

REGIONAL PARKS



Catching the sunrise at Kelleys Island State Park in Lake Erie was a spectacular scene in early July. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

Camp, hike, fish, float

Exploring Kelleys Island State Park: Sleep in a yurt, bike the trails, there's something for everyone of every age

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KELLEYS ISLAND — I could hear kids laughing on the beach when I turned out the light in my tent. When I turned it back on, at 5:30 a.m., the only sound I heard was birds chirping.

I woke up early enough to catch a gorgeous summer sunrise on the Lake Erie shore at Kelleys Island State Park. I took a few photos, then waded into the lake, all alone in the water.

Kelleys Island has long been my favorite Lake Erie island, and the state park here one of my top Ohio parks. But I've always been a day-use visitor, taking the ferry over with my bike in the morning, returning to the mainland in the evening.

What a difference a couple of nights makes.

I brought my car this time, loaded with food and minimal camping equipment (there was a kitchen, after all, in my yurt). And I prepared to stay a while. Not long enough, mind you. But long enough to know I'll be coming back with my sleeping bag.

THE QUIETER ISLAND

At about 4.5 square miles, Kelleys Island is the largest U.S. island in Lake Erie, nearly twice as big as better-known Put-in-Bay, about 3 miles west.

Put-in-Bay gets most of the attention — not all of it good, particularly this summer, when a coronavirus outbreak attracted statewide headlines earlier this month.

Kelleys Island is considerably quieter than its more rowdy cousin, though not always quiet. I poked my head into a couple of downtown establishments when I arrived, and was distressed at how close guests were mingling, most without masks.

I didn't linger in town, instead heading to the north side of the island, to the state park campground, with 129 sites spread across a gorgeous lakefront, wooded property. If there is a prettier campground in Ohio, I haven't seen it. Also one of the most popular — the campground is largely booked through Labor Day, though there are some gaps and cancellations, according to park manager Chris Ashley.

My home for the next two nights: one of the park's two yurts, large, circular platform tents that sleep up to six, fully furnished and also featuring a small kitchen and bathroom. In recent years, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources has added dozens of these "getaway" rentals, which also include small cabins and other unique structures, to state park campgrounds across the state, part of a long-term effort to make camping easier and open up the outdoors to more Ohioans.

They are very popular, typically reserved six months in advance, per state rules.

As much as I enjoyed the yurt, it's the park here that's the real draw.

The park's nearly 700 acres make up almost a quarter of the island. The Cleveland Museum of Natural History owns another nearly 200 acres on Kelleys, giving much of the island an undeveloped, parklike feel.

There are hiking and mountain biking trails here, cool geological formations, and some interesting remnants of a quarry operation that used to be a major presence on the island.

The biggest draw, though, is Lake Erie — with terrific fishing, boating or, in my case, floating, on a 90-degree afternoon earlier this month.

But first, I had to earn that swim, hiking a couple of trails and biking around the island to see a few sights. Among the highlights:

► The 2.2-mile North Shore Trail, which winds through the woods west of the campground, along the water, and into the protected North Shore Alvar State Preserve (an alvar is bare rock, in this case limestone, with unique plantlife growing on and around it). At the entrance to the trail is an architectural relic, a century-old, long-abandoned crusher building for the Kelleys Island Lime & Transport Company, once the world's largest producer of lime and limestone.

SEE KELLEYS ISLAND, K2



Camp: Campsites at Kelleys Island State Park are often reserved months in advance.



Float: The small but scenic beach offers swimming at Kelleys Island State Park.



Fish: The fishing pier at Kelleys Island State Park is a big draw to the park.

If you go: Kelleys Island State Park

Getting there: Kelleys Island is easily accessible via a 20-minute ride aboard the Kelleys Island Ferry, which departs from its Marblehead dock numerous times daily. Price is \$10 one way for adults, plus \$16 for a car. For information: kelleysislandferry.com. Note: The Jet Express has canceled 2020 ferry service from Sandusky to Kelleys Island due to high water levels at its Sandusky dock.

Getting around: We took our car, but it's not necessary to have a car on the island, particularly if you're just visiting for the day. Take or rent bikes or rent a golf cart to travel around the island.

Camping: The state park campground offers 129 sites, including 36 with water, sewer and electric service. Reservations are required and book up fast; see reserveohio.com or call 1-866-644-6727. Reservations for the park's two yurts and two Sherman cabins are available six months in advance, and book quickly. Price is \$100 per night for yurts, \$70 for cabins. Rentals are for a minimum of seven days, although occasionally shorter periods are available. Call 419-746-2546.

New on Kelleys Island: Monarch Butterfly Box and Caterpillar Café, 604 Division St., is a walk-thru greenhouse with butterflies and plants, plus a gift shop and small café. Information: monarchki.com. Also, Crooked Tree Vineyard, 715 E. Lakeshore Drive, opened a tasting room last year, offering samples of its half-dozen varieties. Information: crookeditreevineyard.com.

Where to eat: Personal favorites include Kelleys Island Wine Co. (418 Woodford Road), the Village Pump (103 W. Lakeshore Drive), Dockers (114 W. Lakeshore Drive) and the Island House (131 Division St.).

More information: kelleysislandchamber.com; ohiostateparks.org



Glacial grooves, created by retreating glaciers about 18,000 years ago, at Kelleys Island State Park. *Susan Glaser, cleveland.com*

Kelleys Island: Named after brothers Datus, Irad

FROM K1

› The 1-mile North Pond State Nature Preserve Boardwalk Trail, with a plastic boardwalk built atop a wetland, and a spur to a gorgeous stretch of sand. Part of the boardwalk was slightly submerged during my walk, because of the high water levels, but getting my tennis shoes wet was a small price to pay to access this interesting ecosystem, a favorite of birders.

› The park's famous glacial grooves, created by massive ice sheets that scoured the bedrock 18,000 years ago. Kelleys' tract of grooves, 15 feet deep and 35 feet wide, is the largest example of glacial striations in the world.

"It's amazing that so many people don't know about this place," said Annie Cooper from Medina, who has been vacationing on the island for decades. She and her kids occupied the yurt next to mine.

"When we come here, I tell everybody I know to visit," she said. "I always bring an extra tent in case someone wants to stay, and they usually do."

After my tour of the park, I hopped on my bike and circled the island, stopping in at the Kelleys Island History Museum, where I learned that the island, initially known as Cunningham's, was renamed Kelleys in 1840 after brothers Datus and Irad Kelley, who developed the island in the 1830s.

There are exhibits here about quarrying, wine production, fishing, island medical care and more.

I also revisited the Charles Herndon Galleries and Sculpture Garden, a 10-acre property on the island's east shore, home to native Cleveland Herndon, who uses materials from the island for his creations. It's a lovely space.

But I was largely biding my time until I could do what I really wanted: Swim in the lake.

The Kelleys Island beach has long been one of my favorite stretches of sand on Lake Erie. It's small (particularly now, with high water levels), largely protected from big waves, with soft, natural sand, and a gentle pitch into the water.

There are kayaks and paddleboards for rent on the beach, but I opted for an inner tube, because I wanted to be in the water, not on it.

I kicked my way past the no-wake buoys and the fishing pier, floating among the boats anchored in the bay. The water was warm and calm and I had visions of making it all the way to the Canadian line, about 2 miles away.

Alas, after about an hour of floating north, I turned myself around and headed back to shore.

I rinsed off in the yurt shower, prepared dinner on the grill, admired the darkening night sky, then hit the sack early. I had one more morning here, one more glorious sunrise and one more pre-dawn swim.

Editor's note: This is one in an ongoing series about state parks in Ohio and surrounding states. Please send suggestions to Travel Editor Susan Glaser, at sglaser@cleveland.com.



Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor, which is one of the parks featured in the new passport. *The Plain Dealer*

Ohio promotes park visits with passport; opens Storybook Trails at 4 parks including Wingfoot Lake



Want more info?

For information on the Passport or on Storybook Trail visit ohiostateparks.org.

COLUMBUS — The state is encouraging visits to Ohio State Parks this summer with a new passport to track your travels.

The passport includes stickers, park details and fun facts about all 75 state parks. It costs \$10 and is available at state park retail stores, park lodges and online, at reserveohio.com.

The state park service also recently expanded its Storybook Trails program, which promotes nature and reading among Ohio families. Each participating park features a different book, with pages from the stories mounted on signs along the trail.

New trails were recently introduced at four parks: Wingfoot Lake in Portage County, which features "One Leaf, Two Leaves, Count With Me!" by John Micklos Jr.; Maumee Bay in Lucas County, with "Where Butterflies Grow" by Joanne Ryder; Dillon in Muskingum County, with "Miss Maple's Seeds" by Eliza Wheeler; and John Bryan in Greene County, with "As an Oak Tree Grows" by G. Brian Karas. Alum Creek in Delaware County also has a Storybook Trail, featuring "In the Trees, Honey Bees" by Lori Mortense.

A Little Free Library is included on each trail, so visitors can take a book or leave one for others.

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