

Author to share beauty of great outdoors

By Cheryl Sherry

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If you go

Author Eric Hansen will be the featured speaker at the Fox Valley Sierra Group monthly meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday. Hansen's books, "Hiking Wisconsin" and "Hiking Michigan's Upper Peninsula — A Guide to Hiking Adventures in the U.P.," will be available to purchase.

The Fox Valley Sierra Group meets the second Thursday of each month at the Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve, 4815 N. Lynndale Drive (County A), in northwest Appleton. (The meeting location is wheelchair accessible.)

All meetings of the Fox Valley Group are open and free to the public. For more information, go to <http://wisconsin.sierraclub.org/foxvalley>.



Author Eric Hansen will be the featured speaker at the Fox Valley Sierra Group monthly meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday. Submitted photo

If listening to Eric Hansen eloquently detail past hiking excursions is even half as good as the actual hikes, the Fox Valley Sierra Club is in for a real treat.

Hansen, author of "Hiking Wisconsin" and "Hiking Michigan's Upper Peninsula — A Guide to Hiking Adventures in the U.P." as well as feature stories in Backpacker magazine, will be the guest speaker at the Sierra Club's monthly meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve in Appleton. The event is free and open to the public.

Listen, for example, to the Milwaukee man's enthusiastic description of hiking near Lake Superior, the largest freshwater lake on earth. "Lake Superior is our Grand Canyon," Hansen said by telephone. "It's our Grand Teton and the epitome of who we are. It's big, pure water and the waterfalls — you talk about landscape art — it's an almost universal, human fan club. I mean who isn't willing to get out of the car for a waterfall?"

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is an organization of 750,000 members in the United States and Canada who enjoy the great outdoors.

Headquartered in San Francisco, membership is organized into units known as groups that serve smaller geographical areas. The Fox Valley Sierra Group, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary year, serves about 1,100 members throughout northeastern Wisconsin.

"Many of our people do go and hike trails," FVSC conservation chairman Dale Schaber said. "(The club) also is interested in not only having individuals go out hiking but also families. ... That's one of our goals."

Schaber and his wife, Penny Bernard Schaber, hiked the 1,000-mile Ice Age Trail in August 2005, becoming the 25th and 26th people to complete it, he said.

Hansen credits his parents with his love for the great outdoors.

"My parents did things like ride three-speed bikes from San Diego to New York City in 1946," he said. "There's a picture of me in diapers on my first trip at maybe 10 months old. So it kind of started young. My parents almost pushed me out into the woods but taught me confidence in finding my way home."

Since then, Hansen said he's had "one foot in the city and one foot out in the wild."

Writing was something the outdoorsman always had dabbled with, even during his earlier years as a tool and dye maker and instructor. In the mid-'90s, Kristin Hostetter, Backpacker magazine's gear editor, took Hansen under her wing.

"I had pretty good credibility as a backpacker and have wandered all over," he said. "I've spent cumulatively six months of my life in Glacier National Park in Montana hiking and climbing and making 24 trips to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. I am consistently wandering and being out there and exploring the upper Great Lakes, the Great Basin, the southwest and the northern Rockies. So Kristin saw potential in me and brought me along. So I did a bunch of work for them, which was a big kick-start."

Hansen hiked 800 miles to research his first book, "Hiking Wisconsin," which was published in 2002. His second book, "Hiking Michigan's Upper Peninsula," was the result of a 2001 assignment for Backpacker, resulting in another 900 miles of hiking — this time in the Trap Hills.

"I was stunned when I first saw the Trap Hills," he writes in the book. "Huge, mesmerizing views; a

beautiful older forest; soul-satisfying solitude and a trail that seemed to be the proverbial miles of smiles had me on cloud nine."

Hansen also has the answer to the elusive question: Why do people from Illinois and beyond flock to Wisconsin?

"Why do people in Chicago daydream about being up north? I think it's because of critters and grouse hunting and fly fishing, waterfalls and loons yodeling and eagles flying by. Wisconsin's got this rich conservation ethic ... and we are seeing the payoff for a lot of things now."

Hansen said life as he sees it is a search for authenticity sometimes conducted in the arena of music or art or spiritual affairs.

"But for many of us a lot of times it happens in the arena of the land, and there's many different avenues. ... You sit on these high ledges and watch the sun rise or the sun set, and you can feel your brain cells growing and this great sense of well-being."

Where to go

As soon as the weather turns into spring and summer, Eric Hansen says these are five great places to hike in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula.

- Morgan Falls/St. Peters Dome, 12 miles west of Mellen in northwestern Wisconsin. A 4-mile out and back roundtrip; or 1-mile roundtrip to the waterfall. Morgan Falls, a gem often described as Wisconsin's prettiest, is a 70-foot-tall diagonal plunge down a granite slab. St. Peter's Dome offers long sightlines stretching to Madeline Island and Bayfield's Mount Ashwabay on a good day.
- Presque Isle River Waterfalls, west side of Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in the U.P. A 2-mile loop circles a splendid and notable collection of waterfalls featuring three sizeable drops. A virgin forest of hemlock, white pine and white cedar lines the river.
- Trap Hills, a little northeast of Bergland, south of the Porkies in the U.P. offers a 6-mile loop with shorter options. There are notable 50-mile views from high rock balconies.
- Mead State Wildlife Area, 18 miles east of Marshfield. A 6-mile loop with shorter options. Notable spring bird-watching, nesting ospreys, heron rookery, sandhill cranes and waterfowl. Broad sightlines across open pools and marsh.
- Sea Caves, a little east of Cornucopia in Wisconsin. A 4-mile out and back roundtrip to spectacular mainland sea caves. Fantastic sandstone landscape art. Arches, overhangs, caves and Lake Superior.