

DNR fisheries management biologist Mark Flammang of Albia walks with daughter Addy, 9, while pulling Zadie Hoff, 4, of Des Moines on an ice fishing expedition.



# Cold Comforts

# A winter weekend at *Honey Creek Resort State Park* is as relaxing as a summer one:

## *Fish, fun and a whole lot of chilling.*

“The thing about ice fishing is that it’s about the cheapest kind of fishing there is,” says Mark Flammang, DNR fisheries management biologist, as he walks across frozen Rathbun Lake. His words turn to smoke in the January morning air, his compact body easily hauling a sled filled with the few tools of the sport.

“You need a bucket, a couple of rods and a hand auger,” he smiles from under a thick Carhartt ski hat. “That’s about it.”

Iowa’s second-largest lake is a vast sheet of white in winter—11,000 acres of glittering snow and ice. Save for a few all-terrain vehicles zipping between miniature warming tents—“Any luck?” being the standard greeting for anglers—there is nothing but faint wind, echoing quiet and a passel of sluggish fish below the surface waiting for the frying pan.

For those visitors who have never ventured out on ice before, Honey Creek Resort State Park is a good place to do it. The whole purpose of the DNR’s state-funded wonderland is to be the easiest entry point into deep nature for Iowans. Resort interpreters guide guests to the winter woods and frozen water, through hikes, crafts, snowshoe or cross-country ski runs, snowmobiling, sled outings, ice-

skating or, like Flammang’s morning activity, ice fishing.

It’s a good-looking time in southern Iowa farm country, too. Trees dressed in fine coats of snow surround the lake like tassels on a white afghan. When the sun’s out, everything sparkles as ice anglers set up weekend encampments. Their choices are far from random—travelers can ask at any neighborhood bait shop where the sweet spots for fish are, says Flammang.

The resort looms large on shore. Its beauty is in the details. The stone, wood and stained-glass windows, many of which represent Iowa-native prairie flowers, help it fit in among the white plains of isolated countryside 95 miles southeast of Des Moines. Rathbun Lake is surrounded by sleepy small towns that haven’t yet caught up to the development, and the world is silent even on a winter drive, with a few pick-up trucks ambling slowly along as the only signs of humanity.

### LIFE ON THE LAKE

Flammang and his nine-year-old daughter, Addy, huff across Rathbun Lake, studying native gizzard shad that seem to have been caught off guard by the weather. Several are suspended, frozen in the surface ice, making



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the walk across the water even more surreal.

"I see one, Dad!" Addy calls. Flammang walks over, then squats to examine it with her. Just about everything in this lake eats gizzard shad. This is about as far north as you find the fair-weather fish, and deep winter throws them for a loop. For this lake, the evidence of plentiful shad is a good sign for anglers.

Crappie are the usual goal for Rathbun's ice fishing crowd. In the summer, fishing boats may be rented from Buck Creek Marina near the dam. The resort's docks are impressive, with several slips and ample space for boats of all sizes and personal watercraft. Opposite the docks: a fish-cleaning station and fishing pier to help families get out on the water without a boat.

But on this winter morning, about a dozen or so people have gathered in simple warming tents or on overturned buckets, hoping to snag panfish for dinner without the fancy details.

"No matter what the season is, Rathbun is known throughout the Midwest as a crappie fishing destination," says Flammang.

It's his business to know. He oversees the management of the fish populations at Rathbun Lake, which include channel cat and white bass in spring and fall. And don't forget the walleye. "The thing about Rathbun walleye is that they tend to be very nice-sized," he says. "These are fish people are going to remember."

For walleye fry, life begins at the Rathbun Fish Hatchery, under the careful watch of the hatchery staff. It's also designated the state's main catfish hatchery, producing 80 million eggs every year. The fish hatchery is open to the public year-round, and though the operation is quiet in winter, a wall aquarium, small theater, visitor center and video about the facility in the

tank room still provide a nice break from the cold.

A state-record muskie mounted on the wall, caught in Spirit Lake and weighing 50-plus pounds, provides a little fishing incentive, too.

## ELUDING CABIN FEVER

On a drive from the fish hatchery, visitors cross the massive dam, created when the Army Corps of Engineers backed up the Chariton River for flood control in 1971. (Richard Nixon was the keynote speaker.) Sparse traffic makes it a pleasant drive, interrupted only by the occasional gawker haphazardly pulled over to watch one of the many wintering eagles.

Back at the resort, park staff lead hikes around the surrounding grounds, including a 3.5-mile nature trail that is home to a remnant of native prairie. Even in winter, the Indian grass and switchgrass wave in the wind. At the 850-acre Honey Creek State Park, about an eight-minute drive away, the trail leads past 14 Woodland Indian burial mounds.

"We walked out into the prairie last night and did some owl calls," says Angie Platner, a 38-year-old mother of two from Norwalk doing staff-led snowflake crafts with her kids at the lodge. She cups her hand and blows through it, an imitation of what the park interpreter taught her family last night.

"Our guide was very good at involving my daughter—she got to lead the family out there. It was just so quiet. Being from in-town, the stillness was magnified."

Earlier in the day, Platner and her husband pulled the kids around the resort on a sled. Later, they're going ice skating near the boat ramp. "For us, it's not only about having the resort activities," she says, "it's about the outdoors, too."



Child-friendly activities, such as snowflake crafts, below, make the resort a perfect family getaway with an indoor water park, cabins, lodge and a sprawling outdoor landscape for ice skating, skiing, sledding and ice fishing. FAR LEFT: Taking part in the resort nature programs, Evelyn Platner, 9, of Norwalk cups her hands to practice owl calling. MIDDLE: DNR interpreter Keneth Hamilton leads a night hike to call owls with Angie and Evelyn Platner.

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**SILENT NIGHT:** Nestled against 11,000 acres of snow-clad lake, enjoy quiet nights occasionally broken by the arctic-like sounds of shifting ice or a distant owl or coyote call. After a day ice fishing, ice skating or skiing, friends can relax by the fire, over a hearty meal or tackle a two-story indoor water slide. Regardless, a warm, soft bed is a perfect end to an active day.



## KNOW YOUR ICE

*Though the sheet of ice that is Rathbun Lake in winter may look uniform on the surface, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers shows the man-made habitat of the lake that fish love best on their website, [www.nwk.usace.army.mil/ra/Fishing.cfm](http://www.nwk.usace.army.mil/ra/Fishing.cfm), which includes GPS coordinates.*



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The one- to four-bedroom cabins are designed for snuggling in for a warm winter's nap, each built like a miniature condominium complete with gas fireplace—a rarity in Iowa cabin stock. Spring brings the prairie flowers, and some of the cabins sit right on the main interpretive trail, where a snowshoe hike takes travelers past ancient farm fenceposts crooking out of high- and lowland forest.

As the hills head toward the lake, the draws fortify a diversity of wildlife through the seasons. Deer, raccoon and turkey are joined by songbirds and other seasonal migrators such as pelicans. On one mid-winter hike, a coyote jogged across The Preserve 18-hole golf course.

"This is similar to what the settlers saw," says Mike Godby, park manager. "We're getting animals in one area that go for prairies, animals that live in the woodlands and animals that are edge-dwellers. It's the whole array in one compact place."

The icefishing crowd tends to stop in for a warm-up in the Lakeshore Bar and Grille, maybe for a nip of Iowa's own Templeton Rye. The bar is a mix of locals and guests, and you get the feeling both are glad to see each other.

Guests on one January night are simply happy to be here—and the locals of the small-town southern Iowa farm country are grateful for new jobs and the faith visitors have shown in the blossoming resort.

"It's gorgeous," says Marlyn Robinson of Moravia, dining in the restaurant with her grandkids. "I like the fact that they left the trees and they left the landscape intact."

"I was here when Rathbun Lake was built and dedicated. My husband helped build the dam...I think it's improved the economy a lot. My family used to camp out here—this place has always taught my kids about the environment."

And with the addition of the resort, it continues that tradition, all year long. 🐾





**RESORT** Guided nature activities help novices learn how to get outside and appreciate the outdoors. From bird identification, night hikes and ranger-led walks to cooking classes and fly-fishing instruction, use these myriad of topics as your entry point into the outdoor world. Call the resort for event schedules at **1-877-677-3344** or visit [www.honeycreekresort.com](http://www.honeycreekresort.com).

#### TRAVEL NOTES

**Honey Creek Resort State Park**, 12633 Resort Dr., Moravia. **877-677-3344**; [honeycreekresort.com](http://honeycreekresort.com). Cabins from \$169; double rooms from \$109. RV area with pull-through sites, full hookups with Honey Creek overlooks, from \$49. (Cabins and simpler campsites also available at the neighboring Honey Creek State Park, with the state's only year-round campground thanks to a heated showerhouse.)

**Rathbun Fish Hatchery**, 15053 Hatchery Pl., Moravia. **641-647-2406**; [www.iowadnr.gov/fish/programs/hatchery/rathbun.html](http://www.iowadnr.gov/fish/programs/hatchery/rathbun.html). Located about seven miles north of Centerville on road J5T. Big groups, please call ahead. Small tours are self-guided. Open year-round Monday through Friday, 7:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m.

#### KEEP IN MIND A FEW SAFETY TIPS WHILE ICE FISHING:

- Dump all leftover bait out of the lake, far from shore, to make sure no minnows find their way into the lake. Dumped bait doesn't really feed the fish, and chances are there may be an invasive species in the mix.
- Bring a rope and ice-safety picks (or car keys, in a pinch) in case you find yourself on thin ice. Mark Flammang's daughter Addy has been hearing the ultimate rule since she was a toddler: "My daddy told me that if you don't know about the lake, don't go on it." She's right. Check with the resort before venturing out.
- Dress in layers. Get inside and warm up if you start to feel cold or disoriented. Keep a cell phone with you at all times, with the resort number handy. Call if you think you might be in trouble.