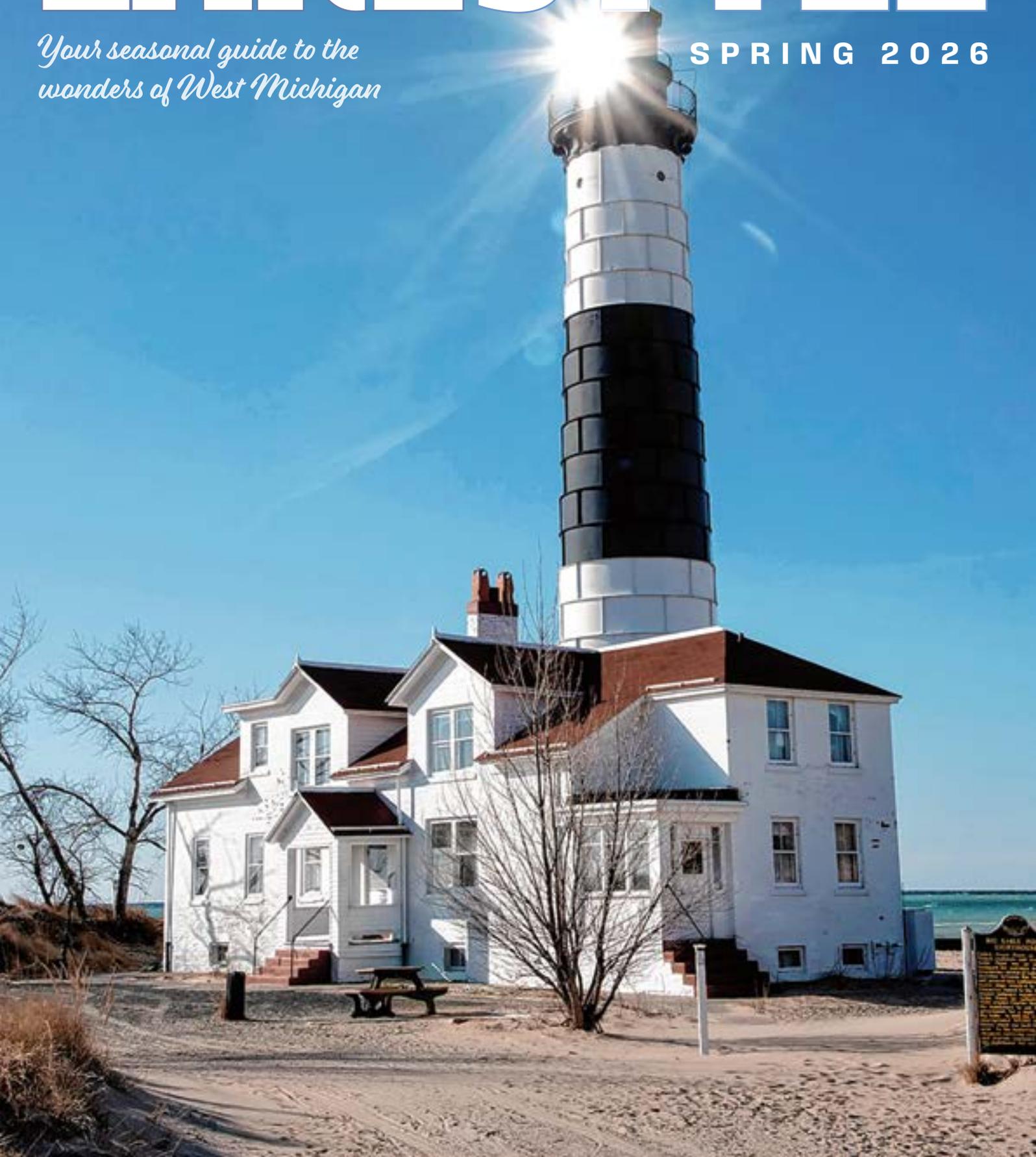


LAKESTYLE

*Your seasonal guide to the
wonders of West Michigan*

SPRING 2026



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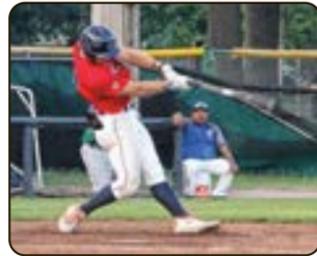
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Cover photo by **STEVE BEGNOCHE**

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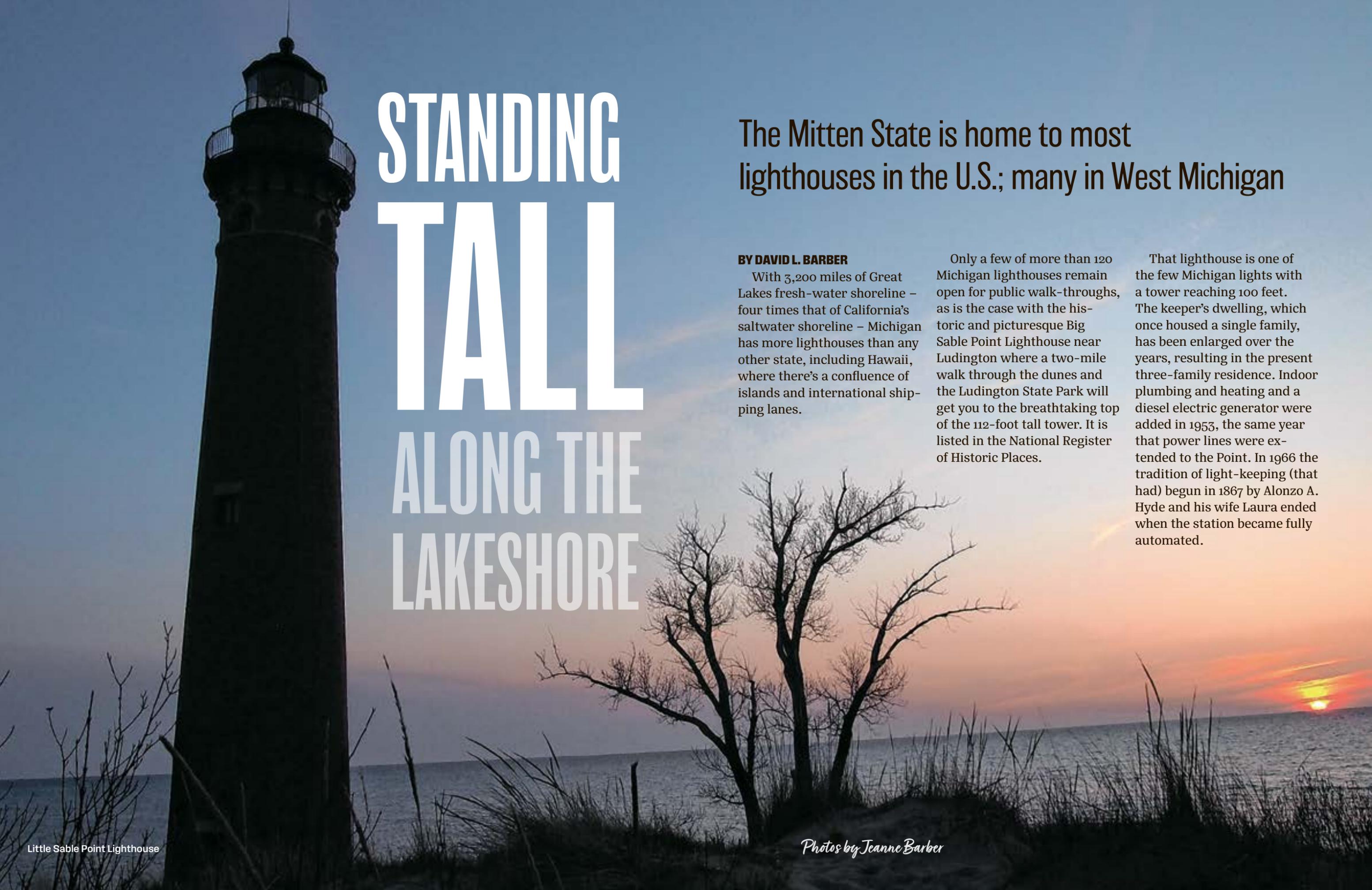
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STANDING TALL ALONG THE LAKESHORE

The Mitten State is home to most lighthouses in the U.S.; many in West Michigan

BY DAVID L. BARBER

With 3,200 miles of Great Lakes fresh-water shoreline – four times that of California’s saltwater shoreline – Michigan has more lighthouses than any other state, including Hawaii, where there’s a confluence of islands and international shipping lanes.

Only a few of more than 120 Michigan lighthouses remain open for public walk-throughs, as is the case with the historic and picturesque Big Sable Point Lighthouse near Ludington where a two-mile walk through the dunes and the Ludington State Park will get you to the breathtaking top of the 112-foot tall tower. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

That lighthouse is one of the few Michigan lights with a tower reaching 100 feet. The keeper’s dwelling, which once housed a single family, has been enlarged over the years, resulting in the present three-family residence. Indoor plumbing and heating and a diesel electric generator were added in 1953, the same year that power lines were extended to the Point. In 1966 the tradition of light-keeping (that had) begun in 1867 by Alonzo A. Hyde and his wife Laura ended when the station became fully automated.



SS Badger passing Ludington Lighthouse and pier



Manistee Lighthouse with freighter

Located in downtown Ludington is the Stearns Park Beach North Breakwater Light – built in 1871 – which for decades has been the shining beacon for the S.S. Badger carferry, many massive freighters and scores of fishing boats and other pleasure craft.

Manistee’s equally historic lighthouse, and every bit as picturesque, is scheduled to open its doors for public tours this summer after decades of be-

ing shuttered. The 38-foot tall Manistee North Pierhead Lighthouse has one of four remaining catwalks on Lake Michigan, one that stretches nearly a quarter-mile from shoreline to beacon and is a favorite spot for local fishermen to gather.

Another Lakestyle-area lighthouse with mesmerizing local legend and lore is located just south of Pentwater in Oceana County, where the Petite Pointe Au Sable – which means “little

point of sand” – reaches skyward as the Little Sable Point Lighthouse.

It, too, has a historical marker at its base that reads, in part: “This light uses a third-order Fresnel lens positioned 108 feet above the lake. The tower was painted white in 1899 to make it more visible to ships during the day and was restored to its original brick in the 1970s. In 1902, the first overland route to the lighthouse was cut from

Mears. The lighthouse was renamed Little Sable Point Light Station in 1910. In 1915, the original lard-burning wick lamp was replaced by a brighter, incandescent oil vapor, kerosene-burning lamp. Visible for nineteen miles, the light flashed every thirty seconds. The lamp was electrified and automated in 1954. After automation, a keeper was no longer needed and the house and ancillary buildings were razed.”

To the south, the Muskegon South Pier Light, which is located on the channel that leads to Muskegon Lake – passing Devils Kitchen Trail and Snug Harbor along the way – and is also open to the public on a seasonal basis. What makes this 48-foot tall beacon extra special is that the USS Silversides – an honored World War II Gato class submarine with a remarkable fighting record – is permanently moored within easy walking distance.

Visitors are encouraged to walk through the submarine, as well as the sub’s museum located at the same site.

In 1987, the Michigan Circle Tour was created to guide visitors from one lighthouse, to the next. The Michigan Department of Transportation and the West Michigan Tourist Association jointly created a self-help map and booklet to enhance the Circle Tour

Other popular West Michigan

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Muskegon South Pier Lighthouse and Lightkeeper's House



Lens Manistee Lighthouse



Point Betsie Lighthouse



Grand Haven Lighthouse

lighthouses on that tour include:

Holland Harbor Lighthouse, built in 1872 and affectionately known as Big Red, stands 32-foot high;

Grand Haven Lighthouse, built in 1839, stands 51 feet tall;

Point Betsie Lighthouse, built in 1858 and long considered one of the most popular destinations for lighthouse enthusiasts, stands 37 feet tall.

Back in West Michigan, the Lakeshores Keepers, "... offers unique opportunities to explore five lighthouses along the

shores of Lake Michigan from Whitehall to Manistee," adding that visitors can "... experience the history of the lakeshore by visiting the lights in person or exploring our online resources ... whether you're climbing a tour, walking the grounds, or learning from home."

"Through preservation, education, and storytelling, we invite you to connect with the rich maritime heritage of Lake Michigan," its website reads. "Discover the vital role these structures continue to play and

how you can be part of it."

Its five lighthouses include both Ludington beacons, Manistee, Little Sable Point and the White River Light Station near Whitehall. For more information, go to lakeshorekeepers.org

Many other lighthouses are nestled along the Lake Michigan shoreline, as well as the Lake Superior and Lake Huron shorelines. Some remain open for tours, while others are home to bed and breakfast lodgings, museums, and a few are even privately owned.

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DUSTING OFF

the



How spring signals the return of Northwest Michigan's busiest season



BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI

Spring doesn't arrive all at once. It comes in layers — a drive-thru window sliding open for the first time in months, a museum shifting from winter schedules to weekend hours, crews returning to a ship at the dock, or golfers brushing the dust off clubs that haven't seen daylight since fall.

Across **Manistee County**, **Mason County**, **Lake County**, **Oceana County**, and the lakeshore communities of **Whitehall** and **Montague**, the season marks a reset. Winter is, for the most part, finished. School sports are transitioning from the hardwoods to the ball fields and there are more things to do. The rhythm of the commu-

nity and the lakeshore lifestyle is amping up towards the summertime crescendo.

For many locally owned businesses, nonprofits and institutions, spring is the bridge between winter quiet and the summer surge that sustains the year.

Tourism and hospitality activity rises sharply in spring across coastal and

recreation-based communities, according to the **Michigan Economic Development Corporation** and state labor market data. Employment in food service, lodging, retail and recreation typically increases as visitor activity returns, particularly in regions tied to outdoor recreation, lakeshore

welcome to Ludington signal for the season. The Petunia Parade brings red, white, and blue color to the curb throughout the busy spring and summer months. This volunteer-led effort has become a tradition for generations of residents and spring and summer visitors.



access and seasonal travel.

For operators, that reality shapes spring decisions each year: when to reopen, how many staff to bring back, and how quickly to scale operations.

WHEN FAMILIAR CURB APPEAL, DOORS AND DOCKS OPEN AGAIN

Some of the clearest signs of spring aren't on a calendar — they're on Main Street.

Every year thousands of petunias are planted along Ludington Avenue as part of the annual

In Ludington, the reopening of **Dairy Queen** has long served as an informal marker of the season. Based on prior reporting by the *Ludington Daily News*, the seasonal ice cream stand traditionally opens in mid-March, often drawing long drive-thru lines even on chilly days.

“What a great day to start,” owner Jeff McDonough said when the business reopened for the 2024 season. “We always open in mid-March,” he added, noting that some years the opening coincides with snowstorms, while others feel more like spring — but the return itself is what customers

watch for.

Downtown shops on Ludington Avenue shift into extended spring hours as sidewalks begin to fill again, while beach-adjacent souvenir shops, beachwear retailers and rental operations near Stearns Park reopen as lakefront visitation increases. This is common in all of the beach communities up and down the shore.

Along the harbor, activity builds even before passengers arrive. The local marinas up and down the West Michigan coast begin to fill up as boats make their way into the summer's safe harbors.

The **S.S. Badger Lake Michigan Carferry**, which connects Ludington with Manitowoc, Wisconsin, generally begins its sailing season in mid-May. Weeks earlier, the signs are already visible: the ship emerges from annual layup as crews return for inspections, maintenance and training, equipment moves on and off the vessel, and final checks are completed at the dock on Maritime Drive — a familiar cue that spring travel is close at hand.

Another inland milestone follows shortly after. In Oceana County, **Lewis Adventure Farm & Zoo** traditionally opens for the season in mid-May, bringing animal encounters, outdoor attractions and farm-market activity back online ahead of peak summer travel. This popular place comes alive again in spring after the winter hiatus.

The seasonal transition is especially pronounced in the Silver Lake and Mears area, where business activity closely follows dune and beach access. The Silver Lake Dunes State Park — widely known for its ORV opportunities —



is open all year round, but spring begins its run toward the peak. Early-season visitation to **Silver Lake State Park** helps drive that momentum, with hikers and photographers often among the first to return.

OUTDOOR SEASONS RETURN — PARK BY PARK

According to the **Michigan Department of Natural Resources**, spring marks the annual transition from winter operations to active recreation across Michigan's state park system. As snow recedes and ground conditions improve, parks move out of winter layup and into staged reopening, bringing trails, campgrounds and

shoreline access back into regular use.

In Mason County, **Ludington State Park** is often one of the earliest indicators that the outdoor season has begun. Hikers, birders and photographers return to the park's extensive trail system as soon as conditions allow, drawn by dune forests, wetlands and Lake Michigan overlooks. Day-use areas and beach access see steady spring traffic, while campground preparation ramps up ahead of peak summer demand.

To the south in Oceana County, **Charles Mears State Park** transitions from winter quiet to spring readiness, with increased foot traffic along the beach and campground activity building as April turns to May. Nearby, **Silver Lake State Park** experiences an early influx of visitors exploring the

dunes and shoreline on foot. Long before the height of ORV season, hikers and photographers take advantage of cooler temperatures and open vistas, helping jump-start seasonal activity in the Silver Lake and Mears area.

In Manistee County, **Orchard Beach State Park** reemerges as a spring destination for picnicking, hiking and panoramic Lake Michigan views. The bluff-top park draws residents and visitors seeking quieter spring outings before summer crowds arrive, reinforcing its role as a shoulder-season favorite.

Just south of the core coverage area, but closely tied to regional travel patterns, **Duck Lake State Park** also sees a noticeable spring uptick. The park serves as a natural stop for hikers, cyclists and beachgoers moving between

Whitehall, Montague and Muskegon-area destinations, adding to the sense that the lakeshore corridor is reawakening.

Beyond individual parks, trail systems such as the **Hart-Montague Trail State Park** reflect the broader seasonal shift. As snow melts and surfaces dry, walkers, runners and cyclists return in growing numbers, reconnecting trail communities and downtowns after months of winter slowdown.

Spring also marks the return of several key outdoor seasons statewide. Inland trout streams reopen in late April, drawing anglers back to rivers and creeks. Great Lakes pier and shoreline fishing resumes, while state park campgrounds reopen in stages and move into active reservation periods. Marinas and public launch ramps begin welcoming early-season boaters, adding another layer of activity along lakes and harbors.

Taken together, the gradual reopening of state parks, trails and waterways provides some of the clearest evidence that winter has loosened its grip — and that northwest Michigan is once again open for outdoor exploration.



MUSEUMS AND ARTS DUST OFF THE CALENDAR

In Manistee, the **Manistee County Historical Museum** expands public hours in March and April. In Mason County, seasonal attractions operated by the **Mason County Historical Society** traditionally return in late April and May, including the **Port of Ludington Maritime Museum** and **Historic White Pine Village**.

The **Ludington Area Center for the Arts** continues gallery exhibits, workshops and performances through spring, often paired with opening receptions that draw people back downtown after winter. Regional venues such as the **Frauenthal Center for the Performing Arts** also see

spring calendars fill with concerts, theater and family programming that attract audiences from across West Michigan.

Soon, live music will fill the streets, art and craft shows will pop up and festivals, parades and family-friendly attractions will keep everyone busy and entertained. That starts in the spring.

Spring in northwest Michigan is not about flipping a switch. It's about momentum — built by one reopened business, one returning crew at the dock, one thawed trail, one fish fry, one cold-water plunge or early tee time at a time.

By the time summer arrives in full, the groundwork has already been laid during these weeks when communities dust off the open sign — and ease into their busiest, most vibrant time of year.

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West Michigan's Most Treasured

Spring Traditions

BY CRISTINA JUSKA

From the first hints of green in March to full summer bloom by June, spring in West Michigan is marked by traditions that draw locals and visitors outdoors after a long winter. As temperatures rise and the landscape comes back to life, communities across the lakeshore celebrate the

season with festivals, outdoor recreation and long-standing events that have become annual rites of passage.

The season often kicks off with St. Patrick's Day festivities in downtown Ludington, where the Ludington Downtown Development Authority teams up with local businesses for a multi-day celebration of

Irish spirit. From March 15-18, the downtown district fills with themed activities ranging from Kegs & Eggs and beer runs to live music and colorful public art, creating a lively start to spring.

Just weeks later, off-road vehicle enthusiasts mark April 1 as the opening of ORV season at the Silver Lake Sand Dunes.

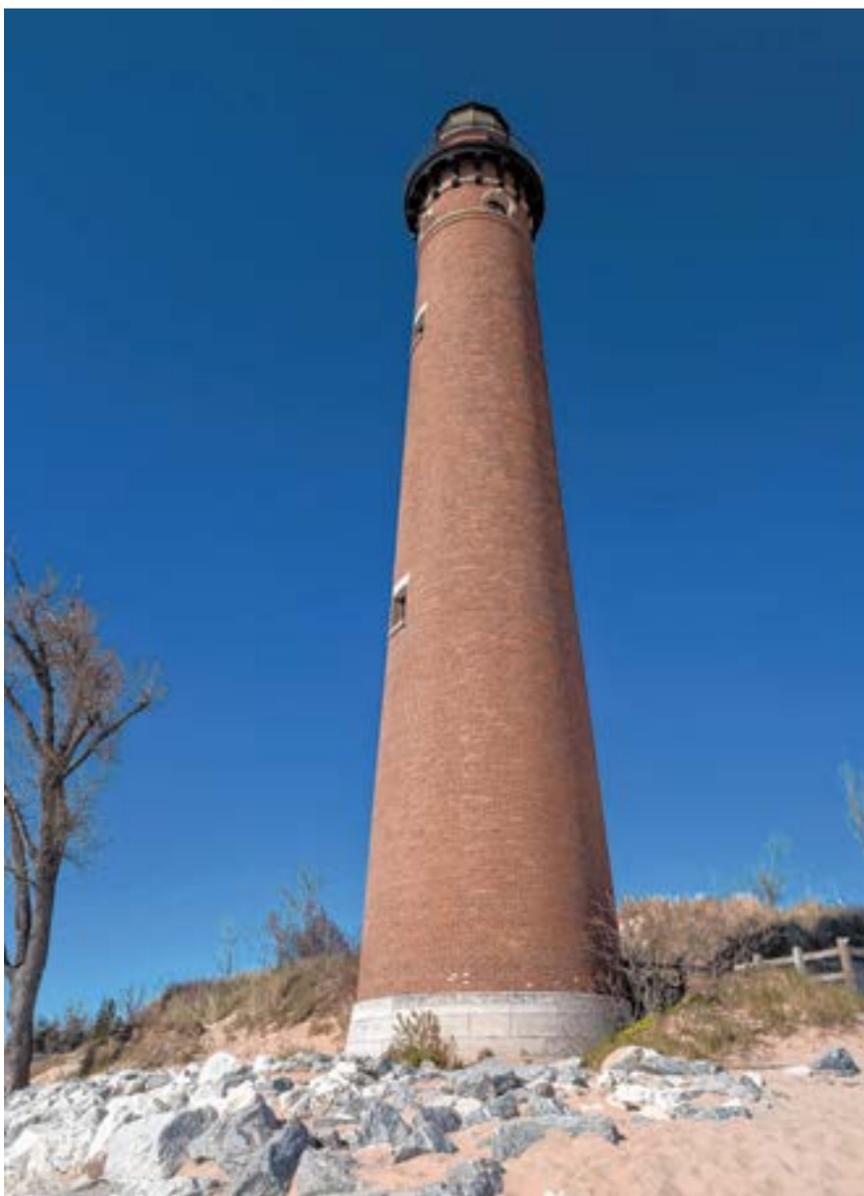


The dunes offer the only opportunity east of the Mississippi River for open sand-dune riding, drawing riders from across Michigan and beyond. Visitors can rent dune buggies or opt for a guided experience with Mac Woods Dune Rides, which offers family-friendly tours from mid-May through October.

In Ludington, one of the season's coldest — and most anticipated — traditions returns April 18 with the annual Lake Jump at Stearns Park Beach. Participants collect pledges before sprinting into the icy waters of Lake Michigan to support a local cause. The 2026 beneficiary is the West Shore Amateur Hockey Association, with proceeds helping ensure access to youth hockey programs regardless of a family's financial means.

As May arrives, lighthouse season opens along the Lake Michigan shoreline. Visitors can once again climb towers and explore grounds at five historic sites operated by Lakeshore Keepers, including Big Sable Point, the Ludington North Breakwater Light and the Manistee North Pierhead Light. The openings offer sweeping lake views and a closer look at West Michigan's maritime heritage.

Farmers markets also signal spring's full arrival. In downtown Muskegon, the



Muskegon Farmers Market transitions into its summer season in May, operating Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays through November. Owned and operated by the City of Muskegon, the market features locally grown produce, flowers, baked goods and artisan items, with longtime favorites like The Cheese Lady and Morat's Bakery located just across the street.

Few spring traditions are as iconic as the Tulip Time Festival, held May 1-10 in Holland. Since 1929, the festival has celebrated Dutch heritage with millions of

blooming tulips, parades, traditional dancing, artisan markets and cultural programming that draws visitors from across the country.

Further north along the lakeshore, Grand Haven welcomes spring winds with the Grand Haven Kite Festival, set for May 16-17 at Grand Haven State Park. The event features giant display kites, stunt-kite demonstrations and family-friendly beach activities, transforming the shoreline into a colorful, wind-powered spectacle.

Motorcycle enthusiasts converge on Baldwin in mid-May for Blessing of the Bikes Week, organized by AMVETS Post 1988 and AMVETS Riders Chapter 1988. What began in 1972 with just four motorcycles has grown into a multi-day gathering that draws thousands of riders each year for rides, music and community events.

Memorial Day weekend brings anglers to Pentwater for the annual Amateur Salmon and Trout Fishing Derby, sponsored by the Pentwater Sportfishing Association. Open to association members, the tournament awards prizes across multiple species categories, continuing a





longstanding lakeside tradition.

Spring wraps up in Oceana County with the National Asparagus Festival, held June 12-14 in Hart. Featuring an asparagus parade, farm tours, food competi-

tions and live music, the festival celebrates the county's designation as the Asparagus Capital of the Nation and honors the crop that has shaped the region's agricultural identity for generations.

Together, these events form a seasonal rhythm that defines spring in West Michigan — a time when communities gather, traditions return and the lakeshore comes back to life.

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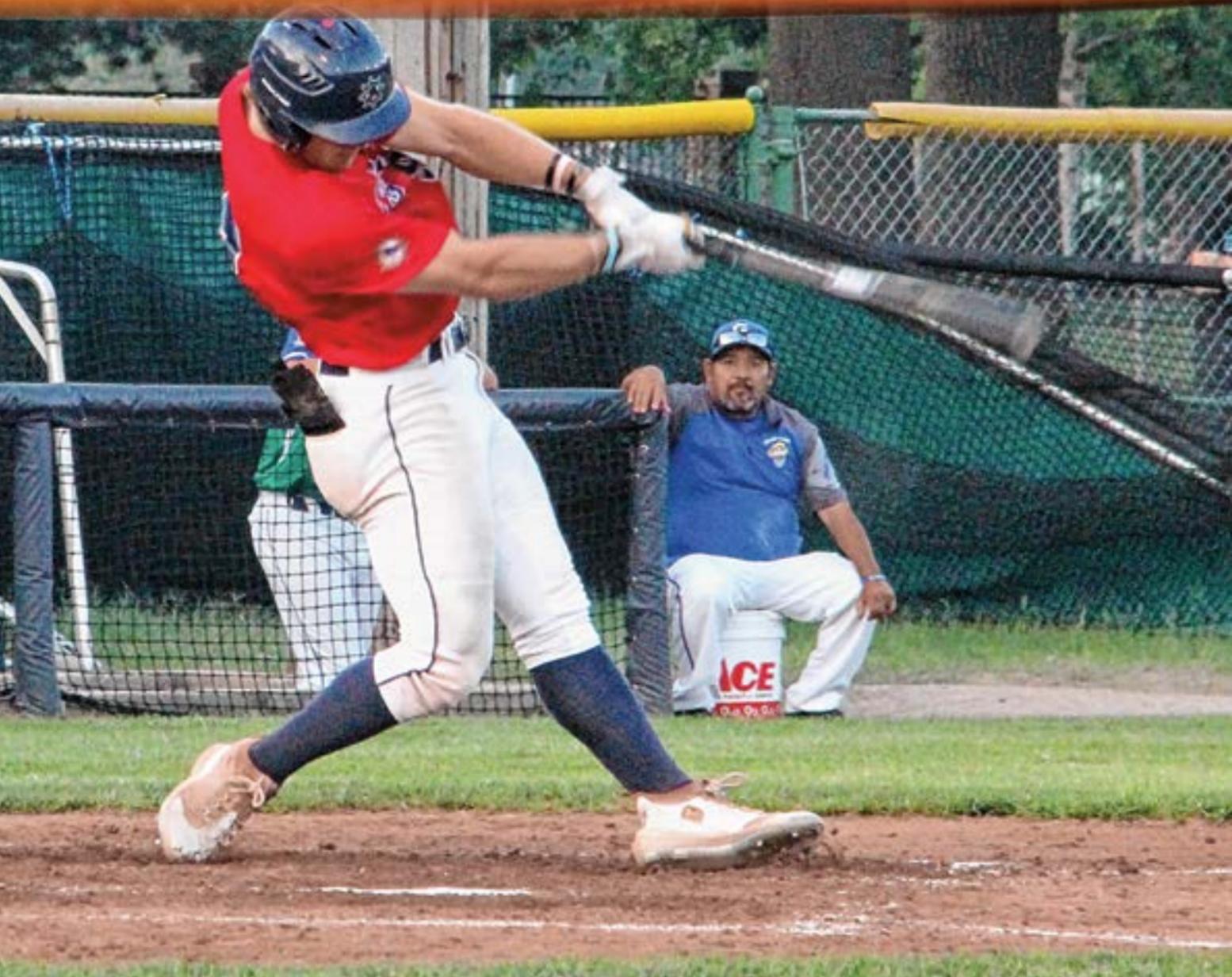
Springtime along the lakeshore – real spring, when the temperatures of April and May bubble at a balmy 60 degrees and then in late May and early June broil at 70 degrees – is a time for raising kites to the skies after a long winter's nap, when trees regain their greenery, when rusty ole' tractors shed their snow-thickened blankets, when spectacular sea-going freighters longer than two football fields return to their Lake Michigan ports, when the birds and the bees take flight, when tiny woodland critters scatter to and fro, when sitting by a lakeshore campfire sparks thoughts of a summer-soon-to-be, and so much more. Ah-h-h, springtime along the lakeshore – paradise reborn, to be sure.

Photo essay by Jeanne Barber



Getting Ready to

PLAY BALL



MUSKEGON — The start of the Muskegon Clippers' 2026 summer baseball season is still months away, but preparations are underway as the family-run organization readies for another year of college summer baseball in the Muskegon area.

The Clippers are moving forward without founder Peter Gawkowski, who died Oct. 27, 2025. His son, Dan Gawkowski, said the team remains committed to continuing his father's legacy.

"The team status is the same as it always is," Gawkowski said. "We plan to continue the team going forward as long as possible and do so as best as we can to honor my dad's legacy for all the incredible amounts of hard work, time and money he put into making this team a reality."

The Clippers open their season June 5 at home against the Michigan Monarchs, but much of the spring is devoted to behind-the-scenes work.

A major focus is securing sponsorships and business partnerships.

"We have tons of sponsorship packages we have worked on and

deals for local sponsors that we are trying to fill daily," Gawkowski said. "Without sponsors, we can't play."

He said the search for sponsors fell behind following his father's death, but efforts are now ramping up.

"We definitely have sponsors that are returning; we've got a large core of sponsors that return every year that we could not go without," he said. "So while we expect many of the sponsors to return, as well as a lot of new ones come aboard, we don't have a ton of them set in stone yet."

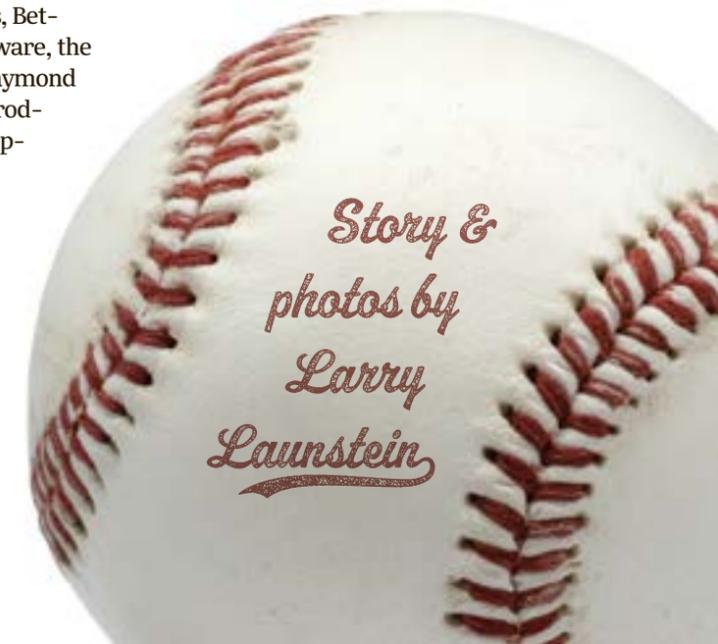
Past and returning sponsors include Beltone Hearing, White Lake Glass, Clifford Buck Construction, Langlois Home Furnishings, Betten, Sports Clips, Ace Hardware, the Muskegon Lumberjacks, Raymond James, Nowak Machined Products, Quality Tool and Stamping, Parmenter Law and others.

The team is also seeking volunteers, workers and interns to help on game days and with seasonal preparation.

Family members and friends handle many roles, including preparing Marsh Field, selling concessions, running the Clippers Closet merchandise stand, taking tickets and postgame cleanup. Additional help is recruited through the team's website and social media.

"We've also had a few people just know about the Clippers and want to be a part of it, so they contact us," Gawkowski said. "But we always need more help."

Another ongoing need is host families to house players during the season. In-



◀ The Clippers Casey Barnes homers in the eighth inning, leading a four-run rally to defeat the Lake City Mariners, 8-7 June 25. The game helped keep the Clippers in the playoff hunt, which ended by only one percentage point behind the Michigan Monarchs.



Muskegon Clippers Jack Bakus swings at a pitch during Game 2 of their doubleheader against the Southern Ohio Copperheads July 12 at Marsh Field in Muskegon. Clippers pitchers Maxwell Salas and Winston Delp pitched a combined no-hitter to win, 3-0.

mation, including requirements, videos and testimonials, is available on the team's website.

"This is always an issue for us; we rarely have enough host families and are always looking for more," Gawkowski said. "Everyone who has ever done it has loved it."

Host families receive free season tickets and often maintain relationships with players long after the season ends, he said.

Several key items are already in place for 2026, including the regular-season schedule, coaching staff and broadcast plans. Brian Wright, a long-time Clippers assistant and the head coach at Shelby High School, has been

named head coach. Wright has more than 630 wins in 46 years at Shelby.

"He definitely knows what he's doing, and the guys always love him," Gawkowski said.

Wright will continue coaching at Shelby this spring while staying involved with Clippers planning and is expected to run the team's annual youth baseball camp.

Miles Welch has been hired as the new play-by-play announcer, and games will again be broadcast online through Sailor Sports Network.

"We have one of, if not the best broadcast in the league," Gawkowski said, noting it allows fans and players' families to follow games remotely.

The team is also introducing enhancements to the fan experience, including party deck rentals with a ballpark buffet, new business membership packages and a new online ticketing system designed to speed entry into the park.

Single-game tickets will be available online and at the gate. Adult tickets are \$10, while seniors 65 and older and students are \$7. Early-bird specials and discounted season tickets will be offered during the initial sales period.

Traditional promotions such as flying fish, Scotts Meats Trivia and themed games will also return during the 2026 season, Gawkowski said.



Maxwell Salas helps the Muskegon Clippers get a combined no-hitter in the second game of their doubleheader against the Southern Ohio Copperheads at Marsh Field in Muskegon July 12. Winston Delp pitched the final inning with no-hit relief as the Clippers won, 3-0.

The Muskegon Clippers' Nathan Masar pitches in game three of their three-game series against Grand Lake, of Celina, Ohio July 26. The game went into a shootout, which the Clippers won. Even though the Clippers took care of business by winning the three straight games they needed to win, the Michigan Monarchs lost two straight in Lima, Ohio, but got rained out in the final game, allowing them to get the final playoff spot by only one percentage point.



To learn more about about paid positions, volunteer work and internships -

Internships - <https://www.muskegonclippers.com/internships>
 Paid positions - <https://www.muskegonclippers.com/jobs-with-the-clips>
 Volunteers - <https://www.muskegonclippers.com/get-involved>

Host family information -
<https://www.muskegonclippers.com/hostfamily>

How to become a sponsor -
<https://www.muskegonclippers.com/become-a-sponsor>

How to learn about the team:
 2026 team roster -
<https://www.muskegonclippers.com/2026-roster>



2026 team schedule -
<https://www.muskegonclippers.com/2026-schedule>

2026 online ticket sales and ticket information -
<https://www.muskegonclippers.com/regular-season-tickets>

Tickets may also be purchased at the front gate up to an hour before each game.



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READY, SET, SOW!

THE GROWING SEASON BEGINS

BY SHANNA AVERY

Cities, towns and countryside along the lakeshore already have the draw of beautiful Lake Michigan, but with a little love and work, spring blooms can transform your yard into a picturesque dreamscape.

Spring gardening is the perfect way to bust out of hibernation after the very cold, old-time Michigan winter we've had this year and enjoy the best that outdoors has to offer, whether by planting a flower patch, sowing wildflower seeds, enjoying

myriads of crocus, daffodils, grape hyacinths and tulips planted in the fall, or by getting a start on a vegetable garden.

The work is good for the body and soul, and the yield is what "living the life" is all about.

GARDEN CLUB KNOW-HOW

Area Garden Clubs such as the Dirt Dauber Garden Club in the Montague/Whitehall area have all the know-how when it comes to spring

gardening.

Julie Essenberg with the Dirt Daubers offers some 'plant'astic gardening advice.

"Spring arrives a little differently along the Lake Michigan shoreline. In Muskegon and surrounding West Michigan communities, cool breezes, lake-effect weather, and slower-warming soils shape how — and when — gardeners get their hands dirty. Members of the Dirt Dauber Garden Club know that patience, preparation, and plant choice are the secrets to a thriving spring garden along the lakeshore," she said.

The Dirt Dauber Garden Club has been “rooted” in the community for nearly 69 years, and since its founding in 1957, it has been nurturing gardens, friendships and community spirit in the White Lake area.

“What began as a small group of women gathering to share gardening knowledge has grown into a thriving nonprofit organization dedicated to environmental stewardship, education, and public beautification. Known for its commitment to sustainable gardening practices, seasonal garden tours, and long-standing beautification projects in Montague and Whitehall, the Dirt Daubers continue to prove that strong roots help communities flourish,” Essenberg said.

POPULAR SPRING PLANTS

“Early spring gardens in Muskegon shine brightest with cold-tolerant plants that don’t mind chilly nights or variable temperatures,” Essenberg said.

She lists pansies and violas – which are hardy, cheerful, and often unfazed by a light frost; Tulips, daffodils, and crocus – planted the previous fall, these bulbs are the first big signal that spring has arrived; Hyacinths – fragrant and reliable in cooler conditions; Hellebores – sometimes bloom while snow is still on the ground; and Primrose – A colorful choice for early-season containers and borders, Essenberg described.

“These plants thrive in the cooler temperatures common along the lakeshore and provide much-needed color after winter,” she added.

Left & Lower left: Tulips are showy flowers that come up mid-spring.

Below: Grape hyacinths pop out in contrast to the faint field grasses of early spring.

SHANNA AVERY PHOTOS

WHEN TO PLANT FOR SPRING BLOOMS

Essenberg said for true spring blooms, timing often happens months in advance.

“Flowering bulbs such as tulips and daffodils should be planted in the fall, allowing them to establish roots before winter. Perennials can be planted in early spring once the soil can be worked, but gardeners should watch soil temperature and moisture rather than the calendar. Annuals like pansies can typically be planted as soon as the ground has thawed and daytime temperatures are consistently above freezing,” she explained.

SPRING PLANTING: FROST OR NO FROST?

“Muskegon gardeners know that the last frost often arrives in mid-May, though proximity to Lake Michigan can push that date later,” Essenberg said.

She said plants that can go in early are lettuce, spinach, kale and peas; dishes and carrots; broccoli and cabbage; and cool-season annuals like pansies.

Plants that should wait until after the last frost include tomatoes and

peppers; cucumbers and squash; beans; and zinnias, marigolds and other warm-season flowers

“Using cold frames, row covers, or starting plants indoors can help extend the growing season while protecting young plants from unexpected cold snaps,” Essenberg informed.

PREPARING THE SOIL FOR SPRING PLANTING

“Healthy gardens begin with healthy soil. After winter, Muskegon’s sandy or clay-leaning soils benefit from thoughtful preparation,” Essenberg said, listing helpful steps such as removing winter debris and spent plant material, adding compost or well-aged manure to replenish nutrients, loosening soil gently once it’s no longer saturated and testing soil pH if plants struggled in previous seasons

SHANNA AVERY PHOTOS

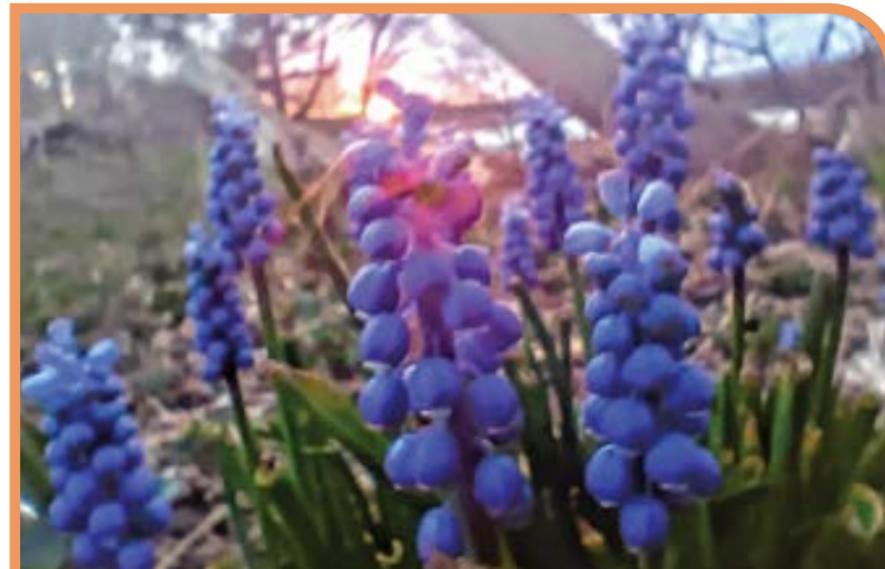


Above: If there are trilliums naturally growing on your land, you can make a little woodland wildflower garden near where they are growing.

Top right: Photo courtesy of Dirt Dauber garden club: Hellebores is an early spring flower that can even bloom when snow is still on the ground.

At right: Crocus are one of the first flowers to pop from the ground, with yellow/orangish centers and bright purple, white or yellow petals.

Below: To extend the growing season, seeds can be planted in containers as early as winter.



She recommends avoiding working soil that is too wet, as well as compacted solid, which can restrict root growth throughout the season.

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR LAKESHORE GARDENERS

Some other tips Essenberg offers are, “Mind the wind: Lakeshore breezes can dry soil quickly; windbreaks help protect tender plants. Mulch thoughtfully: Wait until soil warms before mulching to retain heat and moisture. Choose resilient plants: Native and lake-adapted species often perform best, and practice patience: Spring unfolds more slowly near the lake — waiting pays off.”

SEED LIBRARIES

Some area libraries are helping folks prepare for spring gardening with their seed programs, such as the Mason County District Seed Library, where members can check out six seed packages per week. The popular program has 300 members and so many seeds “we could rewild the entire county,” said Danielle Nitor, who began the program last year at the Mason County District Library.

Nitor said people don’t have to wait till spring to start their growing season. They can start seeds in the winter.

“My main goal is native wildflowers, but many things can be planted in the winter, especially cold season vegetables like broccoli, carrots, kale, leeks, spinach, gardens and herbs,” she said.

People can use a pot or a milk jug cut in half with holes poked in the bottom to start plants. It is important to fill the container with seed starting soil. People then can place their seeds in according to depth indicated in the seed packet instructions, whether surface zone or a bit beneath the surface. Close the soil, and label the container and leave it outside so it can acclimate to the elements, Nitor instructed.

“It is best to do this in the winter, this

is how most plants will germinate,” she said.

After the plant forms ‘true leaves’ they can be transplanted into the ground. They will grow the first set of leaves, and when they get their second set of leaves they are ready to plant, Nitor explained.

Nitor said some popular native wildflowers are milkweed (such as common milkweed, butterfly milkweed and swamp milkweed, also called rose milkweed.)

“I collected swamp milkweed seeds along a lake in my kayak,” she said.

She also listed blue vervain, cardinal flowers, and blue stemmed goldenrod that grows in clumps and grows outward. They boast blue stems.

Some seeds are labeled as host plants, indicating they draw pollinators.

Nitor said the program is really taking off and they have been bringing more people into the library without them even realizing it.

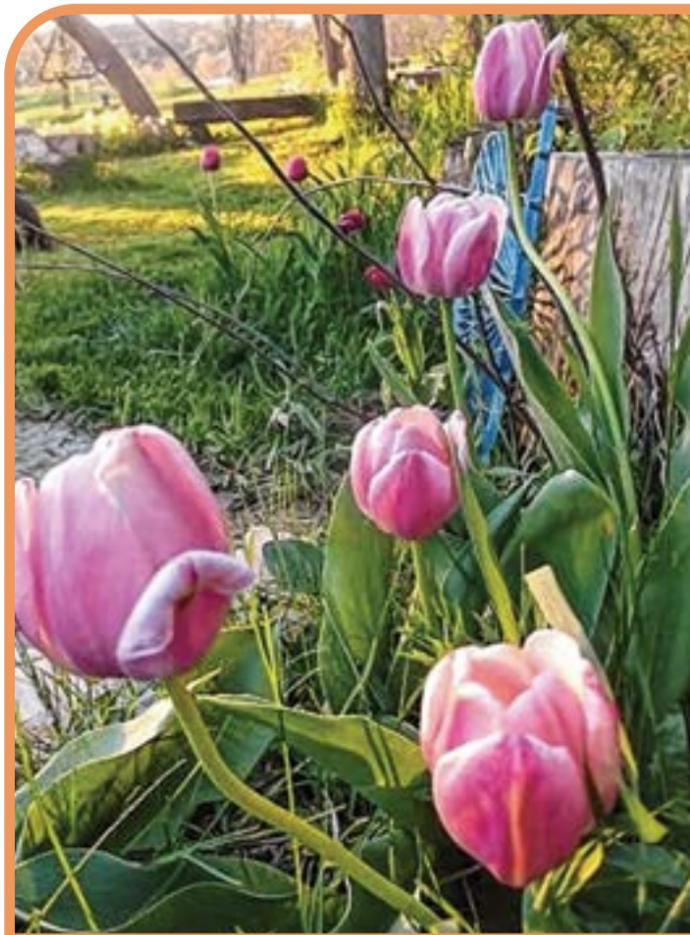
Nitor said don’t worry if wild flowers don’t bloom right away. Sometimes it takes three years for them to bloom. A way she said to remember is, the first year they sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap.

Other local area seed libraries can be found at White Lake Community Library, Muskegon Area District Library - Montague branch, Hart Area Public Library and Pentwater Township Library.

Right: Tulips add grace, beauty and splash of color to a springscape.

Below: Violets can provide a beautiful ground cover and can come in shades of purple, white and yellow.

SHANNA AVERY PHOTOS



At right: Cheerful daffodils come in a variety of colors, from yellow shades, to white, to the pink variety pictured.





We're ready for this change of season

BY STEVE BEGNOCHE

After a long, cold winter spring this year will be especially welcomed.

It's a time to get outdoors. Plan and plant a garden. Rake the yard. Wash the car. Head afield to forage for mushrooms. Fish. Get out the kayak, canoe or boat.

It's time to look for and savor

wildflowers and the serenade of birds at dawn.

Birdsong is an early harbinger of spring. On those early, clear, quiet mornings when winter's grip slips away, the sound of cooing doves, the call of cardinals, the screech of jays and cawing crows along with music of songbirds, offer the first notes of spring.

Later in the day, less musical sounds of yard blowers, lawn-

mowers, motorcycles and other mechanical marvels might herald the season's change, too.

In farm country, be prepared to share roads with tractors as farmers work or plant fields. By all means, check out the countryside as it comes alive. Fields turn yellow with wild mustard. Red buds on maple change to green leaves. Orchards blossom into painterly scenes contrasting with blue skies.

photos by **STEVE BEGNOCHE**





STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTOS



STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTOS

The sun is warm. Put on your sun-block and enjoy it.

One day, that first thunderstorm of the season rolls through. I love a good storm in any season. The spring rains wash away the grunge left behind by winter melt. Baptized with a spring rain, plants spring to life. Green replaces brown.

As May arrives, so do fawns. They may grow into living mowing machines that increasingly take up residence in cities, but a fawn remains a definition of cute, one that makes most of us smile. Call it the Bambi syndrome.

Spring, for me, also is a time to explore back roads by driving, paths by walking, rivers and lakes in a kayak.



At some point, I'll lose my shoes to walk in the wave wash of Lake Michigan enjoying again the feel of sand beneath my feet as I listen to waves and take in the sun over the lake.

My wife and I like to visit Pete's Woods in Benzie County for a walk on a path through a woods full of trillium and other wildflowers. On the way, we stop and walk the Arcadia boardwalk where one sees a variety of waterfowl, perhaps eagles, and other birds while – hopefully – soaking up sunshine. We dine at a restaurant along the way or in Frankfort after a visit to the much-beloved Point Betsy Lighthouse. A friend and fellow photographer, Deb Crystal, describes that part of Lake Michigan as her happy place because of the sapphire color that often bejewels the lake.



STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTOS



STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTOS



We also like to walk the sand dunes at Silver Lake in spring before the ORV area opens for motor vehicles. The mountains of rippling sand are impressive any time of year, but they're quieter before ORVs start running.

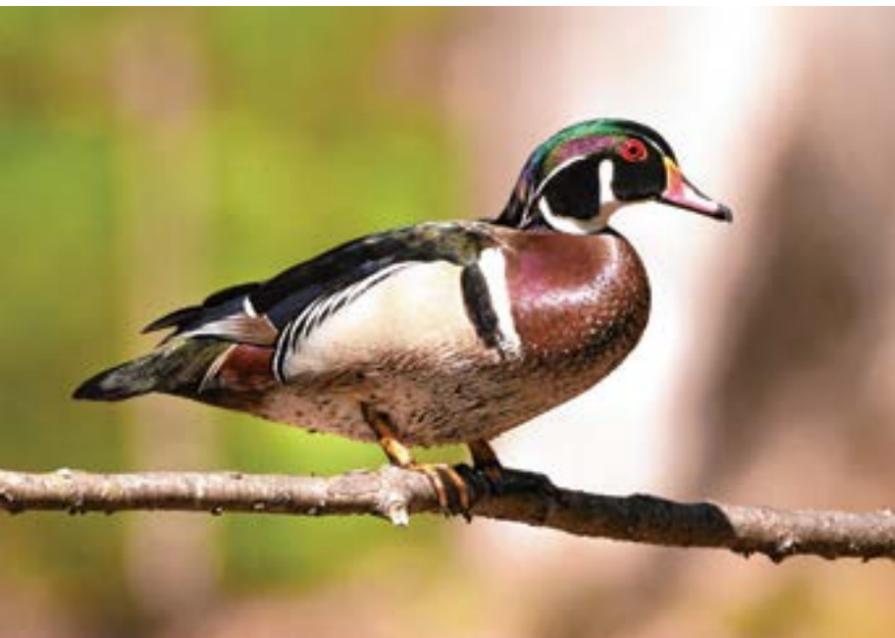
Morel hunting takes us into the Manistee National Forest working our way north from Crystal Valley through Mason County into Manistee County or even further afield. We're not as adventurous or as tenacious as we once were about finding the fungi that is another spring harbinger. Still, even short forays have rewards. We consider finding a dish of morels a bonus.

I try to kayak in Upper Hamlin Lake

early in spring. I head for bayous where green herons and other shorebirds are nesting. I sometimes paddle deep into the cattails and sit silently. Soon, red-winged blackbirds sing. Then frogs make their throaty music. The din can grow quite loud. Add in the honking of geese, and another spring treat is realized.

I'm not a great fisherman, but I like to wet a line, especially in inland lakes. Panfish can be quite active in spring. So can bass and northern pike. Brown trout beckon near the Lake Michigan shoreline. Other trout are in the streams. I mostly catch and release bass and pike which are great fun to catch especially from a kayak at water level.

My thoughts drift as I paddle or float in shallow areas with glimpses of basking



STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTOS

turtles, nesting swans, hunting eagles.

As I write this on a winter's day with a predicted high temperature of 23 degrees in Ludington, even the thought of these activities warm me. Living in four-season-Michigan, when spring arrives, it brings more than a change in the weather.

We give up snow blowing for lawn mowing and raking. We're ready to dig in the earth instead of a snow pile. We're ready to lather on sunblock rather than slip on long johns.

And, despite spring being a season of heart-breaks along the Lake Michigan coast – the cold is slow to leave as the cold lake cools us along the shoreline when inland warmth arrives, it still is spring when hope springs eternal and the days lengthen in daylight and promise.

I'm ready for spring.

It is here.

Enjoy.

After this past winter, we deserve no less.

Steve Begnoche, sbegnoche@yahoo.com, is a four-season fan who enjoys the outdoors.

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