



# WINTER IN WISCONSIN

## THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SNOW BUSINESS

Economic Impact of Wisconsin Winter Tourism

—Dale Knapp, Director of Research & Analytics, Wisconsin Counties Association

**A**ccording to *iExplore.com*, “Winter is the rough season in Wisconsin. Between December and February, the daytime highs rarely top 30°F, and the nighttime lows dip well

below freezing. Wisconsin gets a lot of snow...” Here, the author does not paint a pretty picture of the state. There is a natural instinct to hunker down during those cold months.

But Wisconsinites know how to take advantage of the weather, to get out and snowmobile, ski downhill or cross country, snowshoe, or visit ice caves or other ice formations. Often these



*Ice Fishing Tip Up, Winter on Lake Wisconsin by Rande Knapmiller from Pixabay.*

activities take us to places hours from home. And cumulatively, these winter activities contribute billions of dollars to the state economy.

### **COLD WEATHER LEADERS**

While Wisconsin offers many winter activities for residents and nonresidents alike, the state is a leader in several. The American Birkebeiner in Sawyer and Bayfield counties each February is North America's largest cross country ski event. With multiple races of different lengths, the Birkebeiner attracts more than 10,000 skiers and tens of thousands of fans to the Hayward/Cable area.

In March, thousands more racers and fans descend on the same location for the world's largest fat

tire bicycle race on snow. These tourists spend hundreds of thousands of dollars locally, again boosting the local economy. A 2014 study from the University of Wisconsin Extension estimated that these two events had a \$26 million impact on the region.

Wisconsin is also a leader in snowmobiling. According to the International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association (ISMA), Wisconsin has more registered snowmobiles than any other U.S. state. On a per capita basis, Wisconsin ranks fourth behind three sparsely populated states: Alaska, Wyoming, and Maine. Wisconsin has more registered snowmobiles than the province of Quebec, which has 2.6 million more residents.

Research from ISMA indicates that the average snowmobiler spends \$2,000 per year on snowmobile-related recreation. For Wisconsin, that would translate to \$480 million of spending annually, all of which supports jobs in a variety of industries. Snowmobilers are also big supporters of charities. According to ISMA, snowmobile clubs throughout the U.S. raise over \$3 million annually for charity.

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Wisconsin ranks high on the number of snowboarders as well. A 2019-2020 study from Snowsports Industries America shows that 4.6% of Wisconsin's population were snowboarders. The state ranked fifth on that statistic, trailing Idaho, New Hampshire, Utah, and Washington.

## OTHER WINTER ACTIVITIES

Wisconsin offers a variety of other activities for winter enthusiasts. With thousands of miles of trails, it is easy to get out and cross-country ski near home or as part of a winter weekend getaway.

While not a downhill skiing mecca, the state has several locations for that activity, including Granite Peak at Rib Mountain State Park in Marathon County. With more than 100,000 visitors annually, downhill skiing and snowboarding generate about \$30 million for the local economy. Cascade Mountain in Columbia County, Devil's Head in Sauk County, Whitecap in Iron County, and Alpine Valley in Walworth County also attract thousands of skiers and generate millions of dollars for the local economies.

Winter activities in Wisconsin are not all about recreation. Many cities around the state have winter festivals with a variety of activities that may include ice sculpting, sleigh rides, ice skating, and ice bowling.

Finally, fishing is not just a warm weather activity in Wisconsin. During January through March, you will find



*Once the lake freezes over, some of the islands are accessible by ski and snowshoe. Source: U.S. National Parks Gallery*

thousands of fishermen on the frozen lakes, fishing for panfish and northern pike.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT

For many winter activities, the economic impact has not been fully studied. However, each year the state hires Tourism Economics (TE) to estimate the economic impact of tourism in the state. Tourism is defined as any visit outside a person's county of residence. In addition to annual numbers, they calculate quarterly numbers.

In 2019, TE estimated that tourists spent about \$2.7 billion during January through March. This would encompass residents and nonresidents traveling to ski, snowshoe, snowmobile, or participate in other winter activities.

That spending supports jobs in local communities. As these employees spend their wages, the economic impact of tourist spending grows to more than \$4 billion. For many communities throughout the state, this winter activity is critical for their local economies. ♦