

North of Up North *Sylvania Wilderness Area calls Wisconsinites*

By Dick Ellis



Lori Ellis enjoys kayaking on isolated High Lake after portaging from Crooked Lake in the Sylvania Wilderness area.

With his canoe balanced over his head, Steve Henske disappeared across a mature ridge of majestic pines to finish the portage and reintroduce himself to High Lake in the Sylvania Wilderness Area of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The "wilder the better" whitewater canoeist and "the rougher the better" outdoorsman from Stevens Point had embarked on much longer portages before in Wisconsin, Canada and the western states. He had snow-camped Sylvania last winter in minus-27 degree temperatures to fish the

hardwater. But it was memories of summertime Sylvania and smallmouth fishing with his wife, Missy 24 years ago that called him back again on a fleeting-summer morning.

My family; Lori and Taylor and friend Gina Showers of New Berlin abandoned Crooked Lake to follow the leader through the shade of towering white and red pines hauling two kayaks, fishing gear, food and camera equipment. Up and over the ridge, we descended on High Lake, and took in the natural highs and the pure

fix of isolation, new blue water, sunshine and the promise of good fishing.

"Back then, honestly, we would catch a smallie every other cast on High Lake," Henske said. "Nothing real big; maybe 12 to 17 inches. We also caught a 15 inch rock bass that was so big it was ugly."

It must have been the only thing ugly here. The 34 named lakes within the Sylvania Wilderness Area, according to Wikipedia internet encyclopedia, are "a bit fragile" with low flush rates and low nutrients loads because the area straddles the Great Divide be-

tween Lake Superior and the Mississippi River Drainage Systems. The area occupies some of the highest ground in the Midwest. Many of the lakes are more than 1700 feet above sea-level. Due to that apex system, these deep, clear lakes are primarily land-locked and fed by springs and local runoff. There are no surface streams entering the park, which is one of the reasons the lakes remain pristine and pure.

Special fishing regulations on these lakes, including catch and release for all bass, have also helped to preserve the lakes' fisheries. The Sylvania Wilderness



Returning to the Sylvania Wilderness Area for the first time in more than 20 years to canoe, portage and fish in the summer, Steve Henske and Cody enjoy High Lake.

History of the Sylvania Wilderness

The following is taken almost word for word from the Wikipedia website: Little is known of Sylvania Wilderness Area prior to the 1800s. It was used frequently by the Ojibwa Native Indians, as evidenced by a few scattered artifacts found there. In 1895, Wisconsin lumberman A.D. Johnston purchased 80 acres of land at the south end of Clark Lake with the intent of cutting large pines there. After seeing the land for himself, he was so taken by the rugged beauty of it that he changed his mind and decided to preserve it.

He soon invited friends, many of whom were equally impressed and so moved to purchase adjacent lands. After some time the Sylvania Club was formed, with fishing, hunting and hiking being the main focus. The owners built lodges and cabins on the larger lakes, and the area became an exclusive resort for a small number of affluent and influential guests. Ownership changed hands over the years, and finally the entire area was purchased by the U.S. Forest Service in 1967, which promptly removed all buildings and began managing it as a special recreation area. In 1987, it was designated as a federal wilderness when the Michigan Wilderness Act was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan.

features 25 miles of hiking trails and portages within its 30 square miles. The old growth northern hardwood forests here are some of the most extensive in North America, nearly spanning the entire park at some 15,000 acres. Sugar Maple, Eastern Hemlock and Yellow Birch are the most common, with White, Red and Jack Pine, White Spruce, Balsam Fir and Paper Birch also abundant.

The Sylvania Wilderness and Sylvania Recreation Area, according to a website produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service Eastern Region defining the three wilderness areas within the Ottawa National Forest is located near Watersmeet, Michigan and is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Combined with the adjacent recreation area, the 18,327 acre wilderness offers an outstanding experience for those who want to camp, fish, hike, canoe, ski or enjoy the solitude of a wilderness experience.

Few wildernesses compare to Sylvania, which offers some lakes with sandy beaches and others surrounded by the record-size red and white pines. The large natural area provides habitat for a wide range of wildlife, including threatened or endangered plants and animals like rare orchids and ospreys. More common birds and animals include deer, black bear,



Dick Ellis sits on a deadfall on an island on High Lake in the Sylvania Wilderness Area of Upper Michigan near Watersmeet. (Steve Henske)

grey wolves, porcupines, bobcat, beaver, otter, coyote, fox, bald eagle and loon.

It represents one of only a handful of such areas left in the Midwest, offering the visitor a “window in time”, according to Wikipedia, to the days before the magnificent forests of the Upper Midwest were felled by lumberjacks around the turn of the century.

Although the high number of vehicles in the launch area of Crooked Lake revealed the present popularity of Sylvania, the sprawling acreage of the Wilderness Area allowed us to enjoy a crowd-free day.

summer of 1985. We wouldn't find it, only an occasional strike. What we would find was clear water, giant pines, alone-ness, fabulous paddling, walks on islands with sandy beaches and encounters with red foxes and loons. The Sylvania Wilderness Area could only have better with one small change.

Now someone has to figure out how to move it a few miles south to Wisconsin. *OWO*

CONTACT

We began our trip at Sylvania Outfitters, located one mile west of Watersmeet on Highway 2. They are the only “Special Use Permit” holder providing canoe trips into the Sylvania Wilderness and Recreation Area and surrounding Ottawa National Forest. Sylvania Outfitters and owner Bob Zelinski have provided equipment and guidance to groups for more than 30 years wishing to canoe, cross-country ski, camp, etc. For more information connect with www.sylvaniaoutfitters.com or 906-358-4766.

Camping is permitted at designated sites by permit only. Permits can be obtained on a walk-in basis at the Wilderness Entrance Station or can be reserved through Reserve America online at www.Recreation.Gov. Reservations can also be made by calling toll free, 1-877-444-6777. Single day or season pass fees and other imperative information such as the prohibition of glass and aluminum in the park should also be sought.

“In 1985, our first time here, very few people utilized the park,” Henske said. “We saw two other canoes and over three or four days of paddling basically the entire wilderness area we were the only ones camping. People are using it today, but because they require a reserved area to camp, that curtails use.”

There are 84 designated campsites in 29 locations throughout the wilderness, each with rudimentary amenities such as outdoor toilets, tent pads, pack racks and fire grills. We came on the doorstep of another September, to experience just one day of High Lake Fishing right from the