



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER

MEMORANDUM

TO: Michigan Wilderness Supporters and Interested Parties
FROM: Tyler Barron – Environmental Law and Policy Center
SUBJECT: Opportunities to Designate Four National Wilderness Areas in Michigan
DATE: November 4th, 2021

Over the past three years, Congress has designated new National Wilderness areas in several states across the country. Consequently, Michigan and other Midwestern states may have an opportunity to secure valuable new National Wilderness areas long considered for federal designation. In anticipation of this opportunity, ELPC with Michigan partners have reviewed past proposals to designate new Wilderness areas in Michigan and have discussed potential locations with conservation leaders. Together, we have identified three new areas and one addition to an existing Wilderness area in Michigan's Upper Peninsula that meet federal standards for Wilderness designation: (1) the Ehlco area, (2) the Trap Hills, (3) Norwich Plains, and (4) the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness Addition. Together, the Ehlco area, the Trap Hills, and Norwich Plains would create a nearly contiguous National Wilderness area of almost 50,000 acres. This large expanse of protected public land would be adjacent to and connected with the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. Likewise, the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness Addition would add nearly 2,000 acres of unique pristine land to the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness, creating a total contiguous Wilderness area of almost 17,000 acres.

EXISTING NATIONAL WILDERNESS AREAS IN MICHIGAN

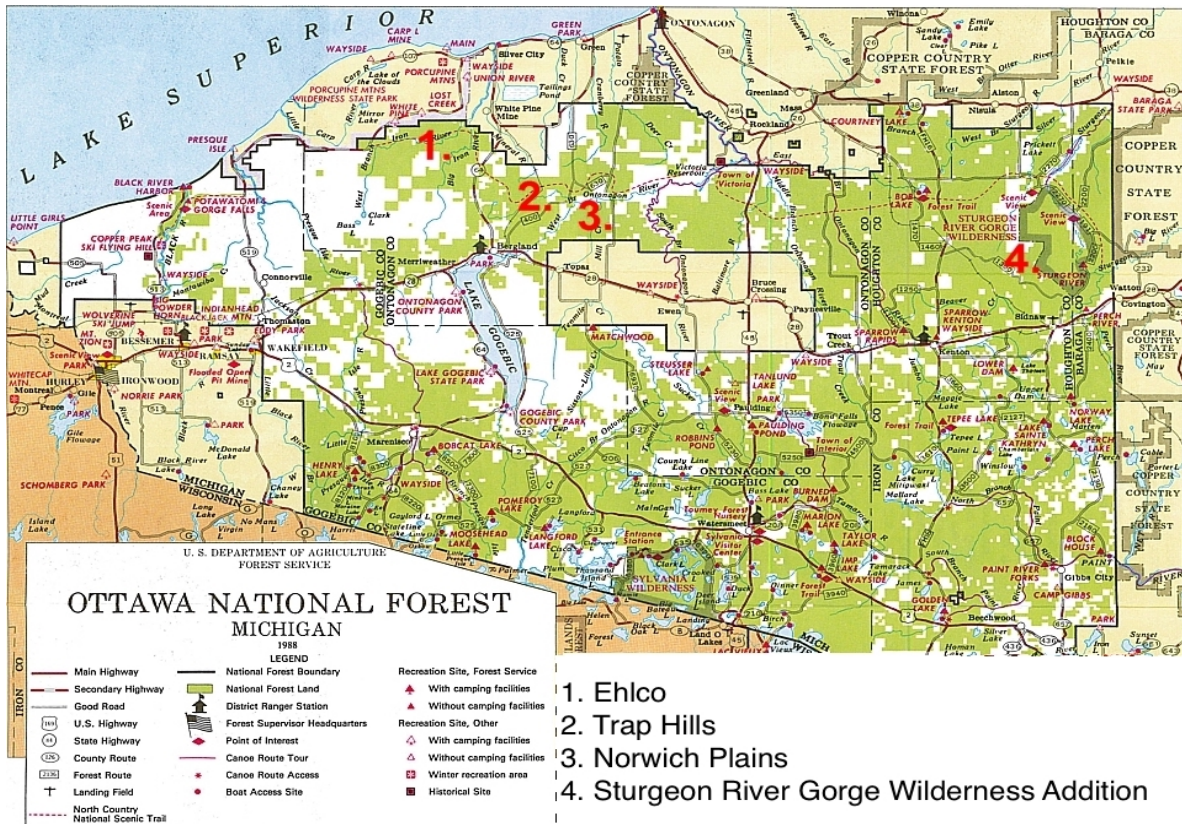
There are currently sixteen National Wilderness areas in Michigan. Four of these areas were designated under the Wilderness Act of 1964, ten were designated under the Michigan Wilderness Act of 1987, and two were separately designated in 2009 and 2014. Ten of these areas are managed by the U.S. Forest Service, three are managed by the National Park Service, and three are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There are two National Wilderness areas in the Lower Peninsula, ten areas in the Upper Peninsula, and four collections of islands. Descriptions of Michigan's sixteen existing National Wilderness areas are included in the attached document.

TOP CANDIDATES FOR NEW NATIONAL WILDERNESS DESIGNATION IN MICHIGAN

Conversations with Michigan Wilderness professionals and research on possible additions to Michigan's existing Wilderness focused on four sites: the Ehlco area, the Trap Hills, Norwich Plains, and the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness Addition. These areas have been considered for Wilderness designations in the past, and they remain strong candidates today. Each area is described below in detail.

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The Ehlco Area
Ontonagon County, immediately south of the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park

The Ehlco area is located in Ontonagon County in the Bergland Ranger District of the Ottawa National Forest. This 16,000-acre area is just south of the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park and was purchased in small parcels mostly by the U.S. Forest Service from the Edward Hines Lumber Company (hence, “Ehlco”) between 1937 and 1969.

After decades of resource extraction in the early to mid-1900s, the Ehlco area has had over fifty years to return to a natural, untrammled state. The Forest Service recommended Ehlco for Wilderness evaluation in 2003, and it remains a valuable candidate today.

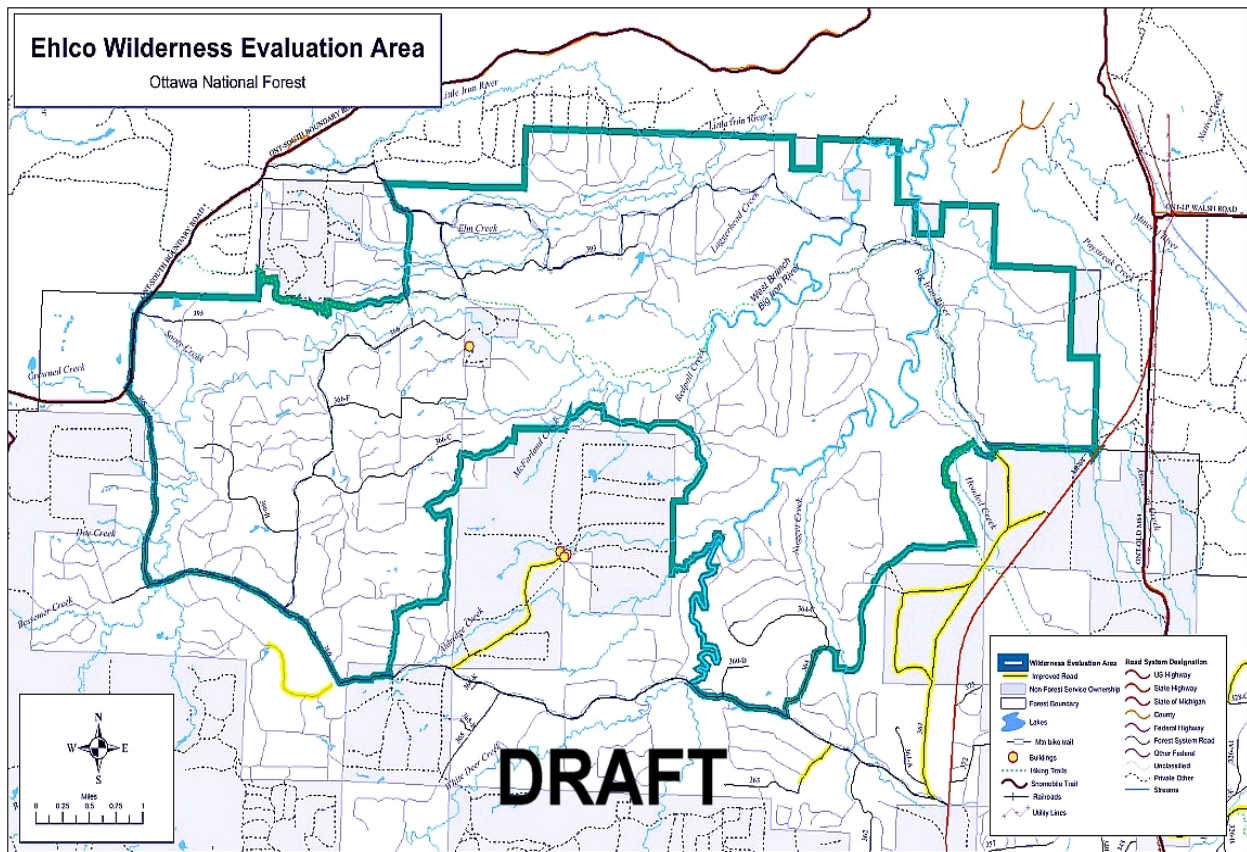
Ehlco consists of a young to mid-successional forest containing upland hardwoods, lowland conifers, lowland hardwoods, and smaller numbers of hemlock, aspen, and paper birch. Its topography is gently sloping and ranges from nearly level to moderately steep in its larger river drainage systems—the West Branch Big Iron River and the Big Iron River. Roughly half of Ehlco’s area consists of wet drainways, depressions, low-lying areas, and floodplains with fine-textured soils. Undergrowing vegetation varies with soil and tree species. The vegetation includes ferns, sedges, and spring ephemerals as well as a variety of shrubs, tree seedlings, and forest floor mosses.

Ehlco is also home to an abundance of diverse wildlife. White-tailed deer, black bears, and fishers are common sights along with numerous bird species frequently found in the Ottawa region. At least one wolf pack claims Ehlco as its territory. The low road density in conjunction with the

proximity of the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park provides a remote habitat ideal for wolves and similar species.

Overall, Ehlco is a low-use area. Beyond some human activity resulting from intermittent hunting and hiking on Ehlco’s 12 miles of the North Country National Scenic Trail there is little recreation in the area. For example, Ehlco’s rivers and creeks are not navigable. While water levels tend to rise in the spring, the waterways can become nearly dry rock beds in the summer. There are also two small inholdings in the area. The first inholding has a private dwelling in the semi-private core of the area and requires access. The second inholding does not have any dwellings.

Today, Ehlco is a strong candidate for National Wilderness designation because it is expansive, largely free from non-native vegetation, natural, secluded, and almost completely federally owned. The designation of Ehlco along with the Trap Hills and Norwich Plains would create a nearly contiguous Wilderness area of almost 50,000 acres. This large expanse of protected public land would be adjacent to and connected with the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park.



The Trap Hills

Ontonagon County, southwest of Rockland, MI, near the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park

The Trap Hills are located in Ontonagon County between US-45 and M-64. They are about 20 miles southeast of the Porcupine Mountains. The area has generally resisted human disturbance due to its rugged landscape and harsh climate. During Michigan’s mid-1800s copper boom, human

presence in the Trap Hills briefly increased; however, the area's residents moved out when the mines closed, and little evidence of related human activity remains in the area today.

This overall lack of human intrusion has resulted in a pristine and nearly undisturbed habitat for a diverse wildlife population. Common species like black bears, white-tailed deer, beavers, and raccoons as well as rarer species like timber wolves, peregrine falcons, northern goshawks, and wood turtles call the Trap Hills their home. The area also features a diverse array of flora such as boreal and northern hardwood forests, cedar swamps, and lichen-encrusted cliffs as well as less common plant species like fairy bells and Braun's holly fern. According to the Forest Service, the Trap Hills are "comprised of large tracts of undisturbed forest, rugged slopes and ridges, streams, waterfalls and ponds, [and they offer] solitude and [a] sense of remoteness that is unique in the Great Lakes area." In addition, the highest sheer cliff in Michigan is found in the Trap Hills, boasting visibility of up to 40 miles and views of some of Michigan's most spectacular scenery.

The vast majority of the Trap Hills is government-owned and within the Ottawa National Forest. Much of it is already located in a non-motorized area. Although there is a small collection of roads used to access the trails and a few motorized trails, one can easily find the remoteness and serenity that a Wilderness designation requires. With a motivated constituency and a valuable landscape, Wilderness experts in Michigan argue that the Trap Hills could be an immediate, viable option for National Wilderness designation.

For more than twenty years, there have been conversations about protecting the roughly 25,000 acres of the Trap Hills. The Trap Hills Conservation Alliance and Northwoods Wilderness Recovery have previously advocated the designation of the area as Wilderness. However, due to growing concerns over the threat of potential logging, including the Trap Hills in the National Wilderness Preservation System is now more urgent than ever.



Image: Cascade Creek and Michigan's highest sheer cliff

Norwich Plains

Ottawa National Forest, immediately northeast of Bergland, MI

Norwich Plains is located in the Ottawa National Forest. The area was identified in the 1986 Forest Plan Roadless Inventory through the RARE II process, but it was not recommended for Wilderness designation in that plan. Timber sales activity and road construction primarily from the early 1980s affected small pieces of Norwich Plains and weakened the appearance and integrity that it needed for Wilderness designation.

Today, however, most of Norwich Plains is a prime candidate for protection since the past 34 years have given it time to revert back to its wild state. It now consists mostly of second-growth forest mixed with areas of old-growth timber, beaver ponds, meadows, and several miles of trout streams. The area is mainly mature aspen, but there is a diverse range of habitats throughout the area. Norwich Plains now has roughly 8,000 acres of remote land suitable for a Wilderness designation and has significant potential to become more unique ecologically as its forests mature. Further, designating Norwich Plains could facilitate the expansion of old-growth forest found in the nearby Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park.

Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness Addition

Ottawa National Forest, adjacent to the southwest corner of the existing Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness

The Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness was designated by the Michigan Wilderness Act of 1987. It consists of 16,744 acres of flat to rolling uplands largely covered by forests of northern hardwoods, pines and other conifers, and aspen. The Sturgeon River has cut through these uplands to form the Sturgeon River Gorge—10 miles long, averaging 1 mile wide and 300 feet deep—and the spectacular Sturgeon River Falls. While the Sturgeon River Gorge benefits from Wilderness designation, roughly 2,000 acres of wild Ottawa National Forest land on the Wilderness' southwestern border lack the same protection.

The proposed 2,000-acre area's value to local wildlife and its suitability for remote recreation make it a strong candidate for designation. Almost half of the area consists of beaver ponds, wet meadows formerly occupied by beaver ponds, and wetland forests. While the wetlands and wet soils do not create favorable conditions for high-value timber, they do provide indispensable habitat for waterfowl and other wetland species. Additionally, moose and moose sign can be seen frequently in the area, indicating the likely presence of a small population of moose separated from Michigan's main herd in counties farther east.

The area offers visitors ample opportunities for off-trail recreation such as hiking and hunting, allowing them immersion in nature's remoteness and solitude. Moreover, this addition to the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness would expand the existing protected area to nearly 19,000 acres of contiguous Wilderness, compounding the benefits of its designation. Overall, this area provides an essential complement to Sturgeon River Gorge and deserves protection under the Wilderness Act.

