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Lake Koshkonong vacationers have a blast, boost local economy

By NEIL JOHNSON (Contact) Friday, June 17, 2011

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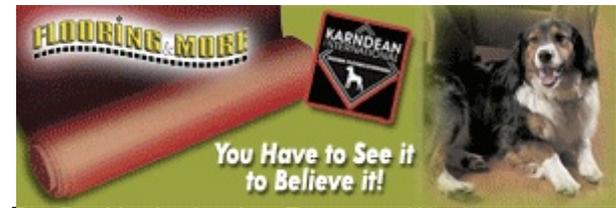


MILTON — Mike Haske clanged a ringer and strolled over to the sand pit to retrieve it.

The Schaumburg, Ill., native was pitching horseshoes by himself on a Saturday afternoon at Lakeland Camping Resort on Lake Koshkonong. A passing vacationer razed him for playing alone.

"Well, you gotta' stay sharp, don't you?" said Haske, his Chicago accent as thick as the muggy, 90-degree air.

For the last 11 years, Haske has spent big chunks of his summers at the 200-acre private campground on Highway 59 near Newville. Like many of Lakeland's 1,500 summer residents, Haske owns a residence there—a plush



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A group from Rockford, Ill., cools off on flotation devices on Lake Koshkonong near the Lakeland Camping Resort beach area in Milton. Tourists brought an estimated \$217 million in revenues to Rock County last year.

Photo



Photo by [Dan Lassiter](#)

People gather for the appetizer

park model trailer he thinks of as a second home.

"It's got everything. Two stories—I got a loft in it, and all that," he said.

As Haske tossed horseshoes, the smell of charcoal and seared steak drifted from a cookout a half block away. Golf carts zipped by on the street past three wet-haired boys languishing under a huge cottonwood tree.

Beyond the guard shack at Lakeland's entrance, pickup trucks hauling boats along Highway 59 passed the gas stations and taverns at Newville, where heavy spenders swarmed like shadflies in Hawaiian shirts.

From the busy Interstate 90/39 overpass, the afternoon sun dazzled Lake Koshkonong. Powerboats roared across the water.

The vacationers are back. They're spending money and loving every minute of it.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, Rock County was ranked 12th in the state in tourism spending, with estimated revenues last year at \$217 million.

The Janesville Area Convention and Visitors Bureau reports a total of 1,500 campsites around Lake Koshkonong. Milton Town Clerk Sandy Kunkel said municipalities estimate that when summer vacationers are at the lake, the local population doubles.

For the local economy, the impact is obvious.

Potato salad and credit cards

On a recent Saturday, lines five customers deep clogged four checkout lanes at Edgerton Piggly Wiggly.

Jenny Nunn, office manager at the store, said there's just one way to describe the supermarket when Koshkonong weekenders descend.

"It's nuts. It starts up on Thursday and doesn't slow down until Sunday," she said.

On an average summer weekend, the store's sales double, Nunn said. Around

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People gather for the appetizer course of a progressive dinner at Lakeland Camping Resort in Milton.

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Golf carts are a favorite method of transportation at Lakeland Camping Resort in Milton.

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the Fourth of July, they triple.

The vacationers' major staples, predictably, are beer, meat and fresh produce. Other hot ticket items: potato salad—gallons of it—plus, box after box of fried chicken and "at least 40 bags of charcoal a weekend, easily," one store manager said.

There's an easy way to spot a Koshkonong vacationer, said Nunn: Whether they're stocking up on everything or just grabbing a few bags of ice, about 75 percent pay with credit or debit cards. No cash.

Edgerton Deegan Hardware owner Don Deegan said the cool weather this year has slowed his faithful vacationer influx—hundreds of Koshkonongers de-winterizing and tuning the plumbing in their campers and trailers. He's glad the weather's finally warmed up.

"It's good to see the vacation families again. Some have come in here for years, and they're like locals to us. We'd be hurting without them for sure," Deegan said.

Across the street, Sid Bhatti, owner of Sid's Tire, Auto and Muffler, serves a niche market: Chicago vacationers who need a propane fill, a tire change and a box of wax worms all in one stop.

"Mom and pop businesses offer these people something quaint they don't always get. It's small town service. For them, it is part of the whole experience," Bhatti said. "Plus, gas is cheaper here than in Chicago."

Repeat customers

Christine Rebout, executive director of the Janesville Area Convention Bureau, said state traffic studies show that on an average Saturday in the summer, 60,000 cars pass Newville at I-90/39. Thousands get off and stay at Lake Koshkonong.

Rebout said even though those vacationers are tucked away in a corner of the county, they're vital to area stores, chain restaurants, festivals and even churches.

That's not to mention the scores of taverns that ring Lake Koshkonong. Places such as the Lakefront Bar in rural Milton become veritable summer

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Photo by [Jan Lassiter](#)

Eric and Katelyn Hampton, 5, of Lindenhurst, Ill., play on the beach at Lakeland Camping Resort in Milton.

communes for vacationers and locals alike.

The Lakefront is connected to Pettit's Lakeview Campground off Highway 59. The place has a visitor's pier, a small lakefront veranda and a jumping house for the kids.

All weekend, vacationers and locals alike pour through the little bar's screen doors for karaoke or to rock out to local bands. The crowds often kill out the beer and soda inventory in the bar's 10-by-30-foot cooler, bartender Dee Thompson said.

Some weekenders, such as Mitch and Janet Gora of suburban Elk Grove Village, Ill., have sentimental ties to their lake haunts. Their son John Rupar met his wife, Daleena, a local resident, during a night out at the lake area tavern Snuffy's Still.

In June 2009, John and Daleena got married on the beach at Lake Koshkonong.

"People pulled over on their boats to watch," said Mitch, who is a state highway worker in Illinois. "When the guy said, 'Kiss the bride,' they all started blowing their boat horns. It was pretty wild."

Afterward, the Goras held a tent reception for 250 guests at their trailer at Lakeland resort. It had a bar and dinner by a Janesville caterer.

Koshkonong weekenders continue to spend even as they're heading home. There's always the last gas station stop—or for some, the Sunday meat raffle at the Lakefront Bar. For the uninitiated, here's how it works: You pay for a number, a bartender spins a wheel mounted on the tavern wall, and winners take home coolers full of steaks and chops the campground owner buys at local supermarkets.

Dee Thompson said some campers tough out a rainy weekend just for the raffle. If they miss it, there's always next weekend.

"It's like a big grand finale for the weekend," she said.

What are they buying?

On a typical summer weekend near Lake Koshkonong, the local population can double as vacationers flood the lake, campgrounds and area businesses.

Here's a glimpse at the economic impact of all those extra people—and how Lake Koshkonong-area businesses made out on one recent Saturday:

-- 6 pontoon boat rentals, \$300 for a full day—Anchor Inn, Newville.

- 50 pairs of flip-flop sandals—Family Dollar, Edgerton.
- \$800 in lottery tickets (average weekday sales are \$150)—Piggly Wiggly, Edgerton.
- 503 pounds of cheese curds, \$7.99 a bag—Wisconsin Cheese and Wine Chalet, Newville.
- 20 propane refills, a tire repair and "a lot" of wax worms—Sid's Tire, Auto and Muffler, Edgerton.
- 300 custards, 300 hamburgers—Culver's of Newville.

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