

F i t n e s s

All Out Fun



EcoTrek Fitness Offers Healthy, Outdoor Exercise

Photos and feature by Katie Garger

Standing on the deck of his house near the Grand Haven State Park early one evening, a spectator looked on as 13 women and one man advanced speedily up the road toward him, resistance tubing belted around their waists.

"This looks like either a walkathon or a family reunion," he observed.

"Something like that," replied Donna Ward, a Spring Lake resident and longtime participant in EcoTrek Fitness, an outdoor workout group which conducts workout excursions in five West Michigan locales and takes funny looks as much in stride as it does thunderstorms and icy conditions.

Cari Draft-Elliott, the owner and creator of EcoTrek Fitness, thinks the outdoors is a perfect setting for exercise.

"Something about being out in the fresh air kind of reminds you of being a kindergartner," she said. And when the weather keeps the less daring on their treadmills, Draft-Elliott and her clients head out into whatever Mother Nature throws their way. In the winter, they wear head lamps to see during their morning and evening workouts, and when other people are running for cover from the rain, Draft said they just wear their baseball caps and smile. "It's fun. It's not caring about what you look like," she said. "You kind of feel like a rebel."



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— Cari Draft-Elliott, EcoTrek Fitness Owner

Whether scampering to the top of a dune, doing yoga on the beach, or wrapping their resistance tubing around trees, EcoTrekters integrate nature into every one of their 75-minute sessions. West Michigan's abundant parks, beaches and hiking trails keep them entertained and refreshed by the sheer beauty and variety of what they see, especially when the weather is

beautiful. Although locations change from week to week, sessions have taken place at Hoffmaster State Park, Grand Haven State Park, Cannonsburg State Game Area, Millenium Park, Johnson Park, John Ball Park, and even the Grand Valley State University campus in Allendale, among others.

Because no two outdoor workouts are the same, it's easy for group members to avoid the boredom of routine. The changing temperature and terrain make creativity and improvisation a must. In her book *The Rugged Walker: Great Workouts for the Great Outdoors*, walking expert and certified fitness instructor Patricia Kirk writes that "hiking and low-level jogging up steep hills builds stamina and lower-body strength; climbing trees and over rocks enhances balance and agility and improves upper-body strength; leaping over mud puddles and gullies develops power and speed; stretching against a log and meditating under a tree promote flexibility of body and mind."

The environmental improvisations used in EcoTrekking are things everyone can try in the great outdoors. The resistance tubing they tie around their waists is light and moves easily with them as they change locations.



"With portable products," writes Kirk, "the top of a mountain or the beach can become your exercise studio." Using existing landforms, such as dunes along Michigan's lakeshore, to replace manmade obstacles or exercise equipment can also be a great way to get in touch with the outdoors. "Exercising in nature reminds you of the intimate relationship between you and the earth," says Kirk.



The benefits of outdoor exercise can extend even beyond those it shares with a more typical fitness routine. EcoTrekters report being sick less often in the winter, as well as experiencing less seasonal depression and overall cabin fever. "When you're outside, you're building your immune system constantly," Draft-Elliott said.

Paula Adkins of Spring Lake has lost 33 pounds and one-and-a-half dress sizes since starting EcoTrek. A diabetic, Adkins said that EcoTrek and other healthy lifestyle changes, like avoiding diet soda, have kept her from visiting her doctor outside of regular checkups for two years. Joy Hohmeyer of Spring Lake lost 20 pounds in three months. "I knew a lifestyle change was needed," said Hohmeyer. "I just didn't know how to accomplish it on my own."

The group setting of EcoTrek helps hold its members accountable to others, not just themselves, in their commitment to exercise. "If you were getting up to run by yourself," Draft-Elliott said, "it would be easier to shut that alarm off." Ward agrees. "Trust me," she said of her group leader, "if you don't go, she'll call you."

Draft-Elliott also offers a food and activity diary sheet to EcoTrek participants, encouraging those for whom weight loss is a goal to keep track of their decisions on an everyday basis. On Wednesdays, she brings her groups healthy treats such as fresh fruit to snack on after their workouts.

Bringing outdoor fitness to west Michigan

Draft-Elliott's idea for EcoTrek Fitness came after completing an outdoor action certification in Portland, Ore. as part of her continuing education as a personal fitness trainer. She met women living on the West Coast running similar businesses and thought, "Why can't we just do it here and see if people are interested?"

After Draft-Elliott took a few of her friends on a test excursion in May 2006, EcoTrek was born. She operated by herself along the Lakeshore for the first year, then hired four EcoTrek leaders in 2008 to lead more series throughout west Michigan. Sessions are offered every day with a special excursion at least once a month.

A mother of one, Draft-Elliott continues to serve clients one-on-one as a personal fitness trainer, but wants to continue expanding EcoTrek Fitness. She may be fast on the trail, but in trying to keep up with the huge success of her business, she said, "I'm taking it slow."

To find an EcoTrek group near you, visit www.ecotrekfitness.com.



photo courtesy EcoTrek

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