



## Wisconsin, naturally

### ABLEMAN'S GORGE STATE NATURAL AREA



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**Notable:** Geology enthusiasts are drawn to Ableman's Gorge for its scenic qualities, but perhaps more so as a small-scale model for interpreting the geologic history of the entire Baraboo Range. Also referred to as the "Upper Narrows," the gorge was cut by the Baraboo River through quartzite, sandstone and conglomerate, revealing a cross-section through the north range. The cliffs and rocky slopes rise 200 feet above the floodplain to form a long, L-shaped wall, the southern leg of which amounts to a mural depicting some of Wisconsin's most interesting geologic past. Erosional forces and a former quarrying operation have re-exposed the long buried layers of rock. Here, the younger, half-billion-year-old Cambrian sandstone is revealed on both the north and south sides of the much older Precambrian Baraboo quartzite. The quartzite originated as sandy layers of water-born sediment in an ancient sea that was subsequently metamorphosed from sandstone into an even harder layer and then folded by tectonic forces. The quartzite now lies vertically in the gorge and exhibits cliff faces with cross-bedding and ripple marks formed by moving water. During the later Cambrian Period, the ancient quartzite island was buried by sand — now sandstone — transported by wind and water and deposited in layers. Today, the cool, moist, north-facing slopes shelter plants more typical of northern Wisconsin, including hemlock, yellow birch, mountain maple and Canada yew. The area is widely used for geology research and a plaque at the adjacent Van Hise Rock wayside honors University of Wisconsin-Madison geologist Charles Van Hise, who formulated some of his principles of structural deformation and metamorphism here. A wonderful interpretation of the gorge's geology is found in Robert Dott's and John Attig's book, "Roadside Geology of Wisconsin." The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program provided funding for the acquisition of this land.

**How to get there:** From the intersection of State Highways 136 and 154 in Rock Springs, go west on Highway 136 one mile to a parking area on the left just before the Baraboo River bridge. Direct access to the quarry's exposed rock is afforded by parking in the pull-off on the east side of Highway 136 across from the bottling plant and then crossing the highway to the DNR gate north of the plant. A trail begins there and leads to Van Hise Rock. Visit [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov) and search "Ableman's Gorge" for a map and more information.

