

A Wisconsin Winter Wonderland

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/wi-farm-winter-s450.jpg>



Senator Smith writes about the wealth of opportunities for winter recreation we have right here in Wisconsin.

Early winter is a magical time. Wisconsinites are blessed with four beautiful seasons and all the recreational opportunities that come with them. Before the doldrums of winter set in, when the season is fresh and new, it's a great time to get back to the winter activities that truly make our state a winter wonderland. Rather than being stuck in the house, there's a whole world outside to enjoy.



At the beginning of the holiday season, I think fondly of my time as a youngster growing up on the north side of Eau Claire. When I wasn't building snow forts and sliding down big hills with my friends, we'd sling our skates over our shoulders and hike down to the city park. The park's skating rink would be full of friends, and there'd be a crackling bonfire to warm us up. If we were feeling really ambitious, we'd catch a ride to Half Moon Lake to punch holes in the ice and take

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our chances at hooking some fish to bring home.

When it comes to the snow, necessity is the mother of invention. Prior to 1900, Wisconsinites were experimenting with vehicles to make travel over snow easier. Early attempts ranged from bicycles on runners to steam-propelled sleighs and even modified Model T Fords. But in a shed behind a pub in Sayner, Wisconsin, [Carl Eliason](#) made innovations that led to the development of the snowmobile as we know it today.

Eliason could not wear skis or snowshoes due to a foot disability, leaving him frustrated in the winter when he could not keep up with his friends. So in the early 1920s he mounted some old skis, parts from a Model T Ford, a boat motor and his bicycle to a long toboggan to build his prototype “motor toboggan,” which was patented in 1927 and improved throughout the decades. In under a century, we’ve gone from a cobbled-together toboggan to the modern snowmobiles of today. What a leap!



When I was a teenager, my dad bought a snowmobile. We spent many days and nights exploring the trails. Once I was able to drive and load our machines up, we rode trails that took us through woods and up hills I’d never been before. Later came downhill skiing, which added to my enjoyment of winter in beautiful western Wisconsin.

The list of activities one can do on a Wisconsin winter day is endless, and the recreational options in Wisconsin have continued growing since I was young. Cross-country skiing has become one of the most popular sports for so many, and our woodland trails are the perfect place to enjoy some time outside.

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In fact, cross-country skiing has put Wisconsin winter sports on the map. The American Birkebeiner (or “Birkie”) is held every February between Cable and Hayward, Wisconsin. In 1973, thirty-five skiers held the first Birkie and now, as an annual event, it attracts both professional and amateur skiers from around the world.



February marked the 50th anniversary of the first Birkie, and this year a record 12,986 skiers are signed up to participate in the four major ski events, with thousands more participating in the youth ski tour, the ParaBirkie, the Barkie Birkie Skijor and the Birkie Giant Ski Event.

If peace and quiet are your thing, many hiking trails are open throughout the winter. With a pair of snowshoes, you can walk these snowy trails and enjoy the fresh beauty of the winter scenery. Hiking is a great opportunity to see a whole new side of our state’s glorious ecosystem at a slower pace.

With all this winter fun available to us, the final thing I’ll say I’m grateful for at the end of a winter day spent outdoors is a nice toasty fire and a hot chocolate. Stay safe and warm out there, and enjoy this wonderful time to live in Wisconsin.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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