

Hidden in plain sight

**Highlighting
the Northern
Highland-American
Legion State
Forest.**



Established in 1925 to protect the headwaters of the Wisconsin, Flambeau and Manitowish rivers, the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest occupies more than 225,000 acres in Vilas, Oneida and Iron counties.

Ted J. Rulseh

Winding down the road from the cottage toward Lake Tomahawk, I'm almost on the bumper of the car ahead, and I force myself to back off to a safe, respectful distance. It's our first day at the cabin we rent on Birch Lake, just on the edge of the Northern Highland-American Legion (NH-AL) State Forest, and I'm on a bait run, eager to finish the errand and go fishing for walleyes.

It's always like this on our family's visits to a cottage near Hazelhurst. It takes a little while for my inner flywheel, racing from weeks of hectic work life, to feel the gentle pull of the north country

and slow down. The process starts when I get back to the lake and sit on the cabin deck, rigging my fishing rods.

The lake itself is peaceful, all the more so because I know it's part of the larger entity known as the NH-AL. Part of the forest's charm is that you can be in it and not even know you're there. I didn't know for the first few years of our two decades of annual week-long trips to Birch Lake.

There's no big, splashy welcome when you enter the forest — just the occasional unobtrusive sign along this road, or that one. And yet, if you're in the wooded lake area of



The forest offers diverse recreational opportunities, such as fishing, camping, canoeing, hiking, bird watching, snowmobiling, biking and hunting, as well as the chance to simply sit quietly and enjoy its natural beauty.

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eastern Iron, central Vilas or northern Oneida county, there's a good chance you're in the NH-AL. In a sense the forest is as much an idea as a place.

Make it what you like

The wonder, the genius of it, is that you can have almost any kind of outdoor experience you want within the wide sprawl of the NH-AL. It's not like Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area, where you camp and paddle — take it or leave it.

I did camp and paddle in the forest, when I was a little younger and more tolerant of sleeping on the ground and packing up wet gear after a thunderstorm on the last night in the tent, but mainly I've enjoyed the forest in other ways, most often with the Birch Lake cottage as the base of operations.

I've fished its larger lakes from the comfort of a 16-foot boat, and its smaller ones from a rowboat or canoe. I've bicycled for miles down deeply shaded town roads, and on the crunchy packed gravel of the 18-mile Bearskin Trail.

I've hiked woodland and lakefront



One lure of the NH-AL is that for generations it has provided families with a quiet wild land experience.

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The NH-AL State Forest provides employment and supports the economic well-being of rural and urban communities alike through the production of forest products we use daily.

trails, easy and rugged. I've snorkeled small, clear lakes, spying on bass and bluegills around sunken snags, sliding like an otter over the smooth, barkless trunks of long-fallen pines.

It's a near-miracle that all this — and much more — is available with such ease. You can be shopping in Boulder Junction or Lake Tomahawk and, half an hour later, be in a canoe on a tiny lake, surrounded by public woods, flicking a bass popper to a bed of lily pads while fragrant wood smoke rises from someone's campsite down the shoreline.

You can bike past a pond along a back road, stop to rest on its shore, and ache for a float tube or fishing kayak, and know that you could go to town and pick one up and be back, fully equipped, in a couple of hours.

If you want to spend a week camping on a lake with a shoreline as unspoiled as you could find in Canada or remote reaches of Upper Michigan, you can. If you'd rather pass a few days shopping, and return to a house-keeping cabin to watch the sunset and listen to the loons, you can do that, too, within the borders of the NH-AL.

Richly accessible

From my small corner of the forest it's hard to comprehend its embarrassment of riches. It covers 225,000 acres —

that's 351 square miles, surrounding one of the world's highest concentrations of lakes, 930 of them, plus 250 miles of rivers and creeks.

It's not a monolithic block of state-owned land. Instead, its public parcels are stitched in between and around private homes and cottages, and enfolding a few small communities. So you can drive or bike a forest road and one moment pass an intersection marked with the classic clusters of white-arrow signs nailed to poles or tree trunks, pointing the way to family vacation cottages, and a moment later come upon a boat launch on a lake with no homes along its shoreline, only mixed woods accented with the graceful white trunks of birches.

You can pass an afternoon scouting for mushrooms in the woods or picking wild raspberries along a trail, and within 10 minutes be at The Corner Store west of Sayner, take a hot shower, and then choose the flavor for a scoop of ice cream to sit atop a sugar cone.

While wilderness, for all its necessity, wonder and enchantment, can be a bit forbidding, there is nothing intimidating about the NH-AL. The lakes, of course are the key attraction, and they are eminently accessible. There are more than 100 boat launches (not counting private ones at bars and resorts), nine public swimming beaches,

and eight picnic areas, most near water.

For those interested in more than day trips, the forest offers 18 family campgrounds, plus two outdoor group camping areas. Here again, you can choose your experience. Most campgrounds are small: two-thirds have fewer than 50 campsites, and the two largest have about 100 each. Just over one-third of all the forest's campsites (353 in four campgrounds) are served by showers and flush toilets. The rest are rustic with only basic amenities, such as hand-pumped water and pit toilets. Four campgrounds include sites with barrier-free access for people with disabilities.

People looking for more private experiences can choose from 131 canoe and remote-reservable campsites scattered throughout the forest. Backpack camping is allowed by permit, and deer hunter camping is seasonally available.

Getting around in the forest is easy in any season, even without the help of highways and town roads. The forest has five interpretive nature trails totaling nearly eight miles, three designated hiking trails totaling 18.5 miles, 32 miles of mountain bike trails, 70 miles of cross-country ski trails and about 400 miles of snowmobile trails.

Hundreds of miles of logging roads and non-designated trails are open for hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking. Some unimproved roads are open to licensed motor vehicles.

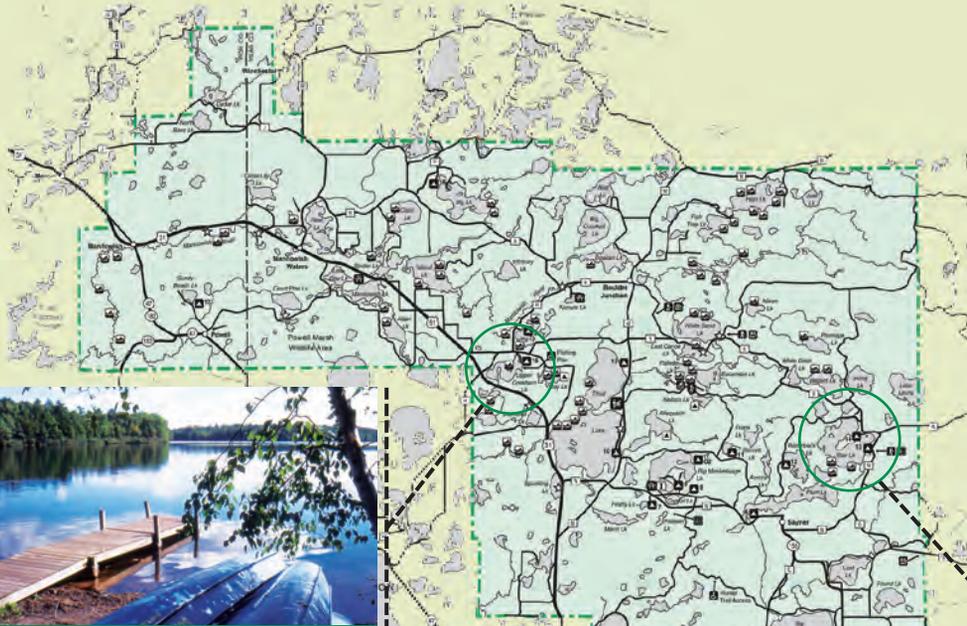
Keep your eyes open while in the forest and you can see almost any creature native to Wisconsin. Fifty species of mammals live there, including black bear, badger, red and gray squirrels, red foxes, porcupines, raccoons, fishers, pine martens, beavers, otters, and, of course, abundant white-tailed deer. Birders, in a given year, may see some 250 species — fully three-fourths of those recorded in the state. Dozens of pairs of bald eagles and ospreys and hundreds of pairs of loons nest around the lakes.

If the rustic life isn't for you, there are still plenty of mom-and-pop resorts scattered on the lakes. Several hundred dollars will get you a week in a nicely kept two- or three-bedroom cottage, most often with a rowboat included, a beach for swimming, a fire pit and a deck. Once there, you can choose simply to enjoy the lake you're on, or explore your surroundings.

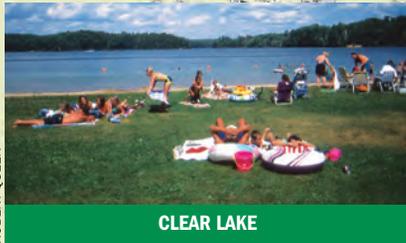
The southern and western regions of

NORTHERN HIGHLAND-AMERICAN LEGION STATE FOREST

To help plan your trip to the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest, visit dnr.wi.gov and search NHAL.



UPPER GRESHAM LAKE



CLEAR LAKE



STAR LAKE



the forest are somewhat more developed and domestic. The central portions, around Star Lake and Sayner in Vilas County, comprise the big woods, where a turn off a county highway may soon lead you to a gravel road, on which you might drive for miles and see few signs of civilization.

A triumph of foresight

A large attraction of the forest — it draws some two million visitors a year — is its diversity. It was established in 1925 to safeguard the ecosystems of the Wisconsin, Flambeau and Manitowish river headwaters. It was most recently

expanded in 2009 when \$2 million from the state's Stewardship Fund went to purchase 1,100 acres bordering the Ontonagon River and the Ottawa National Forest in Michigan's upper peninsula.

The forest was never intended solely as a wilderness or wildlife refuge: it contributes to the well-being of the environment, the economy and communities. Biologically, the NH-AL includes a wide range of forest types and habitats. Most of it is young to middle-aged forest (20- to 80-year-old growth), although a few areas have old-growth characteristics.

Economically, the forest supports numerous forms of recreation: from fishing and hunting, to the "silent sports" of bicycling, canoeing, kayaking and hiking, to motorized activities like snowmobiling and boating. Visitors inject millions of dollars each year into communities like Star Lake, Sayner, Boulder Junction, St. Germain, Minocqua, Woodruff and Manitowish Waters.

Culturally, the forest is important to the region's Ojibwe tribes (known to themselves as Anishinaabe or to others as Chippewa). It lies in ancestral Ojibwe homelands where the tribes exercise treaty-based hunting, fishing and gath-

ering rights.

Significantly, the NH-AL is also managed for timber harvesting for forest products. The emphasis in recent years is on sustainable forestry, defined as using practices that meet the environmental, economic, recreational and social needs of current generations while enabling the forest to fill the same role in the future.

As stated in the NH-AL Master Plan, "The enduring productivity of the NH-AL forest has long been essential to the stability and growth of the local and state economies. Thirty percent of north-central Wisconsin's regional economic output and 27 percent of the region's jobs can be tied to either wood products or tourism." This makes sustainable management of the forest integral to local economic health.

Crown jewels

The NH-AL is big enough to contain some grand features: the Willow Flowage (which regrettably I have not visited) and Powell Marsh State Wildlife Area (which I have).

The 6,400-acre Willow Flowage gives visitors a sense of remoteness and isolation, even though it lies just a dozen miles south of the tourist hub of Minocqua. The state owns 16,000 acres on the flowage, which wraps around 117 islands and is surrounded by swamps, bogs and other watery lowlands.

For those who want to bring their own boats, there are six public landings. Thirty-five semi-primitive water-access campsites are available.

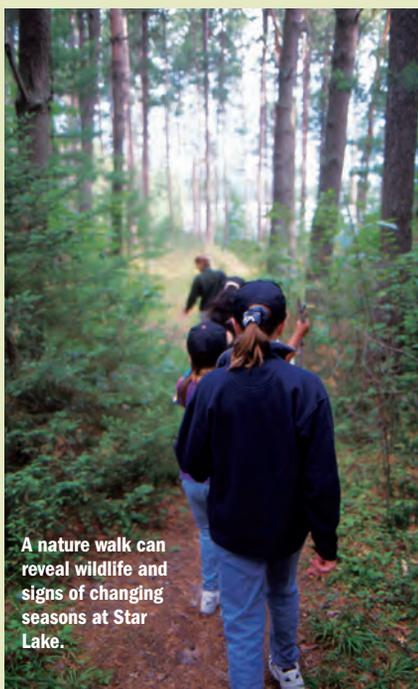
The 4,096-acre Powell Marsh, two miles south of Manitowish Waters, is a rich bird and wildlife area, managed to preserve its open peatland complex and its variety of wetland types and plant communities. Biologists use a combination of prescribed fire, hand-cutting, mowing and shearing, along with changes in water levels, to limit the growth of shrubs and trees and increase the abundance of grasses and sedges.

The best way to experience the marsh is on its 8.5-mile trail, open to hikers and mountain bikers and to cross-country skiers. It's a musical



Camping is a great way to get up close and experience the NH-AL at Star Lake.

ROBERT QUEEN



A nature walk can reveal wildlife and signs of changing seasons at Star Lake.

ROBERT QUEEN

place in spring, when visitors can hear the calls of the wood frog, American toad and spring peeper, along with the less-common northern leopard frog, eastern gray tree frog, green frog, western chorus frog and mink frog. An 1,800-acre refuge in the marsh, closed to the public from September through December, protects waterfowl and wildlife from hunting and other disturbances.

The little things

For me, the lure of the NH-AL lies not in its high-profile features but in the little things, natural or not, that one simply happens upon, or discovers while exploring. There's the little God's Country Ceramics shop on Plum Lake where you can buy coffee mugs and dinnerware with your favorite lake painted on them (if you don't find your lake, they'll make a special order).

And one has to love the general stores. A favorite of mine (before it

closed a few years ago) was the Muskie Lake Store, about two miles from the Birch Lake cottage. Besides a few grocery items and a small fishing tackle section, it offered take-out fried chicken that made a tasty meal when none of us felt like cooking.

More typical is the Star Lake Store which, as its advertising claims, has "a little bit of everything." Besides groceries and beverages, you can buy furniture, clothing (including souvenir Star Lake hats and shirts), gas, bait and tackle, northwoods gifts, and handmade soaps from Star Lake Soap, LLC. The place is also the post office and rents boats.

Of course, the real adventures are found off the main roads. My son Todd and I, snorkeling the clear water of little Bird Lake near Lake Tomahawk, found a sunken tangle of brush and logs swarming with rock bass, bluegills and largemouth bass.

The next day we snorkeled in again, flipping at least a quarter-mile from the access site, this time carrying a fishing rod and a box of night crawlers. Standing in the shallows and casting to the timber, we caught (and released) one fish after another.

On another small lake that I spotted beside a county highway, I caught (and also released) the biggest largemouth of my life — 21 inches. The landing at the lake was just good enough to accommodate the 14-foot boat I used then.

Wildlife sightings are too numerous to mention, but I especially remember driving with my daughter, Sonya, from the Birch Lake cottage toward town, and coming over a rise to find a black bear cub standing in the middle of the road. When we stopped, it galloped off into the woods. And then there was the time when, biking down a town road, I surprised a badger inspecting a fresh roadkill. It half-waddled and half-flowed across the asphalt to the ditch.

If you added up all the time I spend in the forest in a given year, it might come to two weeks, maybe three. The more I discover, the more reasons I have to go back, but the more thinly my attention is spread. One thing is certain: time I spend there soothes as little else can. After a run of days in the forest, I'm the one in the car dawdling along the curvy road to town, while some impatient soul rides my back bumper. 

Ted J. Rulseh writes from Manitowoc.