



# Visionary Views

Sleeping Bear's Pierce Stocking Drive leads to scenic wonders, especially come autumn

By Dianna Stampfler

**C**adillac-born Pierce Stocking wanted to share his vision with others who explored the scenic Lake Michigan shoreline along what is now known as the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

He pictured a series of overlooks atop the vast dunes near Empire where visitors could gaze out to the lake, and up and down the steep drops to the water, soaking up the unparalleled vistas — yet he still wanted to protect the area's fragile ecosystems.

In the early 1960s, Stocking — a land developer, lumberman, woodsman, environmentalist, and naturalist — set out to carve his scenic trail to the top of the

dunes. By 1967, the 7.4-mile Sleeping Bear Dunes Park (also known back then as the Philip A. Hart Nature Trail) opened to the public, complete with a charming covered bridge. Stocking operated the drive until his death nine years later. After that, the National Lakeshore program added it to its portfolio and the trail was renamed the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive.

Over the past 50-plus years, millions of visitors from around the world have traveled along Stocking's picturesque route, enjoying the legacy he left for generations to come. The road is open to automobiles, motorcycles, and skilled bicyclists. It's steep, with sharp turns and often heavy vehicle traffic, but it's worth every minute of the ride to the top.

Fall is unquestionably the most colorful and vibrant time of year to visit, as the changing yellows, reds, and oranges of the maples, birch, and aspen contrast against the deep green pines that showcase the woodland areas alongside the dunes.

**Top Spots:** From the Glen Lake Overlook, Big and Little Glen lakes — separated by the famed M-22 highway — sparkle a deep cobalt blue, while the Lake Michigan Overlook is perched some 450 feet above the Great Lake, overlooking the "Mother Bear" sand dunes.

On clear days, the North and South Manitou islands can be seen in the distance, representing the cubs about which the legend of the Sleeping Bear is based. Pack a picnic for a delightful al fresco ex-

perience, or bring a chair or blanket and settle in for a stellar sunset from one of the designated overlooks.

Eleven terrific trails meander through the Sleeping Bear Dunes, ranging from 1.2 to 16 miles, each offering varying levels of difficulty. The Alligator Hill Trail splits into three loops (3 to 8 miles) and is rated as easy to moderate, while the Bay View Trail includes an easy 2.4-mile Farm Loop and a 4-mile moderate Ridge Loop. The 3.5-mile Dunes Hiking Trail and 2.8-mile Sleeping Bear Point Trail are hilly and sandy, thus earning them strenuous activity level ratings. For a good overview of the routes from hikers and runners who've been there, check out [alltrails.com](http://alltrails.com).

Of course, the 140-foot climb to the first dune from the water is the most famous attraction in the National Lakeshore and it's open year-round for those who are up for the challenge. The trek can take 10

minutes or more one way, depending on the skill of the climber, but the expansive views from the top provide a great reward for the effort.

**Historic Sites:** Nearby stops like the General Store, Boat Museum (former Glen Haven Canning Co.), Blacksmith Shop, Maritime Museum inside the Sleeping Bear Point U.S. Life-Saving Service Station, and Maritime Boathouse in Glen Haven, as well as the Port Oneida Rural Historic District, are occasionally open during fall color tour weekends — but even when they're not open, the buildings themselves are picture-worthy.

Traditionally, the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive is open from early May through the fall color tour season, depending on weather conditions. It stays open until about an hour after dusk, to allow for those memorable sunsets.

Since it's part of the National Lake-

shore, admission is \$25 for a seven-day auto pass or \$45 for an annual park pass, which is good for 365 days from the time of purchase. Admission passes are available at the Philip A. Hart Visitors Center at the intersection of M-22 and M-72 in Empire. ≈

#### PLAN IT!

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore  
[nps.gov/slbe](http://nps.gov/slbe)

**This page:** The Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive is awash with fabulous colors in the fall. **Opposite page:** At one of the drive's overlooks, visitors can enjoy a beautiful panoramic view of Glen Lake.

