

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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A Crown Jewel

Northern Highland State Forest just that

By Dick Ellis

As the largest state property resting “at the top of the state”, a visitor’s guide from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) showcases the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest as one of the crown jewels of Wisconsin’s public lands. Lakes and rivers, according to the literature, are one of the primary features that draw two million people to the forest annually to “fish, boat, swim, canoe and kayak.” Make that two million and six.

My wife, Lori, daughter Taylor, nephew Austin Estrada and I joined Grandpa and Grandma Dick and Mariel Henske of Manitowish Waters on a canoe and fishing trip July 23 on the Trout River within the Northern Highland. A canoe route map also provided by the DNR recommended six other canoe trips within the forest that included campsites and put-in and take-out locations before we decided on a shorter journey that would take only one half-day to complete from start to finish. With less than three actual hours on the water, the isolation and scenery we experienced along with excellent fishing and encounters with wildlife verified the forest’s coronation as Crown Jewel.

According to the visitor’s guide, in 1925 the Wisconsin leg-



Dick and Mariel Henske of Manitowish Waters lead the way and Lori and Taylor Ellis of New Berlin follow on the Trout River last week within the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.

islature created the public forest to preserve the headwaters of the Wisconsin, Manitowish and Flambeau Rivers, once a region of dense towering white pines stripped by logging near the turn of the century. Retreating glaciers 10,000 years ago carved the land’s structure and formed the forest’s unique hills, lakes boul-

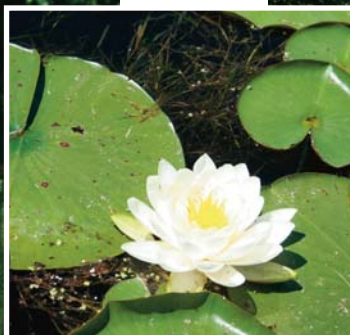
ders and wetlands.

Although our group would have no need for campgrounds, 18 family campgrounds with 865 campsites are found within the forest, with boat landing provided at most. After dropping three canoes at a landing point on the Trout off of Highway 51 and leaving our party with three canoes and the es-

entials including fishing equipment, Dick Henske and I meandered on logging roads in two vehicles several miles to what would be our take-out point within the forest. We left one truck in the old clear-cut and a marker on shore so that at the conclusion of our trip several hours later we wouldn’t glide right by.



LEFT: A scenic journey, good fishing, isolation, and ample encounters with wildlife including bald eagles and these turtles sunning themselves on a log on the Trout River mark a canoe trip last week within the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest. CENTER: Thousands of water lilies in full bloom add to the scenic canoe/fishing trip on the Trout River last week within the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.



Mariel Henske temporarily brings aboard a nice largemouth bass taken from the slop on a spinner bait by her husband, Dick during a scenic canoe trip on the Trout River last week.

At any time, there may be 30 to 40 active timber sales in progress in the forest. Don't be surprised, according to the state, to see active logging taking place, with sales providing necessary wood-based products while ensuring a healthy, sustainable forest that visitors can use and enjoy for many years to come.

We returned in the other truck to find that the ladies and teenagers had us ready for launch and a unique and relaxing afternoon in northern Wisconsin. Experienced canoeists Dick and Mariel led the way, with Lori and Taylor in close pursuit. Unfortunately for Austin, he was placed with me in the trailing canoe. Not fitting even a loose definition of "canoeist", I introduced my nephew over the first hour to every fallen tree and boulder on every tight turn that the Trout had to offer with a not so subtle ramming. "Anyone up for changing partners?" was a question Austin offered up frequently.

There were many such twists and turns on the Trout, adding to the river's personality and our feeling of being in the wilderness. The Trout was extremely narrow throughout our early navigation, with overhanging trees and babbling water running over gravel and around boulders and logs adding to our experience. We could have used another few inches of water, and on

several occasions were forced to abandon the canoes to negotiate shallow gravel bars or fallen trees to continue the journey. There are worse things than feeling cold river water on tired feet as old tennis shoes crunch against gravel and you pull the canoe through to deeper water. Actually, there are not many simple things in life better.

Soon, the narrow river led to natural widenings and "pool lakes" averaging just several hundred yards in length with water depths at three to five feet. The water was adequate to sustain what was apparently from our fishing action very good populations of gamefish. With spinner baits working the pools on medium tackle, Lori landed a beautifully marked undersize musky after a great battle and Dick Henske won his tussle with a largemouth of several pounds.

Beautiful lily pads with white flowering blossoms by the thousands, each it seemed with a visiting worker bee adorned these pools and added the shade and ambush points that the gamefish lay under waiting for a meal. Heavy submerged vegetation and logs adorned with sunning turtles also helped define our surroundings.

According to the DNR, a variety of rare species inhabit the forest, including

some classified as endangered, threatened or sensitive. Species including the spotted salamander, wood turtle and Cooper's hawk are quite uncommon and inconspicuous. Others such as the bald eagle, osprey and common loon provide visitors with more frequent viewing opportunities.

On the last pool of our trip before our shore marker signaled journey's end, five bald eagles escorted us to our truck, flying from tall pine to tall pine before circling high overhead. A good indicator of whether or not a trip has been worthwhile is the degree that the participants ready for it to end. The Trout River left us wanting more.

The Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest, truly, is one of Wisconsin's crown jewels. For more information contact:

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For information on Wisconsin canoe trips near you, Google the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and click on "Home Page". *OWO*