

Exploring the Saginaw Bay area with Meaghan Gass

From the glittering blue waters of Grand Traverse Bay to the bustling Detroit River, Michigan Sea Grant Extension educators can be found living near the water in coastal communities around the state.

This not only helps them stay up to date with the challenges and opportunities of coastal residents — it also makes them experts on some of the state's most beautiful and engaging places to visit. Read upcoming issues of *Upwellings* for more features on the regions where our Extension educators live, work, and play.

If you look at the waving hand of Michigan's mitten, Saginaw Bay sits in the pocket between the forefinger and "Thumb." This large Lake Huron bay is home to sizable coastal wetlands, important migratory bird habitat, and lively fisheries. Along the coast and further inland, the Saginaw Bay region and Thumb are dotted with farm fields and bustling communities.

Since 2018, Meaghan Gass has served as Michigan Sea Grant's Extension educator for the Saginaw Bay area. Meaghan lives in Bay City, with offices in Bay City and Standish. She may be a recent transplant, but she's found lots to love about her new home.

Meaghan and her canine companion enjoy the Bay City Riverwalk, which runs along the Saginaw River where it cuts through downtown Bay City. Depending on the season, riverwalk travelers may encounter live music

performances or displays by local artists.

Veterans Memorial Park on the river's west shore serves as a community gathering place — when it's not filling its dual role as a floodplain management tool. If the river rises, this low-lying property floods first, alleviating the risk of water damage to other city infrastructure.

This large Lake Huron bay is home to sizable coastal wetlands, important migratory bird habitat, and lively fisheries.

Bay City also offers plenty of indoor pursuits. The annual Hell's Half Mile festival is a four-day bonanza of independent films and music each September. Folks can also enjoy music, movies, comedy shows, and more at the quirky State Theatre, built in 1908 and remodeled in 1930 to resemble a Mayan pyramid. Before catching a show, Meaghan recommends the tasty, locally sourced fare at MI Table near the east bank of the river.

Outside of Bay City, the adventures continue. Meaghan points visitors to Bay City State Park, just downstream of town, for great hiking, camping, and swimming. Former rail lines have been converted into a trail network that links Bay City with nearby Saginaw and Midland. Visitors to Midland can explore Dow Gardens and Whiting Forest, which boasts a unique elevated boardwalk that brings visitors 40 feet up into the tree canopy. In Frankenmuth, raise a pint at Oktoberfest, take sides in the great chicken dinner restaurant rivalry, and pick up festive treasures at Bronner's Christmas Wonderland. Around Port Austin, find a burgeoning community art scene that includes colorful crosswalks and several painted barns tucked into the surrounding farmland. Pop by the Au Gres-Sims Schools, where students recently built a water-filtering rain garden on school property.



For fans of local produce, Meaghan recommends stocking up at Midland's great farmers market or filling a bucket with fresh blueberries in Tawas City (or any of the other u-pick farms around Bay County). Keep some cash on hand for impromptu stops at the area's wealth of fruit and veggie stands, where produce comes straight from the hands that grew it.



The Thumb sits along major migratory bird corridors, making the region a must-visit for bird watchers.

The 10,000-acre Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge maintains marshes, grasslands, and floodplain forests that provide crucial habitat for migratory waterfowl. Between the spring and fall migration seasons, a 6.5-mile self-guided auto route allows visitors into unique ecosystems at the heart of the refuge. Visitors and locals can also help these habitats thrive by volunteering at the refuge's Earth Day litter clean-up.

A visit to the Saginaw Bay area wouldn't be complete without some fish! Whether folks are looking to catch or eat fish, or if they're angling to learn more about the legacy and current state of fishing in the area, the Great Lakes Fisheries Heritage Trail website has a wealth of curated recommendations for museums, fish markets, research centers, and more. Visit greatlakesfisheriestrail.org.

As a Michigan Sea Grant Extension educator, Meaghan works with researchers and natural resource agencies to help boost the Bay's native fish populations. She's spreading the word about a new rocky spawning reef at the southern end of the Bay that provides a safe place for fish to lay eggs; find details at michiganseagrants.org/saginawbayreef. In the fall, she can often be found on the banks of a Saginaw Bay-area river, delivering baby lake sturgeon raised in hatcheries to their new homes. Stop by one of these riverside release events in August or September for a chance to meet and hold these incredible little fish.



The Bay supports a thriving fishery for walleye and perch available to recreational, commercial, and charter anglers. If the wintertime conditions are right, give ice fishing a try.

The Bay Port Fish Company has been fishing commercially since 1895. Today, the family-run business runs four boats in Lake Huron and Saginaw Bay. Meaghan suggests finding their fresh, smoked, and frozen fish in their Bay Port retail store or at regional farmer's markets during the warmer months. Visitors can also enjoy Bay Port Fish Company products at the annual August Fish Sandwich Festival.

The famous fish sandwich isn't the only food item celebrated with annual festivities. Sebawaing hosts a June Sugar Festival to honor the local sugar beet crop, and Caseville throws a Cheeseburger Festival (which, despite its name, leans more toward Jimmy Buffett than meaty sandwiches) each August.

Beyond fish and food, there are plenty of ways to explore Saginaw Bay's shores. Snap a photo nearly anywhere as the sun rises over the Bay, then end the day in Caseville to capture a watery sunset. Rent a kayak from Port Austin Kayak and paddle out for a photo at the iconic Turnip Rock. Snorkel, dive, or paddle over one of the region's shipwrecks, like the 1884 schooner *Dorcas Pendell* near Harbor Beach on the Lake Huron side of the Thumb (SCUBA-certified divers can check out Double Action Dive Charters). Au Gres' Riverside Park boasts a new universally accessible kayak launch so everyone can enjoy paddling the river and the Bay. While at the park, look for the new stormwater-friendly bioswale, due for installation this spring by students from Au Gres-Sims School District, who also constructed a rain garden at their school. 📌

