**Showcasing the DNR: Celebrating a big birthday for Michigan’s largest state park**

*Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park turns 75*

**By JOHN PEPIN**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

In the early 1940s, a movement was underway to save from the woodsman’s ax the intact hemlock-hardwood stands in the western Upper Peninsula – in particular, those trees located in what was to become Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park.

In October 1941, an article in the Detroit Free Press predicted a dire future for those timberlands if they were not saved.

“At the present rate of cutting, the largest single stand of virgin hardwood in the United States, covering 250 square miles of rugged country in Gogebic and Ontonagon counties, known as the Porcupine Mountains, will be reduced to a tree-less stump-covered waste in less than 10 years,” the paper reported.

According to an article from 1943 in the Escanaba Daily Press, the Porcupine Mountains “had been under consideration as a public park since 1923, when (P.J.) Hoffmaster, as superintendent of state parks, surveyed the area and recommended that the state acquire at least one township for public use and to preserve the natural scenic beauty. In recent years, agitation has been growing to preserve the virgin timber with which the mountains are covered.”

In those days following World War II, the Porcupine Mountains – the highest range between New York’s Adirondacks and the Black Hills of Dakota – still were attracting thousands of tourists, despite limited access.

“A road now runs along Lake Superior from Silver City to the bottom of the range, and a short, stiff climb brings sightseers to the top of the escarpment which overlooks the lake,” the Free Press story said. “Besides the road to Lake of the Clouds, there is only one other access to the roadless wilderness area of the Porcupines. That is the country highway that leads to the mouth of the Black River and Black River Park, one of the outstanding scenic spots in Michigan.”

The newspaper outlined the aims of those conservation-minded people organized to help preserve the area.

“A vacation-ground whose delights are just beginning to be discovered will lose much of its appeal,” the newspaper said. “This is the dread prospect—unless this great area of privately-owned land can be brought into government ownership so that the timber may be harvested on a selective basis.”

A 1943 Michigan Department of Conservation (precursor to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources) proposal urging land purchases for preservation as a park described the hemlock-hardwoods of the Porcupine Mountains.

“Except for an area immediately adjacent to Lake Superior, the slopes are covered with virgin forest growth of the hardwood-hemlock type, with small scattered patches of old-growth white pine interspersed,” the report read. “Almost every phase of this type is present, varying from almost pure hardwoods, maple, birch and basswood on the upper slopes through varying degrees of hemlock mixtures, to the stands on the lower flats where hemlock predominates.”

These rugged mountains offer many places where hemlock cathedrals provide inspiring places for peace and reflection – nature’s beautiful churches – open to all.

In addition to its tremendous forest resources, the Porcupine Mountains is a place of waterfalls and forest lakes surrounded with evidence of an active geologic past, including an escarpment that separates a high, rocky plateau from the Big Carp River and Lake of the Clouds below.

Other evocative place names lending credence to the rugged and deep forest mountain character of this area known well to the American Indians of the region include Miscowawbic Peak, Manabezho Falls, Mirror Lake, Lost Creek Outpost and Green Mountain Peak.

“Michigan’s most significant post-war parks development was the establishment of Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in the northwestern Upper Peninsula,” according to “A Quick History of Michigan’s State Park System.” “In 1944, to counteract a proposal to commercially mine and log the land, the state allocated $1 million for the purchase of 64,000 acres in the Porcupine Mountains.”

[Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?type=SPRK&id=426) – Michigan’s largest state park at roughly 60,000 acres – was established in 1945. The park extends over portions of Ontonagon and Gogebic counties.

“Designated as Michigan’s first wilderness state park, the majority of the peak’s interior has been left undeveloped. However, by 1948 an extensive trail system had been created, including 10 trailside cabins designed by Ernest Hartwick,” the history stated.

The park gained the “wilderness” part of its title in 1972, after passage of the Wilderness and Natural Areas Act.

The 133-acre Lake of the Clouds is the park’s signature attraction, with other highlights including Summit Peak, a series of waterfalls on the Presque Isle River, Union Bay and the park’s extensive pathways and backwoods trails.

Celebrating this year’s 75th birthday of the park’s creation has been hampered by the novel coronavirus pandemic. Several planned activities have been canceled. However, a spirit of commemoration will be enjoyed and promoted by park staffers throughout the year.

“Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park is a crown jewel in Michigan’s system of 103 magnificent state parks,” said Ron Olson, chief of the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division. “Visitors come to the park to enjoy its beauty from all over the state, across the nation and from other countries too. Celebrating the park’s diamond anniversary is truly a great milestone for Michigan.”

In 1944, Michigan Gov. Harry F. Kelly returned from a trip to the Porcupine Mountains reportedly “enthusiastic” and “very happy” in having visited the wilderness purchase area that would establish the park, according to the Ironwood Daily Globe.

The newspaper reported that Kelly, along with his wife and aides, visited the east end of the park in February 1944, “going up into the mountains on the road to the old Carp Lake mine and also visiting a logging operation in the vicinity of the Nonesuch (Mine). His visit to the Presque Isle River valley today was for the purpose of seeing the proposed purchase area from the west.”

In those days, the park at the mouth of the Presque Isle River was a county park.

Kelly said the area, which today attracts about 300,000 visitors each year, was not only of interest to the state, but of national importance.

“The area is everything that I have been told it is,” he said.

For the latest information about park activities, check with the [park visitor center](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79133_79207_81180---,00.html) and the website of the [park’s friends group](https://porkies.org/).

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