

OUTDOOR CHOICES: Hiking Among Giants: Discovering N. Michigan's Ancient Forests

BY ERIN FANNING

On a muggy May morning, I climbed a steep hill on Hartwick Pines' Au Sable River Trail. Spiderwebs clung to my legs, tagging me as the first hiker of the day, and spiky ferns fluttered in a gentle breeze. Towering pines blocked the hazy sun.

Known for its 49-acre old-growth forest, Hartwick Pines State Park, just outside of Grayling, hosts a plethora of activities from a logging museum to camp-

ing to picnicking to even making your own snowshoes. For me, though, Hartwick has always been synonymous with trails.

With about 21 miles of pathways, Hartwick's most popular route, The Old Growth Trail, winds 1.25 miles through a grove of soaring white pines. At the top of a hill, hikers pass by the log Hartwick Pines Chapel, a quiet retreat, reflecting the meditative quality of the forest.

Although Hartwick Pines boasts Northern Lower Michigan's most famous

old-growth forest, the area is also home to smaller tracts of aging giants, offering solitude and a walk back in time. So after visiting Hartwick, be sure to check out the following places.

Roscommon Red Pines

The 1.4-mile trail twisting through this cluster of old-growth red pines, about 8 miles east of Roscommon, feels like a secret. A hush has settled here, so complete that one can hear the beat of wings high over-

head. At only 34 acres, this slice of the Au Sable State Forest may be small, but it is one of the best places to view these giant trees, not only in Michigan but also in the Central Lowlands, an area that extends from Saskatchewan to New York to central Texas. (For more information: www.michigan.gov/dnr/places/natural-areas/roscommon-red-pines.)

Besser Natural Area

Located about 14 miles north of Alpena, the Besser

Natural Area blends virgin white pines with sandy beaches and a ghost village creating a truly unique outing. A 1-mile trail meanders beneath pines and passes by what remains of the Village of Bell. Sitting just off the bay, the Portland, a shipwreck from 1877, provides kayakers and snorkelers an easily accessible site for exploration. (For more information: www.michigan.gov/dnr/places/natural-areas/besser-natural-area.)

Oden Island Nature Preserve

In 2022, the Old-Growth Forest Network added this 50-acre preserve on Crooked Lake's Oden Island, about 10 miles from Petoskey, to its list of protected woods. A 1-mile trail explores the Preserve's eastern side, and although small, the area almost begs one to move at a slower pace, resting on the lakeside benches and contemplating the age of the surrounding hemlocks, pines, and maples. (For more information: landtrust.org/explore/oden-island-nature-preserve/.)

At the end of my Hartwick hike on that May morning, I encountered a group of senior trekkers, some marching along, others moving more slowly, leaning on walking sticks. Most smiled as we strolled past each other. A few seemed mesmerized by their surroundings, staring up at the soaring white pines or surveying the woods with binoculars glued to their eyes.

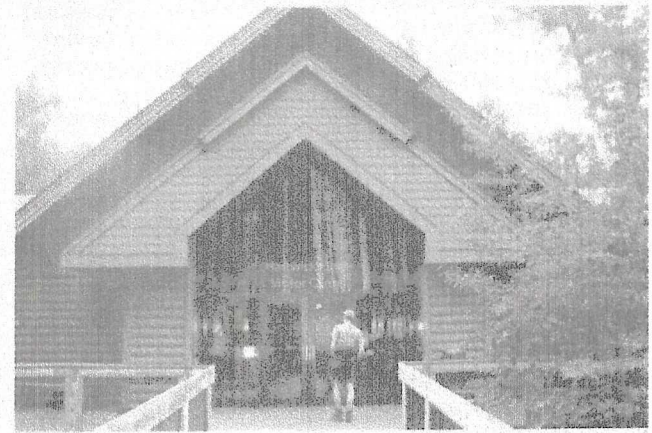
There's an agelessness to a ramble in the woods, an appreciation for all ages, made even greater by a walk among ancient trees. One hopes that these giants will continue to thrive, offering a priceless treasure for generations to come, and with careful stewardship that can become a reality. (For more information: www.michigan.gov/dnr/places/v-centers/hartwick.)

Author Bio: Erin Fanning, author of Mountain Biking Michigan, shares her biking and kayaking adventures at michiganbiking.com. You can find more about her writing at erin-fanning.com.



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The Visitor Center is a must for first-time visitors. Visitor Center highlights include wildlife exhibits.

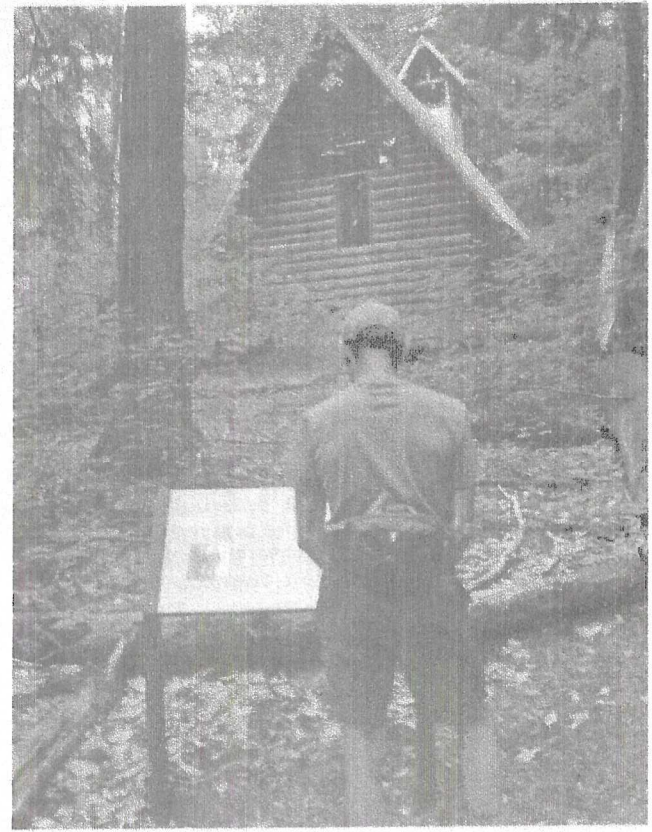


Photo: Oden Island Nature Preserve