

THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

If someone tells you to 'zip it,' just head to the Howell Nature Center

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News Staff Reporter

Who couldn't do with a little more zip in their life?

Zip line riders at the Howell Conference and Nature Center in Marion Township wear a seat harness that clips to a pulley on a 500-foot steel cable. It starts at the top of a steep slope, and riders simply walk down the hill until the ground drops (quickly) away from their feet.

Then they're gliding down the cable, nothing between them and the surface of the pond below but 20 feet of air.

The ride takes about 30 seconds and costs \$3, but it's a thrill you can't get at just any park around the corner. The Howell Nature Center is one of just a few places in Southeastern Michigan with zip lines that are open to the public.

"It's a nice breezy ride across a pond, kind of like flying in a seated position for 500 feet," says challenge program supervisor Becky Johnson.

Zip lines were used in the 1800s to move people from ship to ship at sea, says Gideon Rexford, zip-line consultant at the Outdoor Fun Store in Wayne. In the 1970s, rock and mountain climbers started setting up recreational zip lines, and some places (none locally) now offer longer zip line tours, some through jungle canopies or down mountains.

The Livingston County nature center has two other zip lines, at 25 and 35 feet, that are part of its ropes courses.

The center runs programs for groups of 15 or more that can include zip lines, among many other activities. The cost varies, depending on the package a group puts together.

And on select dates the center opens its zip line and 60-foot climbing tower to anyone who wants to try them (provided they have pre-paid and registered). Zippers must be 9 years or older, wall-climbers 5 or older. All equipment is provided.

The next open tower and zip line date is Aug. 21. Fall dates are scheduled twice a month for August, September and October.