather, Ludolph Arens, founder of the Arens Art Colony in Wisconsin. Fritz spent his childhood summers at his grandfather’s camp and later modeled Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp after it.

After studying music education at Michigan State University, Fritz married Gretchen and served in the U.S. Army. He completed a master’s degree in education at Purdue University and went on to teach band and orchestra in several West Michigan schools.

But Fritz always had a dream. In the early 1960s, he left his teaching career to launch Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp. Together with Gretchen and their family, he established the camp and made it his



life’s work, pursuing the highest standards through unwavering dedication.

Fritz led the organization through decades of growth and success before his death in December 2024. He is survived by Gretchen and their three children — Terry, Tom and Heidi — and five grandchildren. Heidi currently serves as Blue Lake’s vice president of operations and interim president and sits on the board of trustees. Gretchen continues to serve as a life member of the board.

Fritz’s impact as an educator, musician, conductor and leader extends far beyond the camp. His legacy lives on through those shaped by his work and those who continue to carry out his mission today.

### A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

Carolee Morat-Castle, owner of Morat’s Bakery and Dockside Donuts in Muskegon, grew up in the Whitehall area and first attended Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in the summer of 1977, after her freshman year of high school. She learned about a scholarship opportunity and thought, “Why not?”

Carolee joined the choir session that summer, unaware that her relationship with the camp was only beginning.

“I loved everything about it!” she said. “I got to meet great people and sing great music.”

The following summer, she auditioned for Blue Lake’s International Choir, earned a spot and toured Europe for

three weeks, visiting Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

“We stayed in people’s homes and performed concerts along the way,” she said.

In her final summer as a camper, Carolee participated in Blue Lake’s musical theater program, a four-week session in which students learned and rehearsed a full production of “West Side Story.” They then performed the show at the Howmet Theater in Whitehall, now the Playhouse at White Lake.

The Stansells later hired Carolee as a camp counselor during her college years. She recalls serving as waterfront director and returning to Europe as a counselor for the international tour. As an adult, she has hosted European students through the camp’s exchange program.

“I would not have had any of these amazing experiences if I hadn’t gotten that first scholarship,” she said. “I learned about the world, and I had opportunities to perform with great artists.”

She remembers performing with Count Basie as a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

From majoring in vocal performance in college to staying active in local theater to this day, Carolee’s experiences at Blue Lake have shaped her life in countless ways. She sent her children to the camp, and now her grandchildren attend as well.

“We have this incredible performing arts resource right in our backyard!” she said. “I feel lucky to have been able to

take advantage of it.”

## REFLECTING ON THE PAST, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

“His vision for Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp was more than a passion,” Heidi said of her father. “It was his wholehearted existence.”

She describes Fritz as a visionary whose creativity sometimes outpaced his practicality, but added, “It was this sort of drive — and risk — that advanced Blue Lake through the decades under his leadership.”

Heidi considers it “an honor and a privilege” to have worked alongside her father and to witness the camp’s evolution. She noted the COVID-19 pandemic as a particularly challenging period, but said the organization has emerged stronger.

“We know who we are and what we want to do,” she said. “Even after 60 years, the camp still feels young. We still have a lot of incredible potential.”

She said it is an exciting time for Blue Lake as the organization works to expand offerings and extend the season to include additional educational opportunities in the arts. The board of trustees is currently working to name the organization’s next president, with an announcement expected soon.

“It’s a very exciting time for the future of our organization,” Heidi said.



WATCH MUSKEGON

**Find What You've Been Missing**

*Explore Muskegon*

LIVE WHITE LAKE

DISCOVER WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE WHITE LAKE.

WHITE LAKE AREA CHAMBER • VISITORS BUREAU  
Montague • Whitehall

WWW.WHITELAKE.ORG // 231-893-4585

**Let Your Style Shine**

For over 40 years families have trusted our team of jewelers. We are proud to serve our community and look forward to many more years!

**SERVICES OFFERED:**  
 QUALIFIED APPRAISALS • JEWELRY REPAIR ON PREMISES  
 RING SIZING & REPAIR • OVER 40 YEARS EXPERIENCE  
 GEMSTONE & DIAMOND REPLACEMENT • BEAUTIFUL CUSTOM DESIGNS  
 ENGAGEMENT & WEDDING RINGS • FINISHED JEWELRY FROM QUALITY USA MANUFACTURERS

*Victoria's*  
**JEWELRY**  
 Ludington's Diamond Destination

327 S. James St  
 Ludington, MI 49431  
 231-845-5257  
 Victoriasjewelry327@gmail.com • www.ludingtonjewelers.com

**Discover Ludington's Newest Art Destination!**

- Showcasing over 30 talented LOCAL artists
- Fun art classes for all ages
- Jewelry & gem classes coming soon
- Unique, handmade art jewelry pieces that stand out
- Conveniently located next to Victoria's Jewelry

**ART ROCKS**  
 JAMES STREET GALLERY

323 S. James St.  
 Ludington, MI  
 artrocks323@gmail.com  
 231-845-5257  
 www.artrocks323.com



# HALTING THE INVASION: Regional efforts to curb invasive species

**BY SHANNA AVERY**  
Shoreline Media Staff Writer

From tangling vines of invasive bittersweet to thick walls of Japanese knotweed, invasive plants do more than just stifle native ecosystems — they threaten expensive infrastructure. Fortunately, organized groups like the Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area (CISMA) and local conservation districts are leading the charge to manage these invaders in Mason, Lake, Oceana and Newaygo counties.

Zach Peklo, program coordinator for North Country CISMA, which covers Mason, Lake, Osceola, Mecosta, Missaukee and Wexford counties, said CISMA's goal is to address invasive species at the scale they spread across property lines, watersheds and entire landscapes.

"The City of Ludington continues to

make progress on implementing their invasive species management goals, addressing priority areas of invasive bittersweet, Japanese knotweed, and tree of heaven that impact city infrastructure, pose sight-line concerns for motorists, and degrade local greenspaces by out-competing native plants," Peklo said.

He said efforts in the City of Ludington and surrounding counties are furthered by North Country CISMA's "at-cost treatment program," where landowners can receive a free quote for the at-cost rate of treatment for qualifying invasive species on their property.

Interested landowners can contact Emily Fredricks at 231-239-4445 or at [Emily.Fredricks@macd.org](mailto:Emily.Fredricks@macd.org).

Ongoing outreach efforts to assist property owners on how to identify invasive species and how to effectively and safely treat them will take place at

6 p.m. Wednesday, June 10, during an Invasive Species Workshop at Ludington City Hall.

Peklo shared information about other plans to tackle invasive species in the area, such as European frogbit, an aquatic invasive species.

"North Country CISMA is addressing the spread of European frogbit through a multi-county survey and control initiative," he said. "Working in partnership with the Northwest Invasive Species Network, the project focuses on detecting and managing infestations in lakes, slow-moving bays, and wetlands throughout the region. The only known infestation within North Country CISMA's service area is found in Lincoln Lake and is currently undergoing mechanical hand-pulling efforts."

European frogbit forms dense floating mats that block sunlight, reduce oxygen



levels, and disrupt native plant and fish communities, ultimately degrading both ecological health and recreational use," Peklo said. The project is funded through the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, reflecting a statewide effort to limit aquatic invasive species spread.

"On federal lands, North Country CISMA is continuing restoration work through the Good Neighbor Authority in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service on the Manistee National Forest. Funded through timber sale revenues that are reinvested into restoration, the project targets invasive plants such as garlic mustard, Phragmites, and Japanese knotweed. Treatments occur in high-use and ecologically sensitive areas, including ORV trail systems, recreation lakes, and blue ribbon trout streams. The goal is to maintain resilient ecosystems that can support recreation and natural resources without being overrun by invasive plant species," Peklo said.

North Country CISMA is also advancing prevention through its Invasive Shrub Replacement Grant — a program that works with municipalities, schools and public spaces to replace ornamental invasive shrubs — such as Japanese barberry and burning bush — with native alternatives like fragrant sumac and shrubby St. John's wort, according to Peklo.

"The initiative highlights the role of landscaping choices in invasive species

spread and demonstrates that native shrubs can provide the same functional and aesthetic benefits while supporting pollinators, birds, and other wildlife. Sites can still be nominated through the organization's website," he said.

Peklo said that public outreach remains a major component of CISMA's work, such as the ORV outreach campaign encouraging riders to clean their vehicles before and after using Northern Michigan's extensive trail network.

"Similar to cleaning boats to prevent aquatic invasive spread, the campaign promotes the message 'Ride — Clean — Repeat.' By removing mud, seeds and plant material, riders help prevent the spread of invasive species into remote natural areas. The campaign is supported through the Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program," he said.

Additional outreach efforts include the Trout-Reach program, funded by the Lake County Community Foundation, which engages anglers in reducing invasive species spread along popular trout streams. North Country CISMA is also a partner in the Go Beyond Beauty campaign, which encourages homeowners and gardeners to choose non-invasive landscaping plants to protect native ecosystems while supporting biodiversity, Peklo said.

Julia Place, project manager with Mason-Lake Conservation District, touched on the district's work with Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, an invasive insect that

targets eastern hemlock and continues to spread across West Michigan, along with some invasive woody shrubs.

"The Mason-Lake Conservation District began addressing HWA locally in 2021 when Mason and Lake counties were near the leading edge of the infestation as it moved north from southwest Michigan. Since then, the infestation has expanded further north, though management efforts continue locally," Place said. "Early work in Mason County focused on grant-funded detection and treatment on private lands through the Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program. As funding has shifted north to address newer infestations, the MLCDD has adapted its approach to continue supporting landowners. In 2025, a for-hire treatment program was launched, allowing continued protection of hemlock for private landowners."

Place said demand has remained strong with more than 10,000 diameter-at-breast-height inches of hemlock treated during the most recent season. She said work also continues on public lands in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service through the Good Neighbor Authority in the Huron-Manistee National Forest.

"As invasive species pressures continue to evolve, the MLCDD has also expanded at-cost services to address growing concerns beyond HWA. In response to increased landowner demand, the field crew is now assisting with management



of invasive woody shrubs including autumn olive, Japanese barberry and multiflora rose. These species can quickly form dense thickets that outcompete native vegetation and are often difficult

for landowners to manage on their own. This new service is designed to fill a gap between smaller-scale infestations and follow-up treatments, particularly where herbicide application is needed



and contractor availability is limited," she said.

Landowners interested in invasive species management, whether for hemlock protection or shrub control, are encouraged to contact the Mason-Lake Conservation District crew for more information or to request a quote at 231-239-2877 or mlcd.hwa@macd.org.

The Oceana Conservation District, part of the seven-county West Michigan CISMA, pursues grant funds to manage invasive species and has treatment crews based out of Kent, Ottawa and Muskegon counties.

"If you have something on your property that you think is invasive, we may be able to help. Thanks to the Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, we have some money available to help provide treatment services to landowners. We prioritize treatments based on the

level of infestation in our county and currently our target species include Phragmites, Japanese knotweed, European frogbit and Hemlock Woolly Adelgid," the Oceana Conservation District stated on its website.

Folks in Oceana County who are battling invasive species can either get on a waitlist for at-cost treatment through a neighboring conservation district by contacting HWA Coordinator Lance McCarty at lance.mccarty@macd.org; hire a private applicator; or treat the trees themselves. To learn more about all of these options, visit the Oceana Conservation District website.

Folks don't have to let invasive species get the best of them. Groups like North Country CISMA, West Michigan CISMA and local conservation districts are ready to help halt the spread of invasive plants.

**WEST SHORE MARKET**  
**DISCOUNT FOODS**  
**TO STRETCH YOUR BUDGET**



HOURS: Mon.-Fri. 9 AM-6 PM; Sat. 9 AM-5 PM  
 850 W. US 10, SCOTTVILLE MI **757-9130**

**LANGLOIS**

**HOME FURNISHINGS**



**#1 FURNITURE STORE**  
**ON THE LAKESHORE**



**3000 HENRY ST., MUSKEGON**  
**800-606-7600 • 733-2528**



## Furniture & Decor

*to enhance  
 your home  
 and lifestyle*



From the latest furniture trends to the perfect accent piece, find everything you need to make yourself beautifully and comfortably at home.



LundquistFurniture.com

**LUNDQUIST**  
**FURNITURE**

*The Lakeshore's Biggest & Best*  
 YOUR STYLE • YOUR PRICE

Downtown Scottville since 1940  
**231-757-3368**

### Great Yarn Shop Rowan Flagship Store

Open:  
 Mon.-Thurs. 10-3  
 Fri. 10-5  
 Sat. 10-3  
 Sun. 12-3

**Nautical Yarn**

108 S. Rath Ave., Ludington  
 www.nauticalyarn.com **231-845-9868**

### A Destination for Book Lovers



Coffee, Books, Gifts, Toys

Open Dawn to Dusk  
 201 S. Rath Ave., Ludington, MI  
**231-843-2537**  
 www.bookmarkludington.com

**Bakery  
 Treats  
 Everyday!**





# TREASURE HUNTER'S PARADISE

*LakeStyle shoreline home to plethora of trash-to-treasure stores*

**BY DAVID L. BARBER**

Treasure hunters searching for unique and unusual gotta-haves – the ones where one man's trash becomes another man's treasure – can rejoice, the LakeStyle shoreline and countryside is a paradise just waiting to be picked.

In communities large and small – from Muskegon, to Pentwater, to Manistee, and all points between and beyond – the Lake Michigan shoreline with its golden beaches, silver-blue waters, emerald forests and peaceful, playful lifestyles, is also a go-to destination for its many curiosity shops, thrift and consignment stores, second-

hand stores, antique stores and the such – a treasure hunter's all-season Shangri-la, to be sure.

So what best describes something being a “treasure?” Who knows? But you'll know when you see it.

It might be mismatched silverware; old record albums and record players; books with tattered pages; used and worn clothing; cookware and dishware long out of production, but that reminds you of grandma's kitchen; anything “vintage;” cherished toys and games from a person's past; splintered and rusted farm and garden tools from a bygone era; anything Star Wars, Star Trek or with images of movie stars

from the Golden Age of Hollywood; anything from the 1950s, and on and on.

Christmas is sold for nickles on the dollar all year long at these stores, as are other holiday-themed treasures that celebrate Halloween, Thanksgiving, July 4th and all the others. Figurines and dolls depicting Santa Claus wearing Hawaiian shirts, or straw hats, or military fatigues, or anything and everything but his red furry suit, trimmed in white, always seem to be popular.

Also a favorite with shoppers are anything painted red, white and blue; glass-blown Christmas tree ornaments; miniature ghosts, ghouls and pumpkins; turkeys stuffed with cotton balls and not

croutons; and more – treasures, all.

“Treasures?” Oh yeah, you'll know when you see 'em.

In the Victorian Port City the Manistee Indoor Flea Market is open Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Featuring a constantly changing inventory of treasures that are being brought to market by local vendors, it's located in the former Olsen's Supermarket that

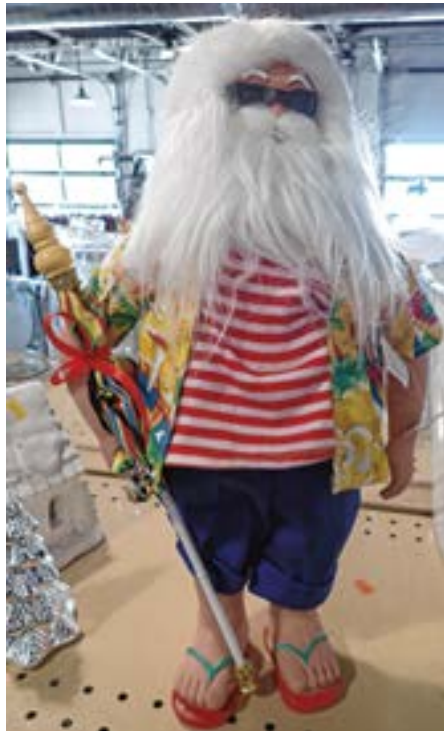
shoulders the northern banks of the Manistee River, at the crossroads of the U.S. 31 highway and the city's celebrated Memorial Drive.

But as it is with similar depositories for valuables, you better be quick when sauntering their aisles because the generation-bonding treasures you see today, might be gone tomorrow. And make no mistake about it, Fort Knox,

itself – America's depository for its golden bullion – holds nothing over the golden treasures found in the Manistee Indoor Flea Market and stores of its ilk.

In an adjoining strip mall to the Flea Market are the Echo His Love Resale Shop, and a second one named Redeemed, both of which feature an ever-changing inventory of unique and unusual treasured items. The latter's





restyled.”

Located on River Street in the middle of downtown Manistee is Three Peas in a Pod, “... an eclectic shop of decor, gifts, furniture, mens and womens clothes, and much more.”

In neighboring Ludington there is the Yada Yada Resale shop, located on the US 10 highway, which features “... a variety of home goods, furniture, clothing, toys, seasonal decor, and more.”

Also located in Mason County's county seat and tourist hotspot are My Sister's Closet in downtown Ludington, which features women's clothing, used, vintage and consignment; the Cedar Consignment Shoppe that has “quality, pre-loved clothing and accessories;” and more.

Antique stores along the lakeshore are many and include, but are not limited to, Maryann's Antiques in Manistee; Sunset Bay Antiques in Ludington; Cole's Antiques in Scottville; Cow Palace Antiques in Scottville; Colby's Hokey Pokey in Whitehall; the Flower Bin in Hart; Wicker Chicken in Montague.

In Muskegon there's the Pine Street

Mercantile, Vintage Deluxe, Four Corners Antique and Artisan Marketplace, Muskegon Rescue Mission, and so many more.

To name all the others might produce a Yellow Pages-thick story, so with that delicate disclaimer offered the best we can do is to suggest a person go to the Internet and Google what type of store they are looking for, and in what community. Trust us, you'll be surprised at the number of such stores that will be revealed.

Of course, besides the locally owned mom and pop stores that serve as shopping anchors in their communities, there also are nationally recognized Goodwill stores, including ones in Manistee, Ludington, Whitehall, Newaygo, Muskegon and other communities, as well as a number of Salvation Army thrift stores.

And consider this, once temperatures heat up there will be all those garage sales, yard sales, swap meets and auctions that will sell off their own treasure hunts. But that, perhaps, is another story for another day.

Facebook page tells us that Redeemed, “... is where antiques and vintage, with a dash of artisan made, are rescued, recycled, reclaimed, repurposed and

## Your Home. Think Positive.



**PRIMO**  
DIRECT VENT GAS FIREPLACE

Warm up to our most luxurious fireplace yet. Where intricate modern styling meets our exclusive innovative heating technology: The PRIMO gas fireplace.

**HEAT & GLO**  
No one builds a better fire

**positive**  
CHIMNEY & FIRE PLACE

231-844-9001

65 S. JEBAVY DR. (formerly Larson Energy Solutions)

Are you thinking of turning  
your vacation in Northwest Michigan  
into a permanent residence?

Let us use our years of experience to help you find a quality builder that's right for you or help you complete your project yourself.

Offering expertise in: Build design, kitchens, baths, flooring and roofing.

**CARTER**  
Lumber

For more information on how we can help you, visit us in-store or online. Welcome to the neighborhood!

2323 West US Hwy. 10, Ludington, MI 231-757-9000

[carterlumber.com](http://carterlumber.com)



**WEST MICHIGAN VOTED.**  
*Ludington Parties Here.*

2025 WINNER - BEST BAR  
2025 WINNER - BEST ENTERTAINMENT

*The Best of West Michigan Awards*

**Where Music Lives**

Live Bands • DJ Trivia • Honky Tonk • Open Mic  
Taco Tuesdays • Late-Night Bites • Packed Dance Floors

From Trivia Battles to Sold-Out Dance Nights – this is where Ludington shows up.

Strangers become friends. The stage stays hot. The lights stay on.

**NO COVER. EVER.**  
203 S. James St. | Downtown Ludington | Follow us @ The Sand Bar

**THE VIBE IS HERE. ...ARE YOU?**

**PROUDLY PROVIDING YOU THE VERY BEST MEATS FOR**

*101 Great Years*

**FAMOUS FAMILY RECIPES**

HAMS • BACON • BRATS • HOT DOGS  
CHEESE • BURGER • SAUSAGE  
JERKY  
SUMMER SAUSAGE  
SMOKED MEATS  
SNACK STICKS • RIBS

**SANDERS MEATS**  
SINCE 1925

**LOCATED IN CUSTER, MI**  
231-757-4768  
[www.sandersmeats.com](http://www.sandersmeats.com)

# Where History Lives

THREE LOCATIONS TO EXPLORE IN LUDINGTON, MICHIGAN

HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
**Port of LUDINGTON MARITIME MUSEUM**

- Three Floors of Engaging Interactive Exhibits
- Shipwrecks & Lighthouses
- Carferry History

MASON COUNTY  
**EMPORIUM**  
AND SWEET SHOP

- Unique Gifts
- Historical Books
- Vintage Candy
- Toys for Kids
- Archive Tours

HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
**Historic WHITE PINE VILLAGE**

- 30 Buildings to Explore
- Authentic Artifacts
- Fun for all Ages
- Ice Cream

(Memorial Day Weekend - Labor Day)

**COMBO TICKETS AVAILABLE** Buy museum tickets online and receive \$2.00 off admission!

**Mason County Historical Society Museums**  
Open Tuesday - Saturday from 10:00 am - 5:00pm, May 2 - October 17, 2026



# *A Place to Breathe: Wilwin Lodge Offers Veterans Peace by the Water*

**BY KATE BABEL**  
Shoreline Media Staff Writer

With the whispering trees, the gentle call of loons, the calm steady ripples of the lake, the Wilwin Lodge at Cygnet Cove offers a place for veterans who are handicapped, disabled, or have PTSD to relax, rest and recuperate from the stress of everyday life and spend time with their families.

Tucked into northern Michigan's forested landscape, the lodge serves

as both a retreat and a quiet form of service — one that continues long after a veteran's military duty ends. Surrounded by woods and water, the property offers an intentional sense of separation from the noise and pressures of everyday life.

According to the Wilwin Lodge website, their mission is "to provide a facility to care for our disabled and handicapped Veterans in a relaxed atmosphere. Providing the necessary

therapeutic care needed, administered by licensed professionals; to utilize the property as a reconnect center for returning war veterans and their families after long deployments; to provide a visitation place for all veterans to utilize on special occasions, events, or vacation; to provide a place for our youth to enjoy the outdoors, including scouting groups, community groups, and other youth organizations."

That mission reflects a broader

understanding among veteran support organizations: that healing is not limited to clinical settings. Time outdoors, connection with family, and a break from routine pressures can play a meaningful role in mental and emotional recovery — particularly for those coping with post-traumatic stress.

Chairman of Wilwin Lodge, Duane Miller, said veterans and their families are free to set their own pace during their stay, whether that means swimming or fishing on the lake, walking the trails, or simply relaxing and enjoying the natural surroundings.

"They're totally on their own schedule," he said, noting the property's 1,183 acres provide ample space to unwind.

Miller said the lodge started in

prior reporting by the Ludington Daily News. The nearly 1,200-acre parcel off East Hawley Road offered the seclusion organizers said was essential to the program's success.

"Vets suffering from PTSD or TBI are very sensitive to noise and can react adversely to it," Bev Ruttkofsky said in one of the Ludington Daily News' first reports on the lodge in 2016. "We needed this remote spot for the program to work. This setting here is like a piece of heaven for these guys."

At the heart of the property is Woodruff Lake, a roughly 70-acre inland lake that continues to serve as a centerpiece of the lodge experience. According to the 2016 Ludington Daily News report, veterans visiting the site could swim, canoe, boat or fish, or simply spend



the Upper Peninsula near the town of Trout, when a man named Robert Considine gave 600 acres of land to veterans to use. The lodge started in the U.P. in 2010 and moved to Cygnet Cove in 2015.

Wilwin Lodge relocated to its current site in Eden Township in 2015 after the Upper Peninsula property it had been using was sold, according to

time along the shoreline. The property also includes miles of trails for walking, biking and exploring, along with periodic therapeutic activities such as horseback riding.

From the beginning, the lodge has emphasized flexibility and independence during each stay. According to a 2016 Ludington Daily News report, visits typically lasted several days, with

veterans and their families setting their own pace while using shared spaces such as the lodge kitchen.

While the program has evolved over time — including adjustments to length of stay and expanded amenities — its core mission has remained consistent: providing veterans with a peaceful, natural setting to decompress, reconnect with family, and step away from the stresses of everyday life.

Owned by the American Legion Department of Michigan, the lodge by the lake surrounded by vast wilderness offers veterans the stillness of nature and days filled with peace and serenity after years of service.

Miller said the lodge typically hosts between 250 and 275 veterans annually, with additional visitors stopping by to learn more about the program. Veterans from any branch are eligible to stay with their spouse and immediate dependent children for up to five days at no cost.

That accessibility — free lodging in a peaceful, natural setting — is a cornerstone of the lodge's mission, removing financial barriers for families seeking time together.

As demand for the lodge has grown, the property has continued to evolve to support both veterans and the volunteers who help sustain it.

In 2024, the Mason County Planning Commission approved a zoning permit allowing Wilwin Lodge to construct a volunteer bunkhouse on the property. The structure, located on the north end of the lake, was designed to measure 32 by 64 feet and include seven bedrooms to accommodate overnight volunteers.

The addition was approved with a clear purpose: to protect space for the veterans the lodge serves.

Miller said the expansion would allow volunteers to stay on-site without using cabins designated for veterans and their families.

Miller and his wife, Barb, serve as caretakers of the property, helping oversee daily operations across the lodge's more than 1,100 acres.

Plans for the bunkhouse included accessibility features such as ADA-compliant entrances, bathrooms and



showers, as well as drive access for emergency vehicles — improvements that align with the lodge's mission to serve veterans with a range of physical needs.

"The American Legion allows for veterans to come out and decompress with their families," Mason County Zoning Director Cayla Sanders said during the 2024 planning commission meeting.

The expansion reflects a broader effort to strengthen the lodge's capacity while maintaining its core mission — ensuring that cabins remain available for veterans and their families, while volunteers have the support needed to keep the retreat operating smoothly.

Experiences shared by visitors reflect that mission in personal terms.

In testimonials posted on the lodge's website, families describe the retreat as a place to disconnect from daily stress and reconnect with one another.

One visitor wrote that their stay was "one of the most relaxing vacations we've had," recalling evenings

around the fire and time spent exploring the trails with family.

The Cox family wrote that they saw a noticeable change in veterans during their stay, describing them as "so relaxed, laughing and enjoying themselves with the weight of the world lifted off of them."

Others highlighted the simplicity of the experience — fishing on the lake, riding trails, and spending uninterrupted time together — as a meaningful break from everyday life.

Several visitors also noted the limited cell service and lack of television, describing it as an unexpected benefit that encouraged them to unplug and spend more time outdoors.


While the experience may appear simple on the surface, its impact can be profound. For some veterans, it is a rare opportunity to unplug from daily stressors. For others, it becomes a place to rebuild family connections or simply find a moment of peace.

Miller said community support plays an important role in sustaining the lodge, with donations helping supply everyday items used by visiting families.

Among the wishlist items are dish cloths, pot holders, mid-range pillows, mattress covers in all sizes and cleaning supplies.

To donate to Wilwin Lodge, visit <https://www.wilwinlodge.com/information/donations>


To view the wishlist, visit <https://www.wilwinlodge.com/dont-delete/wish-list>



**Ask Sherwin-Williams**  
*How You Can Save Every Day!*

No matter where you are in the world or what surfaces you're coating, Sherwin-Williams provides innovative solutions that ensure your success.

5862 W. US 10, LUDINGTON  
231.843.2188  
SHERWIN-WILLIAMS.COM



**You Do Have A Choice!**  
**Don't let insurance dictate where you go for body shop work**

Trust us to restore your car to perfection.  
**Drive with confidence!**  
You're in good hands with Benedict Auto Center.

**Benedict's Auto Center**

1742 W. US 10, Scottville **231.613.4111**



**Elevate Your Experience!**

Discover why we're West Michigan's favorite spot for quality cannabis.

130 S. Main St., Scottville, MI

For use by individuals 21 years of age or older only. Keep out of reach of children. It is illegal to drive a motor vehicle while under the influence of marijuana. National Poison Control Center 1-800-222-1222.

**NORTHSIDE MARKET...**

*While Northside Market may look like your average mini-mart, it's anything but.*

- LUDINGTON'S BEST MEAT AND SAUSAGE
- A DELI TO DIE FOR
- WINE FOR THE WINE LOVER!
- LIQUOR AND BEER

Your Neighborhood Store

Corner of N. Washington & Bryant Rd.

**NORTHSIDE MARKET** 231.843.4460  
*Specialty Meats Market + Deli* Open Daily 8 am-8 pm

**CAR RENTALS**  
Daily • Weekly

Serving You For Over 25 Years!

**VANDERHAAG CAR RENTALS**

1680 W. US-10, Scottville  
**231-757-2727** [www.vanderhaagcarsales.com](http://www.vanderhaagcarsales.com)

**MADE FOR YOU FRESH**  
ONLY AT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD BIG APPLE BAGELS!



**Big Apple BAGELS**

Something *big* is always baking.®

5487 W. U.S. Hwy 10, Ludington • 231-843-9111

**YOUR ADVENTURE CONNECTION**



**Lake Michigan CARFERRY**  
— LakeLac Maritime Services Company

**BOOK YOUR TRIP TODAY!**  
SSBADGER.COM  
@ssbadgerferry





# DIRT TRACKS, DRAG STRIPS AND THE ENDURING ROAR OF SUMMER *in West Michigan*

**BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI**

Executive Editor Shoreline Media

Along West Michigan's lakeshore, summer doesn't just sound like waves rolling in from Lake Michigan — it sounds like engines.

On warm weekends from May through September, the region's motorsports venues come alive. Dirt flies under the lights in Rothbury. Tires smoke on a drag strip in Manistee County. And across the area, generations of fans gather in grandstands for a tradition that has proven remarkably resilient.

This season, that tradition is defined by two very different stories: one of revival, the other of continuity.

## Winston Speedway: A track returns

At Winston Speedway, the focus is on bringing something back.

The 3/8-mile dirt oval sat idle after closing in 2023, its future uncertain. That changed in September 2025, when a new ownership group purchased the property with the intent of restoring it — not just as a racetrack, but as a destination.

"We purchased the property ... and have been working steadily since then to rebuild, improve, and bring the track back the right way for racers and fans," said Andrew Heykoop, co-owner of Winston Speedway, in an email interview.

Unlike many track operators, the new

owners are not former racers. They describe themselves as longtime fans who saw value in preserving a local institution. Since taking over, they have focused on rebuilding both the physical space and the race-night experience.

The 2026 season is scheduled to begin May 15 and run through early September, aligning with Michigan's traditional racing calendar.

### A FULL NIGHT AT THE TRACK

Winston's program is built around variety and volume.

On a typical night, fans can expect multiple divisions — from Super Late Models to Modifieds and Street Stocks — along with a Mini Wedge program designed to introduce younger drivers to the sport. Heykoop said ownership is targeting more than 100 cars per event, creating a steady flow of racing throughout the evening.

The appeal is rooted in proximity.

"Fans aren't sitting a half-mile away — they're right there, feeling the rumble of the engines, seeing the dirt fly," Heykoop said.

That closeness, combined with the presence of local drivers, gives short-track racing a distinctly community feel. First-time visitors often arrive early to watch practice laps, settling in as the sun drops and the night builds into a steady rhythm of engines and applause.

Admission prices reflect that accessibility, with general admission set at \$20 for adults, reduced pricing for children and free entry for younger kids.

"It's affordable compared to major league sports ... real racing, real people, and real competition," Heykoop said.

### Northern Michigan Dragway: Five decades of racing

While Winston is rebuilding, Northern Michigan Dragway offers a study in

consistency.

The strip opened in 1970, built by Tom Ledford, and has operated every year since. Today, the track remains in family hands, with Brian Ledford, track manager and promoter for Northern Michigan Dragway, helping continue that legacy.

"My mom and dad are the owners. My dad built the track and it opened in 1970," Ledford said.

The 2026 season marks the dragway's 57th year of operation, with activity beginning in April through early Test & Tune sessions that allow drivers to prepare for the months ahead. Located about three miles north of Kaleva on Potter Road, the track draws competitors and spectators from across Michigan and neighboring states.

"Opening day is always something racers and fans look forward to," Ledford said.

### STRAIGHT-LINE SPEED, SPLIT-SECOND OUTCOMES

Drag racing offers a different experience from dirt-track competition.

At Northern Michigan Dragway, races are measured not in laps but in seconds. Drivers line up side-by-side and launch down the strip, with reaction time and acceleration determining the outcome.

Among the featured classes are Top Doorslammers — the fastest cars at the track, built for high-speed, straight-line performance.

The sensory impact is immediate. Engines crack to life, vibrations carry through the stands and the smell of tire smoke lingers in the air.

"You might need to plug your ears if sensitive to loud engines," Ledford said. "You'll notice the aroma of tire smoke frequently."

The season typically runs from May through September, drawing between 100 and 200 racers on a given night.

Despite differences in format, both tracks attract similar audiences.

Families make up a significant portion of the crowd, drawn by affordability and the chance to experience racing up close. Drivers are often local, creating a connection between competitors and spectators that is difficult to replicate in larger, more commercialized sports.

"People who like motorsports have a love for race machines, and love the sights and sounds," Ledford said. "The competitors like the adrenaline rush and the chance to get bragging rights."

At Winston, Heykoop described it in broader terms: "real racing, real people, and real competition."

For many lakeshore visitors, a night at the track fits naturally alongside beach days, downtown strolls and summer festivals — another way to spend a long evening before heading back to cottages or campgrounds.

### Other tracks along the lakeshore

Winston Speedway and Northern Michigan Dragway are part of a wider network of motorsports venues across West Michigan, each contributing to the region's racing culture in different ways.

#### CRYSTAL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

Located inland in Montcalm County, Crystal Motor Speedway has built a reputation as one of the region's most consistent dirt tracks. Known for reliable weekly programs, strong car counts and appearances by touring series, it offers a steady, competitive environment for drivers and a dependable experience for fans.

#### THUNDERBIRD RACEWAY

Closer to the lakeshore in Muskegon County, Thunderbird Raceway operates on a smaller, more local scale. With entry-level divisions and a community-focused atmosphere, it serves as an accessible starting point for new racers and

a familiar gathering place for fans.

Taken together, the four tracks reflect the range of motorsports along the lakeshore:

- Winston Speedway is rebuilding, investing in facilities and aiming to reestablish itself
- Northern Michigan Dragway continues a decades-long family operation
- Crystal Motor Speedway offers consistency and competitive depth
- Thunderbird Raceway anchors the grassroots level of the sport

Each plays a role in sustaining a broader ecosystem shaped by both tradition and adaptation.

### Looking ahead

Both primary tracks are making improvements ahead of the 2026 season.

At Winston, that includes new grandstands, upgraded service buildings and expanded concessions. At Northern Michigan Dragway, planned asphalt maintenance and pit-area upgrades are aimed at improving conditions for racers and crews.

Those efforts reflect a shared challenge: maintaining relevance in a changing entertainment landscape while preserving what makes grassroots motorsports distinct.

On any given weekend, the choice may come down to preference.

Some fans are drawn to the rhythm of a dirt oval, where cars battle lap after lap under the lights. Others prefer the intensity of a drag strip, where races are decided in seconds.

Either way, the experience is unmistakable.

Along the lakeshore, motorsports remain more than just entertainment. They are a seasonal ritual — one measured not just in speed, but in community, continuity and the unmistakable sound of engines carrying through a summer night.





## SUN-SATIONAL SUMMERTIME

*Photo Essay by Jeanne Barber*

Ah-h-h, summertime, the season for fairs, festivals, fireworks, car shows, arts and crafts shows, and so much more. For the summer of 2026, a few of the lakeshore fairs that surely will be well attended will be held in Ludington (West Michigan Fair), Aug. 11-15; Oceana County in Hart, Aug. 24-28; in Manistee County in Onkama, July 28 through Aug. 1; Muskegon County, July 18-25. And of course there's all those community festivals, including Independence Day celebrations with parades and in Ludington and Manistee that draw crowds in the thousands, and fireworks that will make the shoreline night skies sparkle. But if you just want to sit back and let the sun soak in, there's all those inviting beaches to enjoy, too.





USS Silversides, moored in Muskegon

JEANNE BARBER PHOTO

# 'TROUBLE' FOUND WWII SUBMARINES LIKE THE ONE MOORED IN MUSKEGON

**BY DAVID L. BARBER**

LakeStyle Columnist

Permanently moored in a channel that connects Lake Michigan to Muskegon Lake, the legendary WWII submarine USS Silversides serves as a sobering reminder of just how special the Greatest Generation sailors were who served inside their sardine-can interiors.

At 311 feet long, Silversides is just 27 feet wide, give or take an inch or two. The run silent, run deep vessel was

barely wide enough for one sailor to navigate its single, central aisle that stretches bow to stern.

To climb down Silversides narrow, vertical ladders that lead to the innermost areas remains an arduous task for those who visit the floating museum today. As for a larger person such as I was a few years back, its confined interior might cause you to bruise your shins, elbows and forehead, just as I found out many times.

With a conning tower number of 236, the submarine served with distinction in the Pacific Theater, recording 23 confirmed sinkings of enemy vessels. Constructed alongside Silversides is a two-story conventional museum that houses thousands of submarine-related paraphernalia. The submarine, itself, is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places and is recognized as a U.S. National Historic Landmark.

It is, I believe, a must-see historic



Crew of USS Whale. Erv Heuer is in first row that is standing, second from left. Betty is front and center.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

site, and it's located right here in West Michigan.

Two decades ago I interviewed a WWII submariner and I'll never forget



Erv Heuer, 2007

served aboard USS Whale, a legendary submarine in its own right and sister ship to USS Silversides.

Mr. Heur died eight years ago, he would be 104 years old today. His obit read, in part: "He served on the submarine the Whale during WWII in Pearl Harbor (1941-1945). He was very proud

of that. He told many of his experiences during the war, many times not knowing if he would breathe fresh air, or see daylight again."

His stories – his experiences – were of the heartbeat of heroes.

"The hardest part was when you were under attack – that wears on you," Mr. Heuer told me in a 2007 interview. "You're under attack and then, well, you run through that one okay, but what about the next one? Yep, that wears on you. When you're on a submarine doing what you do, trouble follows. Trouble finds you."

He recalled one battle in particular. "There were two (Japanese ships) working us over, and they just kept passing back and forth, while dropping their depth charges," he said. "But we just happened to be deep enough that they weren't hitting us. If they'd have known just how deep we hid, I probably wouldn't be here today, talking to you. When those depth charges went off, it was a jolt, a jar, it shook the whole boat."

And just that quick, without so much as batting an eye, Mr. Heuer told another story of when he purposely got Betty

drunk while on liberty on the small Pacific island of Midway. He confessed he had all he could do to sneak her aboard his submarine and hide her from others.

"Oh yeah, I got her drunk," he said. "Why not? She liked her beer!"

Then he smiled and laughed. The hook set deep and he had landed another one – me.

You see, Betty had a cold nose, cute little tail and four paws. American Heritage wrote about Betty, "... if Hollywood had dreamed up a sea dog, it would have been Betty ... a white toy poodle who was the mascot of the USS Whale."

When the crew of USS Whale – hull number 239 – went into battle, Betty went into battle. When they were ordered to remain quiet for silent running in order to escape the enemy, she remained quiet. When they went on shore liberty, she went on shore liberty.

Betty even had her own I.D. Card, medical record and an "official service record?"

I'll never forget how Mr. Heuer's eyes watered, and sparkled, as he remembered Betty, or how his eyes turned cold when he remembered the battles and the

many near-sinkings of his submarine by enemy depth charges.

Life aboard a World War II submarine was difficult, he said. Temperatures inside, especially in the tail section where the motors were located and where he was assigned, routinely bubbled at 100 degrees. Living quarters were tight. Fresh water and air were limited, and the slightest crack in the boat's hull caused by a single depth charge could have meant doom.

"It could get warm in those things, especially down around the Philippines," he told me. "We'd run on the surface at night and then dive at maybe four o'clock in the morning and we'd dive for the day. Our engines were hot – boy, those engines threw off a lot of heat – and the outside water temperature was warm, too.

"In the evening, when we'd get ready to surface, you'd go to light a cigarette and boy, you'd better get to that fire in a hurry because just about the time you'd light (the match) it would go out, that's how short the air supply was. You had to be fast."

In making 11 war patrols, USS Whale sunk over two dozen Japanese freighters, tankers and supply ships, and played a significant role in cutting the enemy's

supply line. The crew of Whale also helped to rescue dozens of U.S. pilots whose aircraft had been shot down in the Pacific and Mr. Heuer's sub was the only American submarine to plant mines in Japan's home waters.

"When we'd go into silent running, everything was turned off that could be," Mr. Heuer said. "You didn't make any noise at all. You didn't walk around, you didn't do anything. You were just left standing, holding your breath."

Just how important of a role did the U.S. submarine fleet play in winning the war against Japan?

Submarines like USS Whale and USS Silversides comprised less than two percent of the U.S. fleet, but sank over 30 percent of Japan's navy – including eight aircraft carriers – and over 60 percent of the enemy's lifeline, its merchant marine fleet.

But all that came at a high cost – America lost 52 submarines and 3,506 men

"Whenever we heard of one of our boats being lost, we felt it, we felt it," Mr. Heuer said. "We knew just how dangerous the job was that we were doing. But we all volunteered, for one reason or another. We had a good crew."

And then, as it was with the striking of a match, it ended, just that quick.

"We were tied up in Saipan when we heard the war was over," he said. "We were getting ready for another patrol and we were told the war was over. Relief. It was a relief."

And so everyone went home, including Betty, USS Whale's official mascot that had been officially designated Dog First Class.

I'm quite sure I'll think about Mr. Heuer, Betty and the rest of the crew of USS Whale, the next time I walk the deck of USS Silversides in Muskegon, and no doubt I'll wonder, too, about what stories the sailors who served on USS Silversides might have told us.

One thing is for sure – they were and forever will remain, the Greatest Generation, and their stories will be forever great.

God bless 'em, all.

**Editor's note:** David L. Barber is a retired journalist living in Manistee. He will provide occasional feature stories and columns for various Shoreline Media publications, including the Ludington Daily News, Oceana Herald-Journal, LakeStyle Magazine and PTW Magazine. He can be reached at dlbarber1006@gmail.com



# Into the Forest: How a Michigan music festival became something more

From Lake Michigan beaches to glowing forest trails, Electric Forest has grown into one of West Michigan's defining summer experiences – blending music, art, community and atmosphere in the woods of Oceana County.

**BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI**  
Executive Editor Shoreline Media

ROTHBURY, Mich. — By late June, the rhythm of summer along Lake Michigan is already in full swing.

Beach towns from Ludington to Pentwater — and south through Whitehall and Montague — fill with visitors. Boats drift across the water. Sunsets stretch long into the evening.

And just a few miles inland, beyond

the shoreline and into the trees, another kind of summer tradition begins to take shape.

At the Double JJ Resort in Rothbury, the familiar pace of the lakeshore gives way to something entirely different. As cars line the roads and music filters through open windows, Electric Forest rises once again — a temporary world built from sound, light and shared experience, drawing tens of thousands into the woods of Oceana County.



For those who return each year, the journey itself becomes part of the ritual — a gradual shift from shoreline calm to something far more immersive.

Electric Forest launched in 2011, following the Rothbury Festival, which was held at the same site in 2008 and 2009. After a brief hiatus, the concept was reimagined — returning with a new identity that blended electronic music, immersive art and the surrounding forest into a more experiential format.

By 2014, the reimagined festival was drawing sold-out crowds estimated between 40,000 and 50,000 people, according to reporting by the Oceana's Herald-Journal. Many attendees were traveling from across the country for the first time.

They came for the music, a blend of electronic artists and jam bands like The String Cheese Incident, whose multi-set performances became a cornerstone of the weekend.

Yet even in those early years, the lineup was only part of the draw. What lingered was the setting — wooded, immersive and constantly shifting — of-

fering something many festivals couldn't replicate: a true sense of place.

## Where the forest becomes the stage

That sense of place is what continues to define the experience.

At Electric Forest, the environment is not just a backdrop — it is the stage.

During the day, Sherwood Forest feels almost quiet. Hammocks sway between trees. Art installations invite people to pause and explore. Some festivalgoers slip away briefly toward nearby Lake Michigan beaches, a dynamic noted in earlier attendee accounts reported by the Oceana's Herald-Journal, before returning inland.

By night, the transformation is immediate.

Lights climb the trees. Colors pulse through the canopy. Music drifts in from every direction, blending into a continuous rhythm that seems to move with the crowd itself.

"You have to see the forest at night" was a common refrain among first-time

attendees, according to 2014 Oceana's Herald-Journal coverage.

As the experience has evolved, so has its scale.

Today, Electric Forest draws more than 50,000 people annually, transforming this part of Oceana County into a temporary city. The festival is presented by Electric Forest organizers and has long been associated with Madison House.

"Electric Forest is known for bringing together a passionate group of fans known as the Forest Family," Alex Dunne, a media relations consultant for the festival, said in 2023 promotional materials. "Electric Forest incorporates the natural beauty of the venue into carefully crafted art pieces and creatively themed environments."

That balance continues in 2026, when Electric Forest is scheduled for June 25-28 with a lineup featuring ILLENIUM, Excision, GRiZ, Chris Lake, Kaskadee, Disco Lines, The String Cheese Incident, Sammy Virji, Levity and ISOxo.

Still, for many attendees, the lineup is only the entry point. The experi-



ence expands far beyond the stages, through curated events, art installations and late-night moments that unfold organically across the grounds.

For nearly a decade, that rhythm held steady.

Then came the interruption.

After a two-year pause during the COVID-19 pandemic, the festival returned in 2022 to a sold-out crowd and a surge of anticipation.

"It's been three years since the last EF and excitement and anticipation are way high," Carrie Lombardi, director of community relations for Electric Forest, said ahead of the 2022 event, according to reporting by the Oceana's Herald-Journal.

"We've all been waiting three years for this."

That return marked a turning point, reinforcing how deeply the festival had embedded itself in the rhythms of summer across West Michigan.

Even before the hiatus, Electric Forest had proven its resilience.

Heavy rain during the 2017 festival turned walkways into mud and campsites into difficult terrain, but attendees adapted and continued the experience, according to reporting by the Oceana's Herald-Journal.



Over time, that unpredictability became part of the culture — not something to avoid, but something to embrace.

## A place to belong

For Ludington resident Drew O’Neal, that sense of culture is personal.

Since first attending in 2015, he said Electric Forest has shaped his sense of connection.

“It completely changed my outlook on life,” O’Neal said in a 2023 interview with the Ludington Daily News.

Over the years, the festival became less about who was on stage and more about who was around him — the friendships formed, the people who returned, the sense of familiarity in a place that constantly changes.

“If you’ve ever felt like an outcast ... you will feel at home here,” he said in the same 2023 interview.

Each summer, tens of thousands of people transform this corner of Oceana County into something resembling a small city.



Campgrounds stretch across fields. Vendors and artists line the paths. Music carries into the early morning hours.

“It is so unpredictable that you can’t help but live in the moment,” O’Neal said in the 2023 Ludington Daily News interview.

And for many, that unpredictability is exactly what draws them back.

As Electric Forest has grown, so has its reach beyond the festival itself.

According to a September 2025 press release from the Electric Forest Charitable Fund, the festival awarded \$20,000 in

grants along with an additional \$10,000 for its Music in Schools program, supporting arts, education and environmental initiatives across Oceana County.

With matching contributions, that investment expanded to \$40,000, benefiting music programs in Hart, Hesperia, Montague, Shelby and Walkerville schools, as well as community art and conservation projects.

In that way, the festival’s impact extends well beyond a single weekend, becoming part of the broader cultural fabric of the region.

## Why it endures

By the time the music fades and the last campsites are packed away, the forest grows quiet again.

Cars file back toward the highway, some heading north to Ludington, others south through Hart and into Whitehall and Montague, or back toward the beaches of Pentwater Township, where Lake Michigan continues its steady rhythm — waves rolling in, sunsets returning to their familiar place on the horizon.

The lights in the trees disappear. The pathways empty. What was, for a few days, a city of more than 50,000 people slips back into stillness.

But the feeling lingers.

In memories carried along the lakeshore, in stories shared long after the weekend ends and in the quiet understanding that, somewhere between the lake and the forest, summer in West Michigan offers more than one way to gather.

And when late June comes again, the road inland will fill once more — leading back to the trees, where the music, the light and the sense of belonging wait to return.





# HOWIE DEALS

FLAVOR THAT FITS ANY BUDGET

\$7<sup>99</sup>



Small 2-topping pizza

\$11<sup>99</sup>



Large 2-topping round or thin crust or Large 1-topping deep dish pizza

\$22<sup>99</sup>



2 Medium, 1-topping pizzas and Howie Bread® with dipping sauce

\$33<sup>99</sup>



2 Large 2-topping pizzas, 3 cheeser Howie Bread® with dipping sauce and a 2 liter of Pepsi

PROUDLY SERVING LUDINGTON FOR 20 YEARS!

## Hungry Howie's®

FLAVORED CRUST® PIZZA

LUDINGTON 5485 US-10 Next to Walgreens  
(231) 843-6363

We Deliver • Open Late • Open for Lunch

Prices and participation may vary. Prices are subject to change without notice. Additional toppings, delivery and tax extra. All stores are independently owned and operated.

Hungry Howie's and its related marks are trademarks of Hungry Howie's Pizza & Subs, Inc. Pepsi, the Pepsi logo and related marks are trademarks of PepsiCo.





Colorful walkway with lanterns

JEANNE BARBER PHOTO

# A living, breathing, family-friendly West Michigan treasure

STORY BY DAVID L. BARBER • PHOTOS BY JEANNE BARBER



Titan the tiger

JEANNE BARBER PHOTO

**STORY BY DAVID L. BARBER  
PHOTOS BY JEANNE BARBER**

Titan's stoic stare will mesmerize you, and Hugo's diminutive size – even though he's as large as a refrigerator – will do the same.

Mesmerizing, too, is the inspiring presence of Ernest and Mac, both of whom stand tall in prideful pose for being the All American treasures they are – the former being a golden eagle, the latter being a bald eagle.

Titan, a rare Amur tiger, and Hugo, a shy and seldom-seen in the wild

pygmy hippo – as well as their feathered friends, Ernest and Mac – are all calling-card residents of the John Ball Zoo, a cozy 140-acre wondrous wildlife kingdom of more than 2,000 animals from five continents and 21 countries.

They, along with a snowy owl named Aspen and a pair of female wallabies named Delta and Mica, will be happy to meet and greet visitors, if they're not napping like Mylo the snow leopard and Booboo, an Alaskan bear, often do.

Nestled on the western fringes

of Grand Rapids just 45 miles or so from the Lake Michigan shoreline, the zoo has been a family-favorite go-to destination for over a century. It is a living-breathing puzzle that has been carefully and meaningfully pieced together over the decades to become the patchwork of otherworld lands it is today, all waiting to be appreciated and explored for the exciting, exotic lands they personify.

Critically endangered today numbers wise, Amur tigers such as Titan are more commonly known as Si-



JEANNE BARBER PHOTO

**Entrance canopy of color with lanterns**

berian tigers. Recognized for being a subspecies native to the Russian Far East and northeast China, it was estimated in 2022 their world-wide population had dwindled to below 500, numbers that do not include the ones that are being cared for and kept from harm's way in sanctuaries, refuges and zoos like John Ball, the latter which

is home to two, with the second tiger being named Mabelle. "They're part of the managed population in accredited zoos, so they are not counted among the fewer than 500 Amur tigers remaining in the wild," said Kirsten Mann, Digital Communications Manager at the John Ball Zoo. "That number refers specifically

to wild tigers living in their natural habitat. "Tigers in AZA-accredited zoos (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) are part of a carefully managed conservation program called a Species Survival Plan. The goal of these programs is to maintain a healthy, genetically diverse population in human care as a safe-



JEANNE BARBER PHOTO

**Wallabies Delta and Mica**

guard for the species. This population can help support conservation efforts through research, education, and, when appropriate, potential future reintroduction efforts. "We have a few different things," said Mann. "We still have our baby pygmy hippo, Hugo, who's much bigger than he was when guests saw him last. We also have our snow leopard cub, Juniper, who's so fun to see." Mann said that in the past three years over 700,000 visitors have looked on in awe and wonder at such zoo residents as Titan, Hugo, Ernest,

Mac, Juniper and all the others. "Booboo is our female brown bear," said Mann. "She's been here since July 9th, 1994, and came to us from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, where she was rescued." Scheduled to open May 22, she said a state-of-the-art otter habitat will become home to Slyde, Quigley, Bruce and Crush. "We'll be adding turkey vultures and a couple other new bird species soon," she said. "We currently have three pygmy hippos – Jahari is our male hippo, Penelope our female, and

her calf," the aforementioned and personable Hugo. Schools from across the state use the John Ball Zoo as an innovative, outdoor classroom. "The furthest schools that have had field trips to the zoo (came to us) from all the way up in Leland, and as far east as Charlotte," said Mann. "Sometimes, we'll even have schools from northern Indiana visit. As for a typical family visit, most people should plan for about two to three hours to comfortably see the majority of the zoo." Near the zoo's entrance is the



JEANNE BARBER PHOTOS



**Above: Snow leopard Mylo sleeping.**

**Left: Alaskan bear Booboo.**

Waters of the World, where the regal eagles – Ernest and Mac, remember them? – strut and stretch their massive, majestic wings.

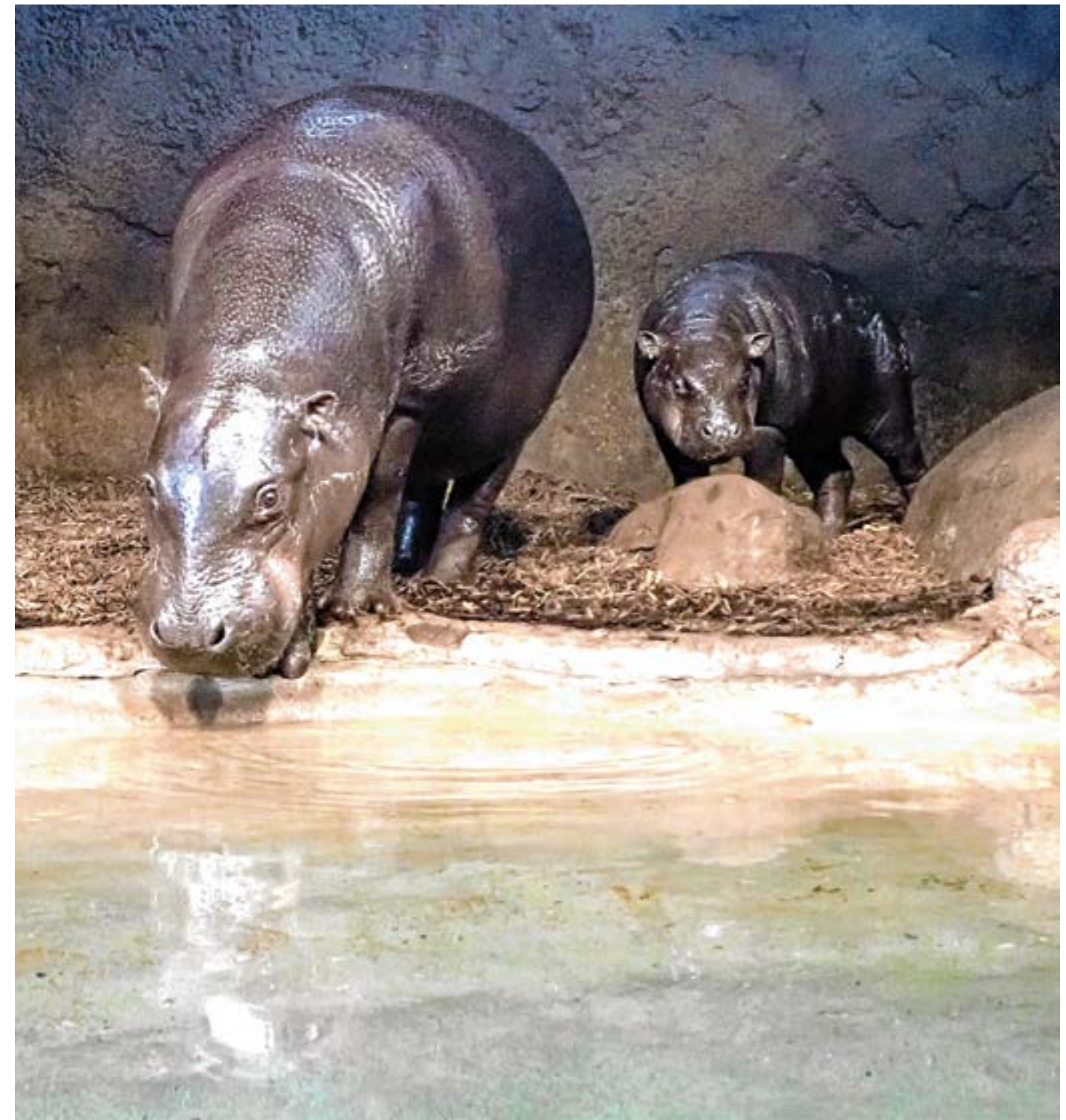
Then comes the Wild Way Trail, the Idema Forest Realm, the Americas, and now under construction and coming in 2028, a new exhibit dedicated to Africa where zoo personnel will play

host to a lion, chimpanzee, meerkat, warthog who already are on site, and their Dark Continent friends such as giraffes, ostriches and more, who are will arrive in good time.

So what other animals might you cross paths with on your visit to the John Ball Zoo and its aquarium? How about black swans, white storks, pen-

guins, spider crabs, beaver (not yet on site), porcupine, Canada lynx, a mountain lion, flamingos, spider monkeys, armadillo, snakes, lizards, turtles, wallaby, cockatoo, ring-tailed lemur, screech owl, honey bees, barn owl, sloth, frogs, salamanders, and more.

The John Ball Zoo is currently hosting the colorful Grand Rapids Lantern



JEANNE BARBER PHOTO

### Pygmy hippos Penelope and Hugo

Festival, which will run through mid June. The festival features hundreds of large hanging lanterns that will make evenings in the zoo sparkle like a kaleidoscope of candle-burnt rainbows.

The zoo offers so much more, including face painting; zip lining; a

ropes course; camel rides; a hobby farm where visitors can get up close with farm animals including, sheep, goats and a cow; stroller, wagon and motorized wheelchair rental (non-motorized wheelchairs are provided, free of charge); first-aid and emergency shelters; a guest services office;

plenty of food service sites; rest-rooms; and a plethora of benches and chairs to sit and rest, and more.

Located at 1300 West Fulton Street in Grand Rapids, the zoo will remain open through mid November. For ticket prices and other information go to [jbzoo.org](http://jbzoo.org), or call 616 336-4300.



Aspen the Snowy Owl  
JEANNE BARBER PHOTO



## BAR & GRILL

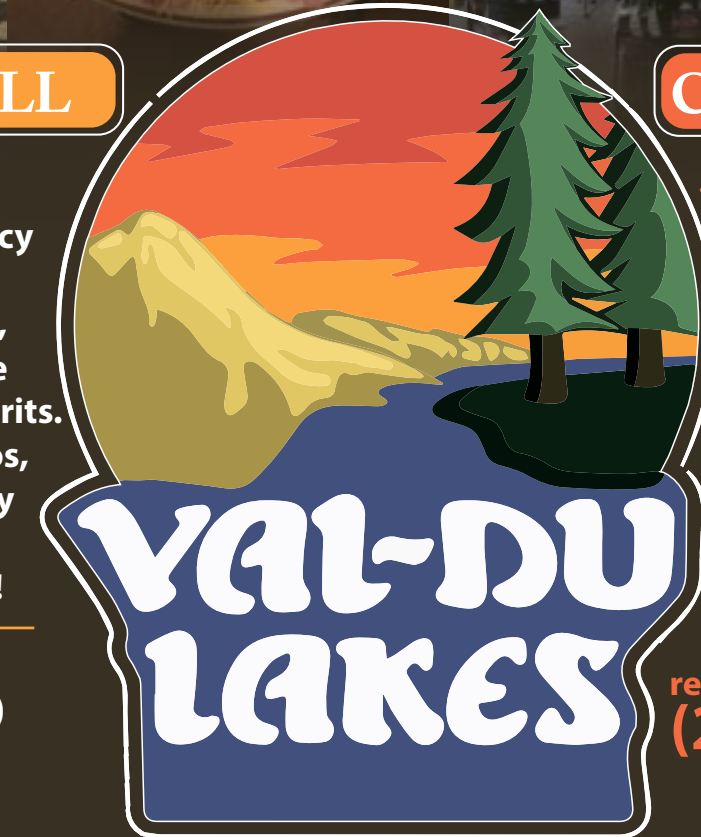
*great food!*

From a cold beer & juicy burger, to sensational steaks & glass of wine, our Bar & Grill is home to fantastic food & spirits. Steaks, salads, burritos, burgers & more! Enjoy your food with a view on our beautiful deck!

Takeout Available  
Live Music (Weekends)

Order online @  
valdulakes.com

**(231) 873.4901**



## CAMPGROUND

*your up north retreat*

Grassy sites, including electricity (some water sites available) picnic tables & fire ring, tents welcome, spacious private showers, clean bathrooms, ATM, ice & firewood available, Camp store & gift shop, camper rentals

reservations:  
**(231) 873.CAMP**  
(2267)

*Relax, have fun,  
make memories...*



## RV Rentals Available

Want a Silver Lake RV camping experience but don't have one of your own? Val-Du Lakes Campground is happy to offer guests an on-site rental in one of our well-kept campers



**1511 N. Wilson Ave • Mears**  
**www.valdulakes.com** 



# DEB STEVENSON GROUP

*"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined."*

— Henry David Thoreau

★ LOCAL EXPERT

MEETING YOUR NEEDS IN THE  
*REAL ESTATE MARKET*

CALL, TEXT OR EMAIL DEBBY TODAY!

 **DEBBY STEVENSON**  
ASSOCIATE BROKER, REALTOR®

 **231-510-5727**

 **WWW.DEBSTEVENSON.COM**

*Photography courtesy of Todd & Brad Reed Photography  
www.ToddAndBradReed.com*



SCAN  
HERE



**GREENRIDGE REALTY**

300 S RATH AVE · SUITE 101 · LUDINGTON

