

# Ice Age Trail

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Wisconsin  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

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## Wisconsin's Glacial Landscape

A mere 20,000 years ago, during the Ice Age, most of northern North America lay under the grip of colossal ice sheets. The effects of the advancing and retreating glaciers can be seen in the headlands of Cape Cod, the Finger Lakes of New York, and the hills of Michigan, but nowhere is the glacier's mark upon the land more impressive than in Wisconsin. Indeed, the State has lent its name to the most recent series of glacial advances and retreats, the Wisconsin Glaciation lasting from about 100,000 to 10,000 years ago.

When the ice melted at the edges of the lobes, the sand, silt, cobbles, and boulders frozen in it were released and formed ridges called moraines. Even as the glacier melted back, ice usually continued to flow toward its edge, bringing more debris with it. Occasionally the flow stopped, the ice stagnated, and blocks of ice detached from the glacier were buried in sand and gravel. Many of Wisconsin's lakes lie in the depressions formed by the melting of the buried ice. These are called kettles.

The following meltwater spread fine layers of sand in broad plains, such as those in Langlade, Rock, and Portage Counties, that today are fertile cash crop farming areas. In several areas the meltwater pooled, forming large lakes where silt and clay collected. The flat bed of glacial Lake Wisconsin, one of these lakes, is a marked contrast to the unglaciated hills of the Driftless Area that bound its western side. In the Fox River Valley, Lake Winnebago and Horicon Marsh are small remnants of another proglacial lake - Lake Oshkosh.

In the areas of Wisconsin that were glaciated prior to the most recent glaciations, erosion has had time to modify the landscape and, as a result, glacial landforms are subdued or unrecognizable. Lakes and bogs are much less common in this older landscape. Most have either been drained by gradually lengthening streams, or filled with sediment that has accumulated over thousands of years. The result is a gently rolling landscape or nearly flat plains broken by occasional remnant hills or ridges. The remnants of glacial debris left us these areas were glaciated long ago, but relatively little is known about their glacial history.

In striking contrast to both of these glacial landscapes stands the dry upland of southwestern Wisconsin known as the Driftless Area. Much of this region is a rolling upland plain, with no glacial sediment, which has been deeply cut by streams into a maze of narrow, twisting ridges and valleys. There are few natural lakes, bogs or marshes in this part of the State. Several prominent mounds, such as Blue Mound in eastern Iowa County, stand as erosion remnants well above the surrounding plain. This Driftless Area landscape has been forming for many thousands of years, whereas our most recent glacial landscape is but 20,000 years old or younger.

Wisconsin's legacy from the glaciers and meltwater streams of the Ice Age is a landscape of great diversity and beauty. The State's many lakes and ponds, forested hills and ridges, and gently rolling farmlands remind us of the glacier's visit and beckon us to come, explore, and enjoy!

Many times during the past 2 million years, a time also known as the Pleistocene Epoch, the climate fluctuated between warmer and cooler temperatures. During the colder fluctuations, the glaciers formed and spread outward from Arctic areas, engulfing most of northern North America. Each of the major glaciations has been followed by a warmer interglacial period, probably similar to that of today, during which the glaciers melted away.

The glacier most recently flowed into Wisconsin about 30,000 years ago and reached its greatest extent, covering approximately two-thirds of the State, about 20,000 years ago before melting back. The retreat of the ice front was interrupted a number of times by readvances; the last one touched northwestern Wisconsin about 10,000 years ago. The extent of this and earlier glaciations in Wisconsin is shown on the maps on this brochure.

The advancing ice was channeled into the lowlands now occupied by Lakes Superior and Michigan, Green Bay, and the Fox River, and it was impeded by the uplands of the Bayfield, Keweenaw, and Door Peninsulas. The ice was thus split into six major lobes as it flowed across the State. The Green Bay Lobe, which had few obstructions in its path, penetrated as far south as present-day Janesville in Rock County.

The moraines vary greatly across the state. Those in the southwest are usually dry, narrow ridges sitting atop the older hills at the edge of the unglaciated Driftless Area. Across the northern counties the moraines form a broad band of hills and hollows - a poorly drained rocky landscape dotted with lakes and bogs. The Chippewa Moraine Ice Age Reserve Unit is a particularly picturesque portion of these moraines, containing numerous depressions filled with lakes, bogs, and marshes. The moraine in Waushara County in the center of the State is similarly pitted with thousands of these depressions, but most of them are dry. The rugged, scenic Kettle Moraine in the eastern part of the State is actually a series of moraines formed between the Lake Michigan and Green Bay Lobes. The Green Bay Lobe left a moraine in Sauk County which blocked both ends of a gorge in the Baraboo Hills creating Devil's Lake. Some moraines stand no more than 30 feet above the surrounding terrain, but others in the Kettle Moraine rise to heights of 250 to 300 feet.

Although many of these features are outstanding by themselves, as a whole they form a glacial landscape of remarkable beauty. The thousands of drumlins, eskers, and kettles and the numerous moraines, eskers, and features left by fluctuating lobes of the last Wisconsin glacier appear very similar to features being formed by glaciers active today. The region of recent glaciations is dotted with 14,000 glacial lakes, bogs, marshes, and fens; and many streams whose courses are determined by the young glacial deposits. In a sense, this region of the State is still recovering from the melting of the last glacier. As the streams slowly wash away kames, eskers, and moraines, and as marshes, bogs, and lakes fill with sediment and organic debris, this young landscape will become like the older glacial landscape which lies between the Driftless Area and the terminal moraines of the most recent glaciations.

The torrents of meltwater released from the westing glacier or draining from glacial lakes cut spectacular gorges in several areas of the State. Some, such as the Dales of the St. Croix, the Wisconsin Dells, and the Dells of the Eau Claire, are still occupied by streams. Others, like the smaller gorge at the Cross Plains Ice Age Reserve Unit, are now dry except for spring and storm run-off.

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The ice within the lobes was almost always sliding or creeping toward the edges of the glacier, even as it melted. As the ice moved, it froze around grains of sand, pebbles, and boulders, picking them up, and carried them along. Boulders that were carried great distances are called erratics. The material frozen into the base of the flowing ice gouged and scraped the land, leaving in some

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## A Trail To Explore The Glacial Landscape

Imagine a public greenway meandering across Wisconsin's glacial landscape. Imagine a trail 1,200 miles long leading both to places of glacial beauty close to home and to some of the remotest parts of Wisconsin. That is what the late Ray Zillmer of Milwaukee had in mind in the 1950s when he proposed that an Ice Age National Park be established along the entire length of the moraines marking the farthest advance of the last glacier in Wisconsin. An avid hiker, he proposed a continuous footpath, similar to the Appalachian Trail, as the central feature of the park so that visitors could explore and enjoy the glacial landscape at their own pace.

In 1975, efforts to establish the trail accelerated across the State. In a few years, volunteers were successful in establishing major segments of the trail. Congress recognized the national significance of the trail and the effort to establish it in October 1980 by designating it a National Scenic Trail (NST). The Wisconsin legislature designated it a State Scenic Trail in 1987. The National Park Service administers the trail in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Ice Age Trail Alliance (formerly the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation). There are also many other partners that participate in the trail by developing and managing specific segments, including the U.S. Forest Service; county and municipal park and forestry departments; conservation, civic, and youth organizations; and private volunteers and landowners.

Increasing development pressure along the trail route made it obvious by the mid-1980s that a permanently protected right-of-way for the trail was needed. Land purchases with fee and/or permits in connection with accessing the trail, such as in Wisconsin State Parks (a vehicle sticker is required). The use of some facilities, such as campsites, may require the payment of a fee and/or obtaining a permit. Users should check with managing authorities in advance to determine fee and permit requirements.

Stewardship Program, a fund from which monies are available to assist in acquiring lands for the Ice Age Trail. In 2000, Congress began annually appropriating land acquisition funds that the National Park Service may grant to partners that acquire lands for the trail.

The National Park Service, through its administrative authorities for the trail, leads the effort to plan the permanent route of the trail and provides technical and limited financial assistance to cooperating partners. Today, almost 700 miles of the trail have been certified by the National Park Service as part of the Ice Age NST. Certification indicates the segment is developed and managed in accordance with approved trail plans and standards, and entitles the segment to be marked with the official trail emblem. An additional 200 miles of completed trail segments are also open for public use and enjoyment.

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In 1958, the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation was established to promote the creation of the national park. As the effort to win Congressional authori-

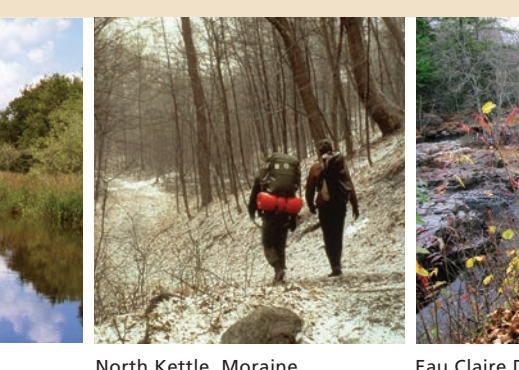
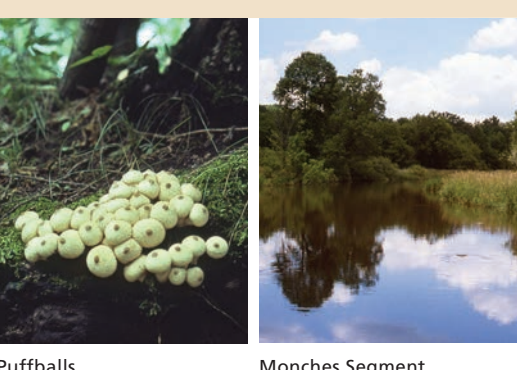
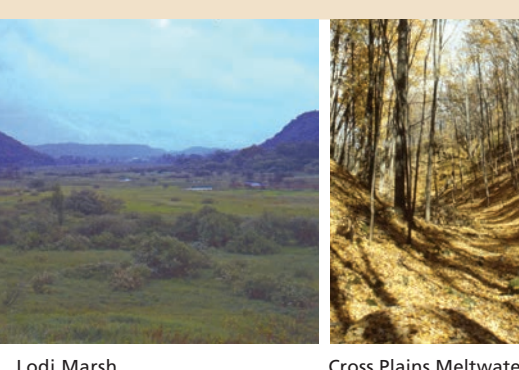
zation of the park gained momentum, volunteers were already at work building the first segments of the future Ice Age Trail in the Kettle Moraine State Forest. In 1964, Congress authorized a joint Federal-State effort to study and recommend a way to preserve and interpret Wisconsin's significant glacial heritage. The result of these efforts was the creation of the nine-unit Ice Age National Scientific Reserve to be administered by the State of Wisconsin in cooperation with, and with assistance from, the National Park Service.

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Lodi Marsh

Cross Plains Meltwater Channel

Trillium

Pothole and Grinding Stone

Devil's Creek - Blue Hills

Purfballs

## Enjoying the Trail

Because many different public agencies and private interests are participating in the development and management of the Ice Age NST, users must be mindful of the type and width of lands protected for the trail varies. Support facilities, such as campsites, are not always readily available. Rules and regulations governing use of the trail are not always the same on every segment.

Users of the Ice Age NST are urged to show their appreciation for the voluntary public and private efforts to develop and manage the trail by using it and related facilities properly and complying with any applicable rules and regulations. Users should be especially careful to respect the rights of private property owners, particularly those who have generously allowed the trail to cross their land. Please stay on the trail, especially when crossing private lands.

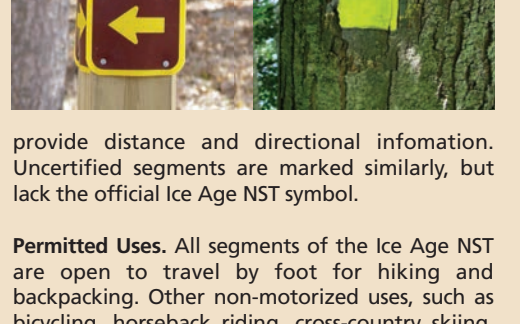
provide distance and directional information. Uncertified segments are marked similarly, but lack the official Ice Age NST symbol.

**Permitted Uses.** All segments of the Ice Age NST are open to travel by foot for hiking and backpacking. Other non-motorized uses, such as bicycling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and jogging, are permitted on some segments by the policy of the managing authority responsible for the segment. In addition, certain segments are open to

snowmobiling in winter. For information on which segments are open to other uses besides hiking, consult the following websites: [www.iceagetrail.org](http://www.iceagetrail.org) and [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

**Fees and Permits.** Hiking on the Ice Age NST is free and requires no permit. However, there may be fees and/or permits in connection with accessing the trail, such as in Wisconsin State Parks (a vehicle sticker is required). The use of some facilities, such as campsites, may require the payment of a fee and/or obtaining a permit. Users should check with managing authorities in advance to determine fee and permit requirements.

**Trail Marking.** Certified segments of the Ice Age NST are signed with the marker shown on the inside of this brochure. These are supplemented by yellow blazes and signs that



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## Description of the Trail Route

The route of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail generally follows the end moraines of the most recent glaciations, although it diverges from them in several areas to include other features of the glacial landscape and a glimpse of the Driftless Area. From its eastern end at Potawatomi State Park on Green Bay, the trail route follows the present and former shorelines of Lake Michigan, passing through Point Beach State Forest and the cities of Two Rivers and Manitowish. The trail continues over the rolling upland of the Kettle Moraine on public and private lands for more than 100 miles through Sheboygan, Washington, Waushara, Jefferson, and Walworth Counties. As the trail traverses Kettle Moraine State Forest, it winds along

extending examples of kettle ponds, eskers, and kames, amidst the interlobate moraine topography. The hiker will enjoy marshes, prairie and oak savanna remnants, and oak, hickory, and maple forests, as the trail threads its way among the many towns and villages of the densely populated southeastern portion of the State. The trail route returns to the end moraine of the recent glaciations in Dane County, skirts Madison's western edge, and leads to several glacial meltwater channels cut into the bedrock hills of the Driftless Area, such as the one in the Cross Plains Unit of the Ice Age National Scientific Reserve. The resistant quartzite of the Baraboo Hills halted the glacier's advance in Sauk County and provides the greatest relief found along the trail—over 800 feet.

At Devil's Lake State Park, the trail divides. The western branch passes through Baraboo and winds north touching the Dells of the Wisconsin River, which were formed by glacial meltwater. The trail then crosses the flat bed of glacial Lake Wisconsin in Juneau and Adams Counties, passing sandstone buttes rising among black oak and jack pine. The eastern branch follows the moraines through Columbia and Marquette Counties and joins together with the western branch in Chaffee Creek Fishery Area. The trail winds among numerous kettles and along the Mecan River and several other trout streams as it follows the hummocky topography of the moraine in Waushara County. The route swings east along moraines deposited as the glacier retreated, passing through drumlin fields and among kettle lakes in Portage and Waupaca Counties, and continues north across outwash plains and end moraines in Marathon County. In Langlade County and other counties to the west, long segments of the trail

traverse county forest lands. Amid the northern forest of spruce, fir, maple, and birch in Langlade County, the trail enters a region full of lakes and bogs formed by the melting of the glacier. In the lake-sprinkled Harrison Hills of Lincoln County, the high point of the trail—1,920 feet—is reached on the shoulder of Lookout Mountain. Timm's Hill National Park, a side trail in eastern Taylor County, leads north 10 miles to the highest point in Wisconsin—1,951.5 feet—in Price County. The segment in Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in Taylor County offers one of the most primitive hiking experiences along the trail. While walking the crests of eskers in the national forest, one gets a hint of what was once the great white pine and hemlock forest that provided the lumber to build the cities of

the Midwest, and the tanbark for the leather industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Chippewa County, the trail again winds among numerous lakes and bogs in the Chippewa Moraine Unit of the Ice Age Reserve. Bearing north, the trail goes over the high quartzite shoulder of the Blue Hills in Rusk County amid small streams in an ash, birch, and maple forest. The trail route winds through the dairy country of Barron and Polk Counties, along the Saint Croix National Scenic River, to its western end in the Interstate State Park Ice Age Reserve Unit.

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