**Showcasing the DNR: A visit to Michigan’s most remote state park**

*This is part of a series of stories to mark the centennial of Michigan state parks. On May 12, 1919, the Michigan Legislature established the Michigan State Park Commission, paving the way for our state parks system. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources is celebrating this milestone throughout the year with special events, podcasts, historical stories, videos, geocaching and more. Find more details at* [*Michigan.gov/StateParks100*](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79133_79205_85747---%2C00.html)*.*

**By JOHN PEPIN**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

It was a strange late November afternoon with a couple of inches of wet snow covering the twisting dirt road that cut through wetlands and wound up into the hills of hardwoods at Craig Lake State Park.

The temperature had climbed into the low 50s and the boiling clouds on the horizon told me it wouldn’t be long before rain would be falling. Rain showers, with snow and ice on the ground in late November – strange indeed.

These conditions added to the mystique of this most remote of Michigan’s state parks. Rugged and wild, Craig Lake State Park is known for its wilderness-style experience – a place in Baraga County glorious and peaceful.

It was “Black Friday,” the day after Thanksgiving, when many American consumers, with ferocity and dedication, famously hunt holiday shopping bargains.

I was among those who decided to take a break from the November-December holiday tsunami storm surge to opt for the outdoors, to get some big deep breaths of fresh air, here along the bubbling waters of Nelligan Creek.

The tannin-laden, whiskey-colored water, leached from the cedar swamps, bubbled out from under piles of snow and cascaded over ice-covered rocks. This little creek runs south, out of the park and across the highway, but not before providing a great deal of beauty and atmosphere to this wondrous place.

Just being here was a special treat so late in the season. After mid-November, those attempting to drive the road into the park often find themselves stranded, their vehicles stuck in the snow.

Today, I was fortunate. I could drive in farther than usual before parking to get out to walk the snow-covered dirt roadway.

There are six lakes here, three of them named for the children of Frederick Miller of the famed Miller Brewing Co. In keeping with the Miller beer theme, there is also a nearby lake, just northwest of the park, named High Life Lake.

Craig Lake, the largest of these lakes, and Teddy Lake were named for two of Miller’s boys, while Clair Lake – known for its smallmouth bass waters – was named for his daughter.

The family once owned thousands of acres around Craig Lake. They had also built a lodge, a caretaker’s residence and several outbuildings there. Unfortunately, tragedy would mar the idyllic setting the Millers had discovered in these tranquil north woods.

Miller, a famous beer brewer and former All-American tackle for Notre Dame, was among those who helped bring the old Boston Braves to Milwaukee.

He was 48 and his son, Frederick Jr., was 22, when they died in a plane crash in Wisconsin in December 1954. The Millers were flying in a private twin-engine plane piloted by two brothers, Joe and Paul Laird, ages 39 and 32, respectively.

“The Milwaukee crash occurred exactly a minute after Miller and the others took off for Winnipeg, Manitoba, for a pre-Christmas hunting trip in the brewery-owned B34 (Lockheed-Ventura) plane,” the Holland Evening Sentinel reported. “The younger Miller, a Notre Dame student, had driven from the school to make the trip.”

Just after the plane had taken off, witnesses saw sparks coming from one of the two engines.

“Paul Laird, at the controls, told the Civil Aeronautics Authority control tower he had engine trouble and was turning back,” the newspaper said. “The plane crashed before he could make the swing, however.

“Flames 40 to 50 feet high burst out as the craft smacked down three quarters of a mile from the airport near a residential section.”

The wreckage of the plane came to rest in a snow-covered field. The men suffered severe burns and other injuries. All but the elder Miller were killed instantly. Frederick Miller succumbed to his injuries at a local hospital about five hours after the accident.

In the wake of the tragedy, the family sold its land to a Marquette-based logging company. The state of Michigan, which owned about 2,100 acres in the area, acquired some of the former Miller property.

“Through a series of purchases and land exchanges beginning in 1956, the state acquired several key parcels within the park area totaling more than 2,300 acres,” the Soo Evening News reported in 1970.

By that time, the new state park-to-be had been dedicated, but funding had not yet been appropriated for its development.

Michigan Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Deputy Director Glenn Gregg explained to the newspaper this park was expected to be different than all the rest.

“This would be the first move the DNR ever has made to manage a park area for wilderness values, outdoor recreational activities and timber production,” Gregg said.

Craig Lake State Park was to be managed as a semi-wilderness park with limited development, but some of the back lands would be managed for logging and timber stand improvement, Gregg said.

Today, the park covers more than 8,400 acres and has maintained its sense of wilderness.

From the granite bluffs that tower behind Craig Lake to the numerous ponds providing homes for beavers, loons, fish, frogs and other wild creatures, to the quiet backcountry campsites and trails, this park remains a vital refuge from the numerous challenges to peace and quiet posed by the noise and pressures of daily living.

Craig Lake State Park has walk-in campsites and other camping options, including yurts and rustic cabins. The park has a main trail covering 8 miles, while the National North Country Scenic Trail runs for more than 7 miles here too.

Beyond hiking and camping, the park offers visitors opportunities to fish, hunt, paddle, birdwatch and take photographs.

Craig Lake itself is 374 acres and features six islands and high granite bluffs along its northern shoreline. The forests here are quiet and green.

Rounding a corner, the tracks of a moose had been cut into the snow on the road. They looked as though they had been made with a cookie cutter. The hoofprints of this single meandering animal came from an old logging road that split a stand of pines.

The tracks continued as the side road headed to the southwest, stopping at a downed tree before sidestepping the road into a wide clearing. No sign of the moose, but I could almost feel the living, breathing moose within those tracks.

Not too far back, a ruffed grouse had pointed its head down and ran across the snow into a tangle of fallen tree trunks and low bushes. The skies were filled intermittently with small flocks of twittering goldfinches.

With the raindrops falling harder now, I turned around and headed back. On the way, I discovered another set of moose tracks not far from a bridge over the creek. I took a few more long looks at the countryside.

Moments later, I was turning back onto the highway heading into the gathering darkness of a dying afternoon.

To plan your visit to Craig Lake State Park, check out [Michigan.gov/CraigLake](http://www.Michigan.gov/CraigLake) and see this [park map](http://www.michigandnr.com/Publications/PDFS/RecreationCamping/craig_lake_map.pdf). Find out more about special fishing regulations set for lakes at the park in a Baraga County section of the [2019 DNR Fishing Guide (pg. 28)](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/2019MIFishingGuide-Feb26_647890_7.pdf).

Read previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnrstories&data=02%7C01%7C%7C903cfdbaa7ba487394b408d6141d788c%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C636718514130661496&sdata=U20ao62kbV%2Fedj3rgGgTm3EA2rfO8hjmbjT4bkWKjqs%3D&reserved=0). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnr&data=02%7C01%7C%7C903cfdbaa7ba487394b408d6141d788c%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C636718514130661496&sdata=TMCcnU%2FKDgJ3wtETsavS02wg5uONhGtA9r5za9kGouA%3D&reserved=0).

**/Note to editors:** Contact: John Pepin, Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Most of this piece was published previously as an Outdoors North column. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**Access:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176138/Access.jpg) An access site at Craig Lake State Park in Baraga County is shown.

[**Campers:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176139/Campers.jpg) Campers enjoy a sunny afternoon at Craig Lake State Park.

[**Creek:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176140/Creek.jpg) Nelligan Creek tumbles over boulders and flows slow around corners alongside the road into Craig Lake State Park.

[**Forest:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176142/Forest.jpg) Lush green forests invite visitors into the heart of Craig Lake State Park.

[**Pond:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176143/Pond.jpg) One of several ponds at Craig Lake State Park providing habitat for moose.

[**Trail:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176145/Trail.jpg) The National North Country Scenic Trail runs for more than 7 miles at Craig Lake State Park.

[**Tree:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176146/Tree.jpg) Bare tamarack trees wait for impending rain showers at Craig Lake State Park on a late November day.

[**Waterfall:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/03/19/file_attachments/1176148/Waterfall.jpg) A waterfall on Nelligan Creek is an inviting sight to visitors on their way in to Craig Lake State Park in Baraga County.**/**