

Win a Family Vacation on Elk Lake

@ White
Birch Lodge



NORTHERN MICHIGAN'S MAGAZINE

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Behind the Boat

After we invented the motor boat, the obvious next step was to rig up a rope and start hauling around the people we love. Here, then, is our ode to all that—a resort that lives to thrill you at the end of a tow rope and a primer on the many proliferating ways to get pulled across the glimmering H₂O.

Text By Kandace Chapple
Photos by Todd Zawistowski



On shore,

Mike Conrad is quiet and unassuming. He stands unobtrusively in the shade of the trees, one flip-flopped foot on the grass, the other perched on the edge of the deck; his brown hair spirals in tight, unruly curls above his ears. When Carson, a young woman on the staff, stops to ask him a question, his trim frame bends down to hear what is being said, and he interacts so politely, so calmly, it takes a minute to realize he is the one in charge, the one who keeps White Birch Lodge on an even keel, the go-to guy. Somehow, despite the responsibility, he stays as relaxed as one of the guests, working in the green of the lawn, above the blue of the lake, from the helm of a white covered porch. On shore, Mike Conrad is nothing like what he will be in a few short hours. That's when he'll be behind the boat, morphed into daredevil mode and performing tricks, like, say, a back flip midair on a wakeboard over the swell of Elk Lake.

Welcome to the nugget of living and loafing at this secluded spot off Meguzee Point near Elk Rapids, where land and water play off each other perfectly. One offering serenity, the other a little dance with insanity.

Mike Conrad's grandparents Cliff and Ruby purchased White Birch Lodge some 50 years ago, and Conrads have run it ever since. Mike's parents, Rick and Karen Conrad, took over next, and then in recent years Mike, 33, continues. Built in the 1890s, the original classic resort-style building has been updated and expanded and other buildings have been added, so that today the 40-acre property includes everything from rustic cabins to upscale condos for accommodations. White Birch Lodge is a place where

family tradition lives on, and one other important thing does too, an obsession for watersports.

Come any Thursday night in July and August, you'll find a well-rehearsed ski show underway, the staff forming a perfect 4-2 pyramid on water skis, slicing the soft waters near the sandy beach with four men on bottom and two gals on top. And behold the Granny Act, when the most veteran staffer is honored with a mop of granny hair and given the dubious pleasure of riding the old zip sled—a five-foot length of plywood with a rounded front from 1952—to close the show.

White Birch Lodge is a celebration of all things outdoors—the original lodge, rich with history and charm, sits on a small rise facing south. A sunrise and sunset spread across the lake to open and close each day, reminding everybody that it's the lake that commands center stage.

Guests can meander on the beach or play tennis or kick back on the veranda, but come afternoon, the action is on the water. There is tubing at 2 p.m., wakeboarding at 3 p.m. and water-skiing at 3:30 p.m. White Birch Lodge runs a fleet of four boats, employs a handful of skilled, handsome drivers, and every day offers watersports lessons for the guests, teaching skills and building spirit with encouragement and camaraderie.

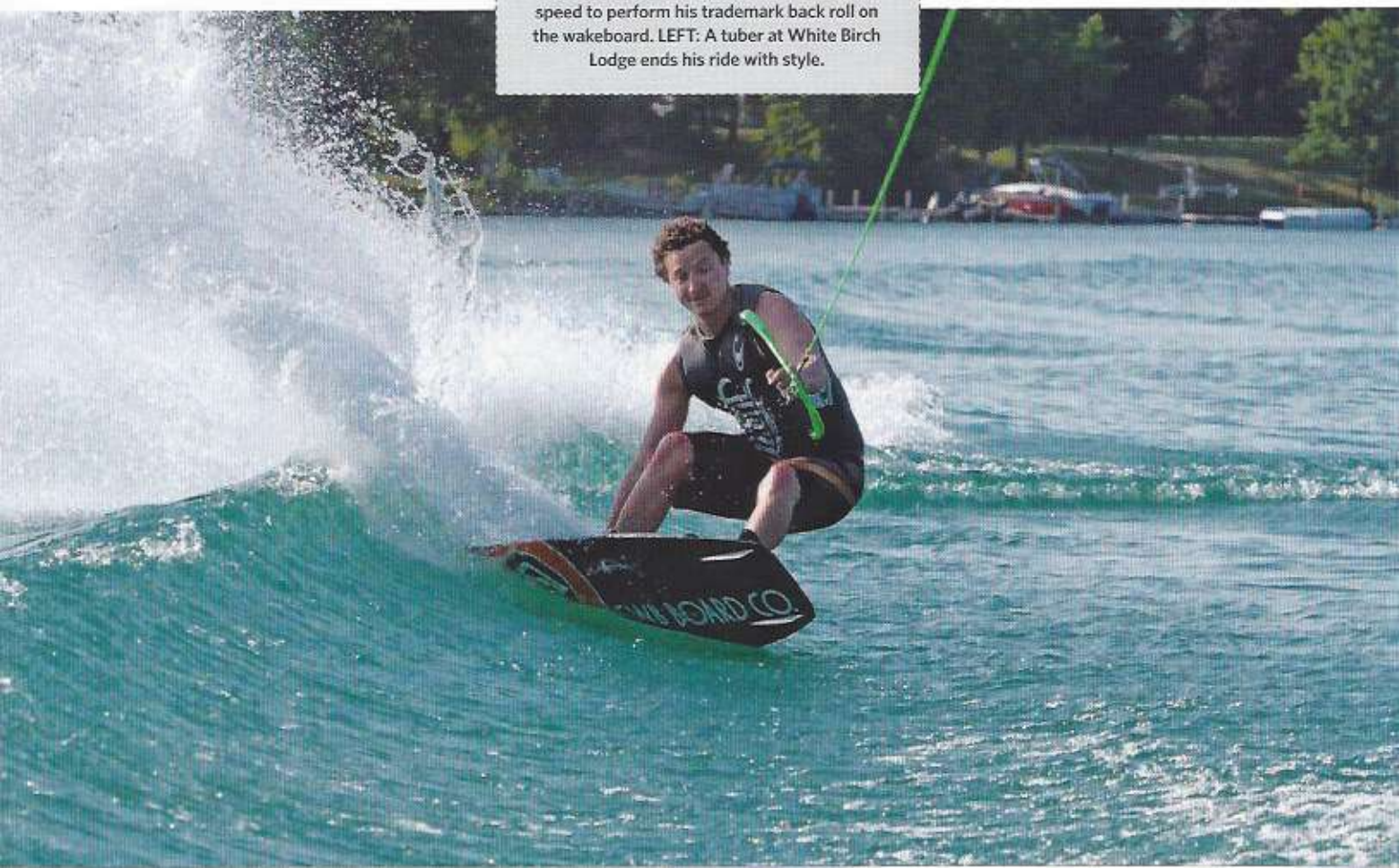
On this June afternoon, the opening week of the season, it's Pete McCartney, 23, at the helm of a MasterCraft X-Star. The boat's white gleam stretches 20 feet long and it houses 350 cubic inches of V8 engine, the same power you'd find in a full-size pickup truck. Power unfettered by stoplights or street signs.

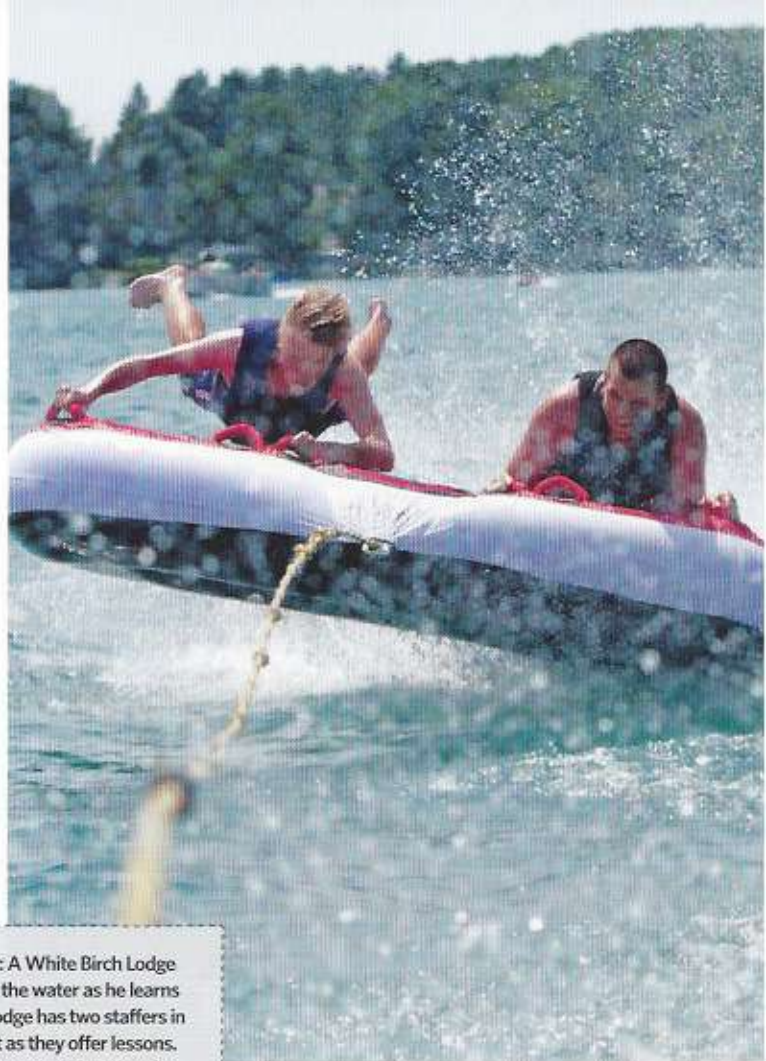
On the dock is a guest, Michael Davis's daughter Erin. She is 9 and will be up on skis today again, like last summer and the one before. The family hails



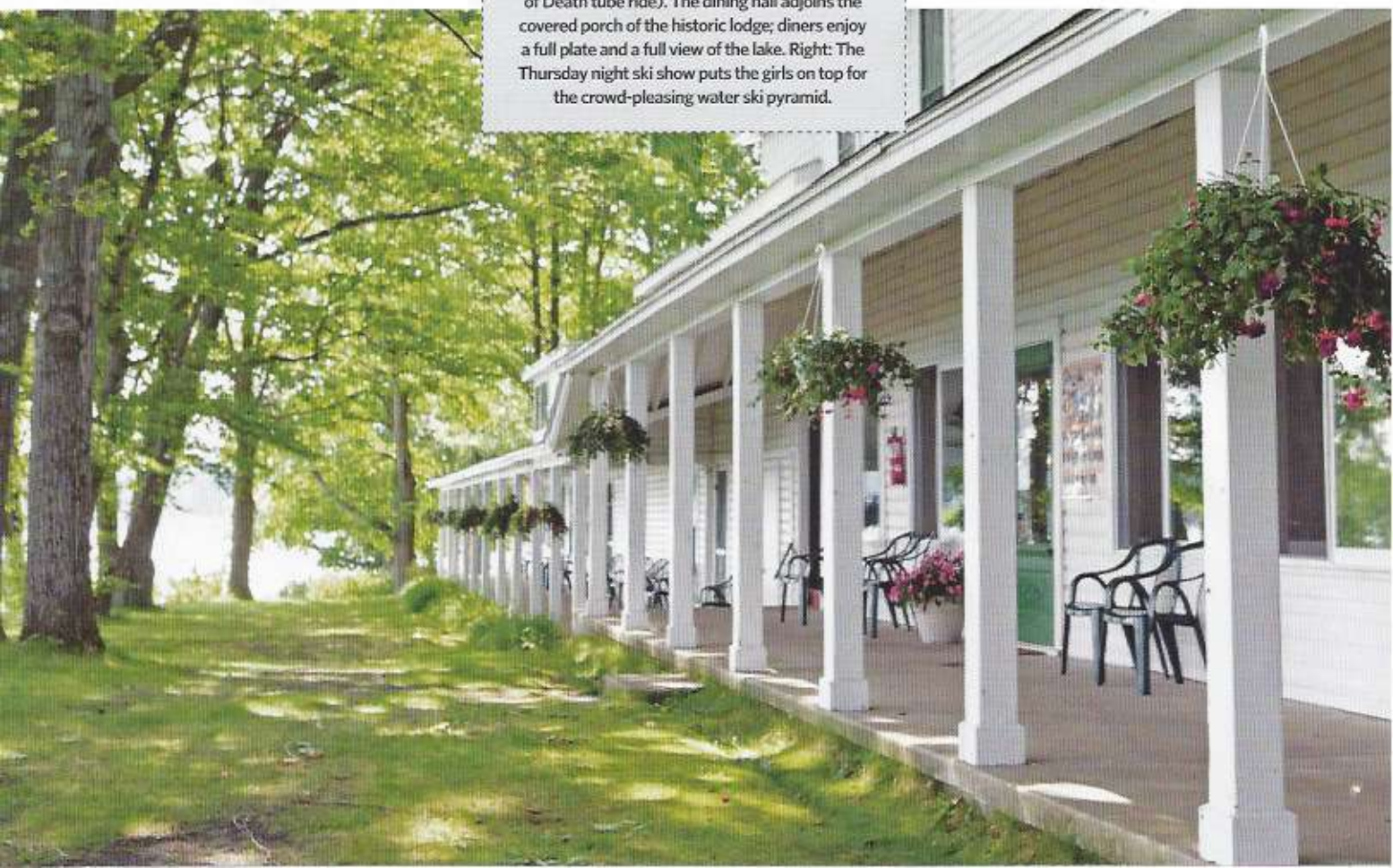


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The White Birch Lodge crew takes a guest out on the wakeboard. Co-staff director Carson Lynes floats in Elk Lake waiting for a pull. Mike Conrad gains speed to perform his trademark back roll on the wakeboard. LEFT: A tuber at White Birch Lodge ends his ride with style.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A White Birch Lodge staffer steadies a guest in the water as he learns to waterski. White Birch Lodge has two staffers in the water with each guest as they offer lessons. Two guests enjoy the infamous C.O.D. (Circle of Death tube ride). The dining hall adjoins the covered porch of the historic lodge; diners enjoy a full plate and a full view of the lake. Right: The Thursday night ski show puts the girls on top for the crowd-pleasing water ski pyramid.



from Columbus, Ohio, and even though they have a boat and lake house at home, here is their real getaway.

"It's a magical place," Davis says, his cheeks tipped with the mark of a week-long sun. "The first year we came, it was like any vacation, something to do once. But by the third night here, my wife says we'll never miss a year. That was 11 years ago."

Indeed, Conrad says several families come the exact same week every year, a standing date on the calendar. The result is an extended family among the guests as they sun during the day and stoke the campfire at night. New families mix with veterans, one sharing the traditions with the next.

Today, as Erin waits her turn in line, a newbie attempts her first time on skis. She falls once, twice, happily plucked each time by a staffer and restarted. The boat idles near the dock and two staffers are in the water with her, prompting and coaching and soothing her back into position. When the young girl falls a third time, the guests on the dock take note, mothers put down their books, fathers set down their drinks, kids on the beach turn to watch.

But it isn't the fall they are waiting for on the next attempt. It's the success.

And when she comes up out of the water, and stays up, the shore cheers. It's a long smattering of applause and whoops that echo along the beach as she passes a second, then a third dock that reaches out from the resort shore. The girl is smiling. How could she not be?

Conrad smiles too and straightens life vests tossed on the dock.

"I learned to ski around age 5 or 6 at White Birch," he says. "I'll always remember the first experience of looking down at the water splashing around my skis. It's a feeling unlike any other to be standing on crystal clear blue Elk Lake water on a warm summer day."

When the lessons end for the day, Conrad takes the boat out with a couple of staffers. It's time for a little fun before the dining hall opens, as it does three times a day, one more thing that makes White Birch Lodge a luxury.

First on the wakeboard is Carson Lynes, 22, from Virginia. This is her fourth summer working at the lodge but her first as co-staff director. She and her sister Hayley are two of the 25 college-aged students working the season.

Carson is confident and calm as she enters the water, her pink bikini turning her tan a shade darker in contrast. When her co-worker tosses her the towrope, she catches the handle with one hand bobbing above the water. The passengers celebrate on the boat, the thrill even of a throw and a catch, fodder on the bright blue water.

Carson rises from the blue and makes wakeboarding look effortless, carving and climbing the wake of the boat. Maggie McCartney, the other co-staff director, also 22, sums up the key to water-skiing as this: "It's all about confidence."



Water-skiing 101

Slalom: This style of water-skiing uses just one ski. The bindings are oriented so that both feet point forward, with one behind the other. Slalom skiers travel at higher speeds than traditional double-ski riders, around 35 mph and take home a killer core workout.

Barefoot: Beginners can use a "barefoot boom." This aluminum bar is attached to the side of the boat where a short rope can be attached or the skier can grip the bar itself. This puts the skier close to the boat to make learning easier. High speed (45 mph) is required, so pros recommend a special barefoot skiing wetsuit that offers extra protection.

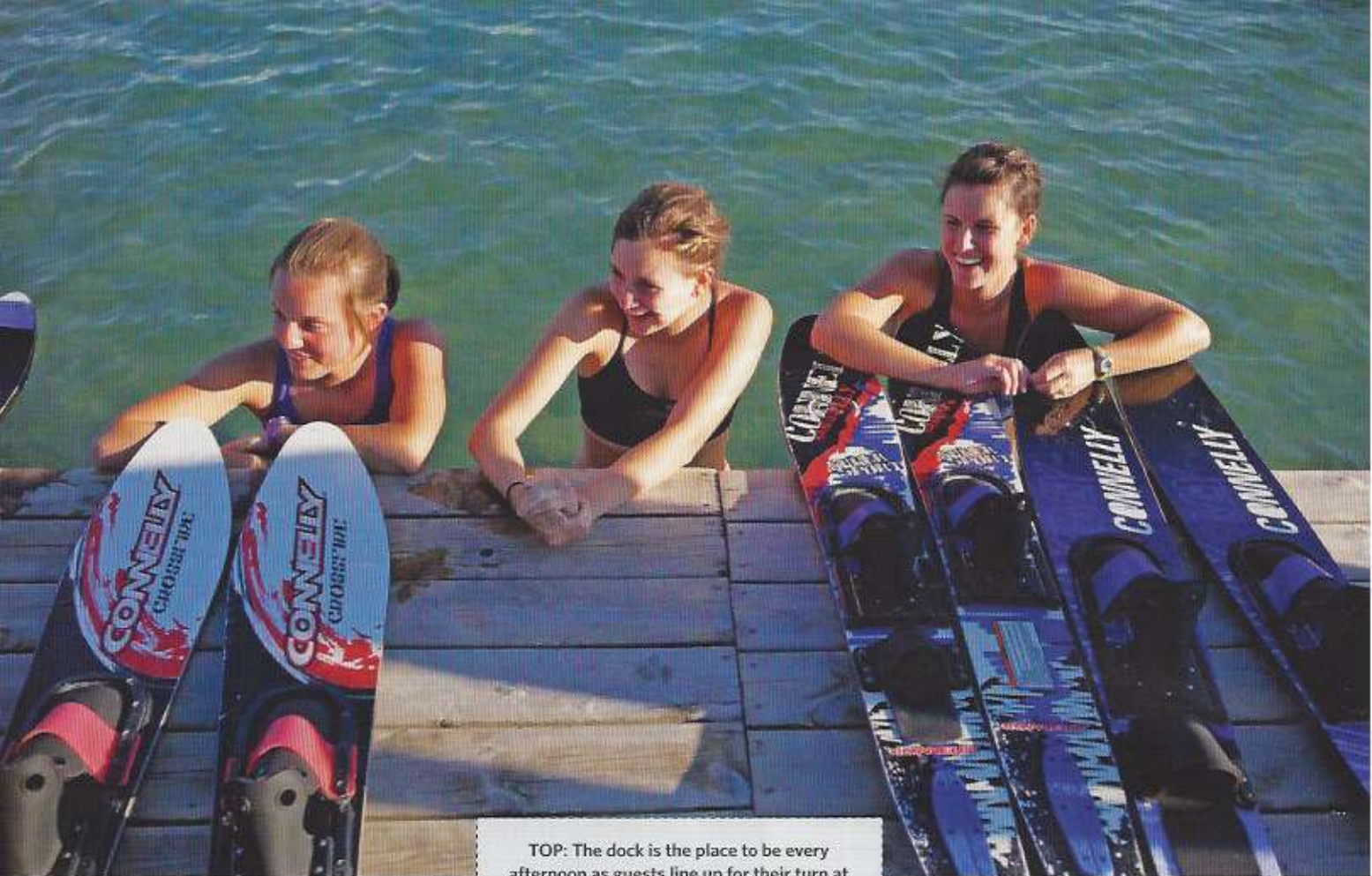
Trick Skiing: Daredevils use smaller, oval-shaped water skis that are smooth on the bottom to make for tighter, faster turning. In a trick skiing tournament, skiers have one or two 20-second runs to strut their stuff and are judged based on difficulty and whether they are on one or two skis.

Come Thursday night, the two will ski as the two fearless gals balancing on the shoulders of four young men. Today, when Carson is done, tired and happy, she climbs into the boat and the goading begins.

"Show them your tricks, Mike," she says. She is happy to redirect the spotlight. He shakes his head no.

It takes more prodding and the unearthing of a different wakeboard and getting Pete back in the driver's seat before Mike's tricks can begin. And when they do, the transformation is inspiring. The unassuming guy who has been touting the good graces of his staff and his guests all afternoon, slides smoothly off the back deck of the boat and into the water, a move perfected by some 20 summers.

In just seconds, the boat is nearing 25 mph, and Mike is atop the water, the wake of the boat at his feet. He's promised us the



TOP: The dock is the place to be every afternoon as guests line up for their turn at waterskiing. Bottom: Mike Davis, long-time guest, hangs with the kiddos like he has for the last 11 summers at White Birch Lodge.



back flip (technically called a back roll), a feat he first nailed at age 18, in the ski show, of course, off the shores of White Birch Lodge.

"Even after all these years, I get a little nervous before each attempt," he says. "It still feels like I might have a gnarly crash! When you are learning, committing to jumping high enough to clear the wake from one side to the other takes skill and guts and lots of practice. But when it happens right, you're just on your board riding smoothly again and you can't believe it."

He assures me that the back roll is a basic trick for pro wakeboarders, but the excitement in the boat as the crew awaits his attempt tells me it's no small feat. As Mike gets his legs under him, the wind rushes around the boat and back to him, coaxing him along. The crew quiets and watches.

It's hard to fit the man on the wakeboard to the man on shore. He could be any age but he looks brand new, like it's his first time, yet as confident as if he's never done anything else. He's fluid, like the water behind the boat.

He moves at last, cuts wide to the starboard side and waits, riding. Then, in a single move, he carves hard and launches, spinning, counterclockwise in the air, flipping headfirst above the wake. Where his feet were, his face looks back at us, upside down, focused. In the next moment, he has landed, right side up, port side, exhilarated. The boat fills with whoops and clapping. There is relief and anticipation too, everybody hoping he'll do it again.

This spell cast over the boat is a regular moment in any given day at White Birch Lodge. But it is also the epitome of life at the lodge, in the sun, on the open lake, the sun falling lower and the roar of water under the boat a washboard under the feet. The man behind the boat is not the man on shore. The water has done its thing again, sharing a touch of its power and beauty with those of us lucky enough to be out on the lake on a summer day. ■

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Tow-Rope Sign Language

Before heading out, go over some basic hand signals with your driver and spotter. These hand signals should be in your repertoire.

I'm OK: Once a skier hits the water, everyone in the boat hopes for his survival ... so show your spotter some love by bending your arm and touching your fingertips to your head. This signals that you're okay. Or you can raise both arms above your head and touch your fingertips together, forming a circle.

I'm Finished: If the skier wants to let go of the tow rope, they can slice their hand across their throat to indicate it's time to kill the party.

Oncoming Wakes: There's nothing like the wake from another boat to break up a beginner's first cruise. The spotter should extend one arm straight out to their side and move it up and down to indicate the rise and fall of oncoming wakes.

Stay Behind The Boat: If a spotter sees danger ahead or is approaching a narrow passage, the safest place is directly behind the boat. The spotter can indicate that the skier should stay in the boat's wake by extending one arm horizontally and moving it up and down.

I Want Back in the Boat: In the drink and had enough? Let your spotter know you want back in the cushy vinyl seats by patting your head several times with your hand.

Water skis and Beyond

Water Skis: The classic "behind the boat" experience. The ingredients: a tow rope, one ski or two, and a spotter on the boat. Using one ski (with the feet in line, one behind the other) is called slalom skiing. Packages: \$300-\$1,000.

Wakeboards: A graceful combination of water-skiing, snowboarding and surfing. Riders hold a tow rope and surf the water like they would carve a mountain, dodging in and out of the boat's wake. With a little (huge!) confidence, boarders can perform tricks and jumps by hitting the boat's wake at high speeds. Wakeboard & boots package: \$200-\$600 and up.

Kneeboards: The kid sister to wakeboarding, and like the baby in the family, you get off easy when you screw up. Because riders are kneel-

ing and therefore closer to the water, the falls are less punishing. And kneeboarding can be done at slower speeds, allowing a nice segue way into the sport for the water wary. Kneeboard (no boots or bindings required!): \$100 and up.

Tubes: No skill required. Just tie the tube to the boat, grip the tube's handles and pray. One-person tubes that might last more than a season: \$70 and up.

Wakeskis: Lighter and edgier than water skis, these are burgeoning technology for those with a taste for daring. They are built to be used anywhere—behind a boat, on the rails or under a kite. Boot and ski package: \$200-\$600.

Wakeskates: It's like wakeboarding but with

no bindings holding you to the board. Staying on is all up to you. The surface of the board has griptape like a skateboard or a high-traction foam so the rider can skate barefoot. Tricks on a wakeskate are similar to those in skateboarding. Popular behind jet skis. No boots or bindings required. Waterskate: \$100-\$350.

Wakesurf: Look, Mom, no hands! This sport uses the boat's wake to re-create the ocean's fury. Wakesurfers use a short surfboard, less than 5 feet long. Once the surfer is up on the board with the use of a tow rope, he drops it and goes no hands. He surfs the wake 10 to 20 feet behind the boat and off to one side, playing against the steep face below the wave's peak. The No. 1 rule? Never surf directly behind a boat with an outboard motor (yikes!). \$150-\$350.