



Beaver Basin Wilderness

History of a Unique Place

Photo Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

Beaver Basin, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore - If you are looking for a fairly low-used area with a large, shallow lake that is great for swimming or paddling, the Beaver Basin Wilderness within Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore is worth a visit. Created as part of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009, the 11,740 acres of wilderness provides permanent protection for a beautiful and secluded portion of the park.

The Typography of Beaver Basin

Located in Alger County, the Beaver Basin Wilderness includes 13 miles of mostly sandy Lake Superior shoreline from Spray Falls on the west to Sevenmile Creek on the east. The typography of the area is notable as you drive down a steep escarpment from the access off of HR-58. The geology of the area is all formed by the last glaciation and includes interesting post-glacial meltwater channels, escarpments, and beach ridges from Lake Nipissing – the larger Lake Superior from 5,000 years ago, with higher water levels from glacial melt.

The wilderness is 3.5 miles wide and contains three shallow but clear lakes: Beaver Lake - 762 acres, Trappers Lake - 45 acres and Legion Lake - 35 acres. It also includes five cold water streams: Lowney Creek, Arsenault Creek, Sevenmile Creek, Little Beaver Creek, and Beaver Creek. The streams and extensive wetlands provide habitat for native coaster brook trout and other fish. Popular fish species include brook trout, largemouth, smallmouth and rock bass, northern pike and white sucker.

The wilderness includes an old growth cedar swamp that currently has healthy regeneration due to lower levels of white-tailed deer. At one time, however, the area had an unsustainable deer population. The story of this boom and bust deer history is now mostly forgotten, but it's a notable management point in Michigan's deer herd history.

“We go along the coast, most delightful and wonderful,” wrote fur trader Pierre Esprit Radisson in 1658, the first documented visitor to the Pictured Rocks. “Nature has made it pleasant to the eye, the spirit and the belly.”

Within the last century, the Wisconsin-Michigan Pipeline Company owned nearly 2,000 acres of prime wild lands in the Beaver Basin. The tract was assembled in 1958 as a corporate employees' retreat. The core of the corporate retreat was a camp composed of cottages, a boat house, and service buildings located on the south shore of Beaver Lake.

How Deer Population Affected the Basin



Wisconsin-Michigan Pipeline Company Retreat Archives
Photo of a deer yard. Photo Courtesy of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources

In July 1966, when it appeared likely that a publicly-owned park would be created at Pictured Rocks, the company approached the Park Service with a plan to retain limited use of their retreat. The company offered to sell their 660 acres north of Beaver Lake in exchange for the right to use the area along the south shore of the lake.

In July 1967, the Park Service agreed to buy the northern lands for \$285,000 and let the company occupy their camp for up to twenty-five years, provided that at the end of that time, the lands would be donated to the lakeshore.

Over the years, the retreat was a popular summer and fall vacation site for the firm's top executives. The corporate president, R.T. McElvenny, was deeply interested in outdoor sports and wildlife management. Under his direction, feeding stations for deer and bear were created, along with ponds for waterfowl, trout, and beaver.

McElvenny had good intentions, but since the last known pack of wolves – the only effective natural predator of white-tailed deer – had disappeared from this area in the 1950s, his feeding stations become problematic. Managers at the resort nourished the herd with commercial food each winter, and their numbers soon began to rise dramatically. Hunting couldn't keep the number of deer under control. By the early 1970s, the retreat's records show that the herd was receiving more than 80 tons of commercial deer food each year.

In 1974, the company found the continued operation of the camp a burden and agreed to sell their entire holdings to the National Park Service. However, with the land came the huge winter population of deer – estimated at 600. The Park Service reduced the amount of feed for the next two winters, and, in 1976, proposed a special hunt to cull the herd down to a more sustainable number of 300. The Park Service's goal was to eliminate feeding altogether.

A local hunting club disagreed with the decision, thinking that if 300 deer were eliminated, none would remain. The club obtained a court injunction against the hunt and spent over \$27,000 feeding the deer in the winter of 1976-77. The following winter, the herd was not hunted, but it also was not fed. Many deer died of starvation and predation by coyotes. By the end of the 1977's winter, the deer herd was estimated at 100. By 1983, biologists found no winter deer in the area.

When biologists returned in 1996, white cedar and maples showed few signs of regeneration after the impact of deer overbrowse 20 years earlier. In most of the basin, white cedar, a favorite deer food, had been replaced by balsam fir, which is only marginally palatable to deer. Deer now found in this area tend to migrate away from it in the fall and still do not winter within Beaver Basin.

A Transformed Landscape

Visitors today will notice little of the past development and wildlife drama that took place in the past. The area looks wild and the lakes clear and lightly used. An extensive maple upland hardwood forest provides habitat for numerous mammals, birds, and flowering plants. Although low in numbers along Lake Superior, the gray

wolf has returned after a half century absence. Other species present include black bear, gray wolf, American marten, fisher, migrating songbirds, raptors such as bald eagle and merlin, waterfowl, grouse and a diverse population of wildflowers.

Recreational opportunities include 8.4 miles of the North Country National Scenic Trail and 8.5 miles of other hiking trails, as well as six backcountry campsites. Though an underwater snorkel trail along the shores of Beaver Lake was proposed in the 1960s, it never became a reality. The beautiful wilderness area with its very clear, sandy lakes can now be enjoyed permanently in a natural state.

More Information

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore: <https://www.nps.gov/piro/planyourvisit/beaver-basin-wilderness.htm>