

Wisconsin: Overview

Everything in the main manual and the skill guides applies in Wisconsin exactly as written. What's different here is the specific hazard profile and the state, local, and legal context around it. This page is the starting point; the other three pages under Wisconsin go deeper on laws, local resources, and the data behind the risks named here.

The Peshtigo Fire: the deadliest wildfire in American history, largely forgotten

On October 8, 1871, a firestorm swept through Peshtigo, Wisconsin, and the surrounding countryside, killing at least 1,152 people, the deadliest wildfire in recorded U.S. history, far deadlier than California's January 2025 firestorm covered elsewhere on this site. It happened on the exact same night as the Great Chicago Fire, 260 miles south, and has been overshadowed by it in public memory ever since despite killing several times as many people. See the Risks page for the full data.

The 1984 Barneveld tornado: Wisconsin's first F5 in 26 years

Modern Wisconsin still carries real tornado risk: on June 8, 1984, an F5 tornado struck Barneveld, killing 13 people and causing \$40 million in damage, the state's first F5-rated tornado since a deadly 1958 outbreak in the Chippewa Valley. Wisconsin's tornado risk is real but episodic, long gaps between the most violent tornadoes rather than a constant, low-level threat.

What this means for how you use the rest of this manual

The manual's Tier structure and the skill guides apply without modification. What's different in Wisconsin: wildfire risk isn't confined to the arid West, Peshtigo demonstrates that a fast-moving firestorm can happen in forested Midwest terrain under the right drought and wind conditions, and tornado preparedness deserves real weight even in a state that doesn't experience violent tornadoes every year, since the ones that do occur here can be catastrophic.

Sources

- Peshtigo Fire death toll and historical context: History.com; National Weather Service
- 1984 Barneveld F5 tornado deaths and damage: Wikipedia, sourced to NWS

Wisconsin: Laws & Legal Considerations

Rainwater harvesting: legal, with a detailed plumbing code framework

Wisconsin permits rainwater harvesting statewide and has built a more detailed plumbing-code framework around it than many states covered on this site.

Rule	Wisconsin
Source water	Rooftop or other catchment
Permit required	No, for typical residential outdoor non-potable systems
Permitted uses	Non-potable: irrigation, landscaping, and toilet flushing where plumbed per code
Indoor plumbing	The state plumbing code specifies exactly what's allowed depending on how collected water enters household plumbing
Local variation	Municipalities, counties, and utility districts may adopt stricter rules; check local zoning and building codes

Where to find it: the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services administers the state plumbing code.

Water rights: standard riparian doctrine

Wisconsin follows the same general riparian reasonable-use framework as most states in this region.

Concept	How it works in Wisconsin
Who holds the right	Owners of land bordering a river, stream, or lake
Governing principle	Reasonable use for irrigation, recreation, and domestic consumption, without excessively infringing on other riparian owners or altering the water's natural flow

Where to find it: the University of Wisconsin’s water law guidance publications, available through UW-Extension, explain the doctrine in plain language for property owners.

Concealed carry: an actual license required, unlike most Midwest peers covered on this site

Wisconsin is shall-issue but not permitless, a genuine departure from the pattern in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Missouri, all covered elsewhere on this site with either permitless carry or a two-tier ownership/carry license system.

Requirement	Detail
Standard	Shall-issue: Wisconsin DOJ must issue a license to any qualified applicant who completes the requirements
Minimum age	21
Training required	A firearms safety training course
Validity	5 years, with a background check at renewal
Vehicle carry	A license is specifically required to carry a loaded handgun within reach while in a vehicle, even though open carry itself doesn't require one for those 18+

A real outlier in this region

Ohio, Indiana, and Missouri have all moved to permitless carry, and Illinois requires a FOID card plus a separate CCL to carry at all. Wisconsin instead requires an actual carry license, with no permitless alternative, closer in structure to Pennsylvania’s or North Carolina’s shall-issue systems than to its immediate Midwest neighbors.

Sources

- Wisconsin rainwater harvesting and plumbing code framework: LegalClarity
- Wisconsin riparian water rights: UW-Extension Water Law Guide
- Wisconsin concealed carry license requirements: Wisconsin DOJ; Alien Gear Holsters

[BY STATE](#) › [WISCONSIN](#)

Wisconsin: Local Resources

Wisconsin Emergency Management and ReadyWisconsin

Wisconsin Emergency Management, part of the Department of Military Affairs, runs public preparedness outreach through ReadyWisconsin, aligned with the national Ready.gov framework.

Where to find it: readywisconsin.wi.gov.

UW-Madison Division of Extension: Wisconsin's version of the other states' land-grant Extension programs, recently restructured

The University of Wisconsin's Division of Extension runs the same category of program as every other state covered on this site, and recently changed its onboarding structure.

A newer, online-first entry point

As of 2026, the path to becoming a Wisconsin Master Gardener starts with an annual fall online course, "Growing and Caring for Plants in Wisconsin: Foundations in Gardening," followed by a winter Master Gardener Onboarding course (up to 5 years allowed between the two). Full certification requires 36 hours of training plus a passing exam score, then 24 hours of volunteer service annually, along with 10 hours of continuing education, to maintain it.

Where to find it: mastergardener.extension.wisc.edu lists the program and county associations.

CERT: supported through ReadyWisconsin

Wisconsin's CERT program follows the same nationwide FEMA model in place since 1993, with ReadyWisconsin serving as the state's central information point for getting involved locally.

Where to find it: readywisconsin.wi.gov/be-informed/be-involved.

Sources

- ReadyWisconsin campaign and CERT program information: ReadyWisconsin; Wisconsin Emergency Management
- UW-Madison Master Gardener Program restructured onboarding and requirements: UW-Madison Division of Extension

BY STATE › WISCONSIN

Wisconsin: Risks & Trends

Same standard as every other page on this site: every figure below is independently sourced, and figures that vary across sources, or measure genuinely different things, are flagged as such rather than collapsed into one number that looks more precise than the underlying data actually supports.

The Peshtigo Fire (1871): the deadliest wildfire in recorded U.S. history

Metric	Figure
Date	October 8, 1871
Verified deaths	1,152
Acres burned	1.2-1.5 million
National/world ranking	Deadliest wildfire in recorded U.S. history

Why the true death toll is likely higher than the verified count

The fire destroyed town records for the affected area, and many victims lived on remote farmsteads or logging camps that were never formally documented in the first place, their settlements, and their bodies, were burned beyond identification. The 1,152 figure is the verified count; some historians believe the true toll was meaningfully higher, though it can't be confirmed with surviving records.

The fire is believed to have started from a brush fire, possibly set by railroad workers clearing land, though no definitive cause was ever established. It struck the same night as the Great Chicago Fire, which killed far fewer people but received far more attention then and since.

The Barneveld tornado (1984): Wisconsin’s first F5 since 1958

Metric	Figure
Date	June 8, 1984
Peak rating	F5
Deaths	13
Injuries	322
Damage (Wisconsin)	~\$40 million
Context	Part of a 46-tornado outbreak; Wisconsin's first F5 since the 1958 Chippewa Valley outbreak, which killed 27 people statewide including 19 in a single F5 near Colfax

What these two have in common

Separated by 113 years, the Peshtigo Fire and the Barneveld tornado both demonstrate that Wisconsin’s most severe weather events are genuinely rare but genuinely catastrophic when they occur, long quiet intervals punctuated by events far outside what residents typically expect from the state’s usual climate.

Sources

- Peshtigo Fire death toll and historical details: [History.com](#); National Weather Service
- 1984 Barneveld F5 tornado and 1958 Chippewa Valley outbreak data: [Wikipedia](#), sourced to NWS