**Showcasing the DNR: Saluting the North Country**

**By HEATHER JOHNSON DUROCHER**

**Trails and resources writer, Parks and Recreation Division**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

It’s midmorning, with the savory smells of sizzling bacon and campfire coffee lingering in the air as my campground neighbors sit at picnic tables finishing their breakfasts.

I realize I’d better get moving before the day’s forecasted humidity and full sun make my planned adventure unbearable.

Thankfully, I’m heading from my tent site to shaded trails for my 3-mile run. I’m eager to explore this new-to-me area. This will be my first time traveling the wooded dirt path winding through Straits State Park in the eastern Upper Peninsula.

These trails, I’ve recently learned, are not only routes crisscrossing this picturesque state park at the Straits of Mackinac in St. Ignace, they’re also part of the North Country National Scenic Trail, which spans 4,800 miles across eight states.

Another fun fact I’ve come to know about this trail: Michigan is home to 1,200 of those miles, which travel through state game areas, forests and parks. The state is home to 12 North Country National Scenic Trail chapters, all led by volunteers.

“Michigan holds the most miles than any of the eight states it traverses through,” said Kenny Wawsczyk, who serves as regional trail coordinator for Michigan with the [North Country Trail Association](https://northcountrytrail.org/).

Wawsczyk and his North Country Trail Association teammates are also here in the eastern U.P. during this late-August long weekend, taking part in the association’s [annual celebration](https://northcountrytrail.org/celebration/).

I’ve come here with several of my Michigan Department of Natural Resources colleagues to learn more about this national scenic trail in this part of Michigan.

We’re connecting with, and recognizing, the hundreds of volunteers who help maintain the thousands of miles of the North Country Trail throughout Michigan and in Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota and North Dakota.

“What really has stood out to me is the passion the volunteers have for this trail,” my colleague Sage Hegdal, a DNR trails specialist, said of attending the event. “It is so important for DNR staff to be among all the North Country Trail Association volunteers who work so hard to maintain the trail.

“Volunteers are critical partners in this trail’s existence, and it is so meaningful to talk to people from all eight states, learn how they got involved and why they do this work. I am sincerely moved by the number of people and volunteer hours that were recognized at the banquet.”

Over these four days, we’ll take part in educational sessions – I’m excited about one on hammock camping along the trail – and we’ll hear from several special speakers during our nightly dinners. But mostly, we’re hopping onto charter and school buses first thing in the morning and traveling to a variety of North Country Trail segments.

Of the hikes I’ve signed up for, I’m especially eager to check out the 9.5-mile trek on Saturday that begins at the [Mouth of the Two Hearted River State Forest Campground](https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?id=677&type=SFCG) two hours north in Luce County.

While I’ve spent a good amount of time in the U.P. since the time I was young, this will be my first time hiking this section of trail that hugs Lake Superior, continues through an area devastated by a forest fire a little over a decade ago, and runs alongside both the Big and Little Two Hearted rivers.

But first, the morning’s plan is to discover what awaits on the root-and-pine-needle-strewn paths not far from my campsite.

**Power of partnerships**

The North Country National Scenic Trail is America’s longest national scenic trail – at almost 5,000 miles, it’s nearly longer than the Appalachian and Pacific Crest national scenic trails combined.

In 2023, the trail became an official unit of the National Park Service, offering recognition and access to additional resources and funding opportunities; it also provides equal legal standing with the other trails and parks that the National Park Service administers.

The National Park Service and its nonprofit partner the North Country Trail Association, alongside hundreds of volunteers and dozens of partner organizations, including the DNR, strive to improve the trail so hikers have the best experience possible.

“Of these many partnerships, the Michigan DNR always stands out as a shining example of what partnership is meant to be,” said North Country Trail Association Executive Director Andrea Ketchmark. “DNR staff are innovative in their approach to projects and always look for opportunities to elevate the good work being done in the field. It's truly an honor to work beside them to make the North Country Trail the best it can be.”

The trail stretches over off-road miles on private property and public land managed by local, state and federal agencies.

“The North Country Trail is an excellent partner to help the DNR maintain and administer the trail through several state parks in the U.P.,” said Doug Rich, western U.P. district supervisor for the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division. “The value the NCT Association and its local chapters brings to the table is invaluable.”

In 2023, some 875 volunteers contributed 65,683 hours to trail improvements over the entire length of the trail.

"It’s amazing to see what our community can accomplish in just one year,” Ketchmark said of efforts in 2023, such as adding 58 new trail miles and installing and repairing 28 bridges, among numerous other maintenance projects.

“This trail is built and maintained one mile and one project at a time, and it’s only due to the dedication of our incredible volunteers, staff and partners that we see it go from vision to reality,” she said.

**‘Choosing your own adventure’**

Hiking the North Country Trail means you’ll be treated to a wide variety of landscapes, including wilderness, prairie, wetlands, mountains, farmland and urban communities. Last year 309 hikes were led by North Country Trail Association volunteers, with over 6,100 total participants.

“The North Country National Scenic Trail is unique in that it can provide an experience for anyone – from long-distance hikers to day users. And you don't have to consider yourself a ‘hiker’ to use the trail either,” Wawsczyk said. “You can follow paved pathways, sidewalks through a town or a natural-surface path through the woods adjacent to a city or in a super remote area away from civilization. Regardless, you're hiking the NCNST, choosing your own adventure.”

Here in Michigan, a large portion of the North Country National Scenic Trail is also known as the hiking route of the state’s Iron Belle Trail, which includes two routes – one for cycling, another for hiking – and totals more than 2,000 miles of trail between Belle Isle Park in Detroit and Ironwood in the western U.P. It is the longest state-designated trail in the nation.

The Iron Belle’s bicycling route, at 791 miles, utilizes existing multi-use trails that have been developed by local units of government. In the U.P., the bicycle route follows U.S. 2, a designated national bicycling route.

The hiking route of the Iron Belle, meanwhile, totals 1,273 miles and traverses the west side of the Lower Peninsula and borders Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula.

The DNR continues to work on completing the Iron Belle – the overall trail is about 74% finished, with the bicycle trail less developed than the hiking route – with plans underway to close gaps in the trail in Grand Blanc and Flint in Genessee County.

“The DNR is proud to work alongside the North Country Trail Association in caring for these many miles of trails that cross both peninsulas and the Mackinac Bridge,” said Tim Novak, state trails coordinator for the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division. “Together, our organizations are committed to providing world-class hiking for residents and visitors alike, whether they’re accessing a trail while at a state park – from the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in the western UP to Muskallonge, Straits and Tahquamenon Falls state parks to the east and numerous parks and state forest campgrounds all across the state – or when deep in the woods and traveling through towns on the Iron Belle Trail that extends more than 2,000 miles from Detroit to the far western tip of the U.P.”

The DNR also was a premier sponsor of this summer’s North Country Trail Association Celebration in St. Ignace.

“The Michigan DNR is a proud longtime North Country Trail Association Celebration sponsor and nonmotorized general fund grantor,” said Lee Maynard, nonmotorized trail grant coordinator for the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division. “…The North Country Trail Association’s long-time partnership, through their dedicated staff and volunteers, is priceless!”

**Keep moving forward**

Back at my campsite, I’ve changed into shorts and a tank top, laced up my orange running shoes, and I’m heading for the trail. I decide to let my feet and mood steer me.

I’ve glanced at a trail map, but don’t determine any specific route.

I head toward the other side of the lower campground, turning right at the road leading to the campground’s entrance and following this for just a bit before seeing the trailhead that I soon discover takes me through the woods and up an incline that at the top opens to an incredible view of the Mackinac Bridge.

I keep going, eventually reaching the upper campground, and I run the roadway there before retracing my steps in the woods, alongside towering oaks, maples and pines.

At one point, having reached a clearing, I realize I’m next to the visitor center just past the Mighty Mac, the one I’ve visited many, many times throughout my life. I never knew, though, that the North Country Trail was right here, accessible from the visitor center.

I continue, keeping a close eye on the dirt paths below my feet. The day is warming up and I feel sweat drop down my face, back and arms.

At a crossroads in the path, I pause to determine which way to go next. For no reason other than it looks good, I go to the right. A few moments later I am rewarded when I reach a tall staircase leading to yet another expansive view of Lake Huron and the Mackinac Bridge.

I end up talking with two women, also here for the North Country Trail Association Celebration but doing their own hike today like me. They’re walking down the steps as I ascend.

“Are you here for the North Country Trail event, too?” I ask as we cross paths.

“We are!” they smile at me, sharing that they’re sisters — Elizabeth is visiting from California, while Darcy lives here in Michigan — and they decided to spend the day together, just the two of them, before Elizabeth must head back home.

We chat for a few more minutes, about the trails, best running shoes, the stunning weather we’ve been having, before they continue their hike. I stand atop the stairway, soaking up the view by myself.

Two couples join me at the top and as they begin to try to take a selfie, I offer to take their photo.

“Oh, that would be amazing! Thank you so much,” one of them says, handing me their phone.

I ask if they’ve seen the other view of the bridge, the one I saw earlier in my run, and when they shake their heads no, I tell them how to get there, if they’re interested.

They head down the stairs and turn right, toward the next view.

A breeze rustles through the leaves and cools my sticky-sweaty skin, leaving temporary goosebumps in its wake. The trees sway. I turn my face toward the sun. I can’t stop smiling.

Learn more about Michigan’s thousands of miles of trails, and access trail maps and other resources, at [Michigan.gov/DNRTrails](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/places/state-trails/pure-mi-trails). For volunteer opportunities and trail information, [visit the North Country Trail Association website](https://northcountrytrail.org/).

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