



# Ironjaw Semi-Primitive Area

Exploring one of the Hiawatha National Forest's Best-kept Secrets

The Pine Marten Run Trail System weaves through many of the Ironjaw Semi-Primitive Area's beautiful lakes. Swan Lake (pictured) can be accessed via a dirt road and includes three reservable campsites – *Photo Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy/James Dyer*

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*Hiawatha Nation Forest, Schoolcraft County* - I turn down County Road 440 to meet the trailhead and feel the temperature plummet. The clouds collect in blended palettes of black and gray above my head; an early summer storm threatens Michigan's Upper Peninsula. I would have to hurry if I wanted to experience the Ironjaw to its fullest.

The Ironjaw Semi-Primitive Area lies south of Munising, MI, in the middle of the vast Hiawatha National Forest. The area is open to hikers and equestrians via the Pine Marten Run trail system, a 26-mile group of trails that loop and twist through pristine lakes and forestland. Trailheads are easily accessible off County Road 440 and are suitable for both vehicles and horse trailers.

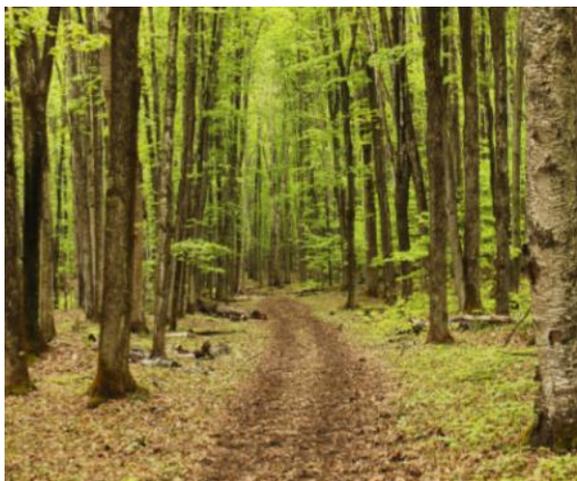
My goal today is to hike along the Ironjaw loop and scope out one of the area's best (if little known) fishing spots for crappie, largemouth bass and northern pike. The trail system is remote enough to provide a great escape from the more heavily used trails and lakes nearby, yet accessible enough to plan a last-minute weekend visit. Rustic campsites dot the area; Ironjaw offers intriguing opportunities for weekend warriors, anglers and equestrians alike.

At the parking area for the trailhead, I steer between a woman wearing a beige cowboy hat and a large gray spotted mare. Three or four horse trailers already sit in the lot, camped out for a weekend of riding. The rain has held off, but I can see the storm's precursor, a swarm of angry mosquitos, pecking at my window. Bug nets are a necessary piece of equipment for enjoying the Upper Peninsula in early summer. I strap mine on and venture out into the melee.

The trails gently incline through hills and dense forestland. Because the area is open to horse travel, the dirt on

the trails is churned and soft. It's tricky for overly-fragile ankles, but a dream for hikers in search of a low impact adventure that's easy on the knees. I stroll for a good 20 minutes before I realize that I've walked in the wrong direction. I double back and call out to a squat man wearing a cowboy hat and, almost too predictably, a sparkling bolo tie, and ask for directions. Pointing disaffectedly, he gestures to a second, hidden trailhead at the other end of the parking lot.

The Ironjaw is a semi-primitive area, which means it is managed to maintain its natural integrity but is more easily accessible and open for a wider variety of uses than other such areas. To accommodate fisherman of all sorts, a dirt road leads to Ironjaw Lake, and boat access is available too, via a dirt hill leading into the water.



Though Pine Marten Run is frequented by equestrians, the trail system also provides a calm getaway to foot travelers. *Photo Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy/James Dyer*

There are also several campsites dotted throughout the area (at least one on each lake), and toilets at each of the trailheads. The trailhead at County Road 440 also includes a pump for water – crucial on a hot, humid day like today.

Once I venture a quarter mile or so past the trailhead, the forest briefly becomes quiet, only to erupt immediately in a cacophony of birdsong. Out here, far enough away from busy roads, the music of nature holds dominance. It's easy to pick out the individual melodies of the forest here. I am enjoying the sound of wind rustling through newly sprouted foliage when the peace is interrupted by the grinding of saws and the crashing of newly felled trees.

Not far past Rim Lake, the trail intersects a logging road. The smell of sawed lumber and burnt remnants of disintegrating pine permeate the air. Next to the road, a massive Harvester Processor is parked. This machine is necessary for efficiently felling trees in a certain direction. Near the roadside, stacks of logs are piled 12 feet high, a testament to the machine's efficiency. I meet up again with the trail and walk on, hoping to avoid any more mechanical disturbances.

The trail begins to circle Swan Lake and storm clouds swirl overhead. The mosquitos have dissipated in the heat of midday and I decide to sneak a late lunch past both the bugs and the weather. I'm not sitting on the lakeshore long before a loon pokes its head through the gentle waves. I've been listening to bird song all day, but this is the first animal I'm able to witness up close and personal. It ducks beneath the water again and emerges with a wriggling minnow in its mouth. We sit and share our lunch together on the lakeshore, waiting for the rain to fall.

Swan Lake is surrounded by four reservable campsites and is accessible via a dirt road off Forest Road 2258. At the trailhead are fire pits, horse-hitching posts and plenty of room for multiple groups of campers and equestrians.



Swan Lake is open for both motorized and non-motorized use. *Photo Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy/James Dyer*

The campsite where I rest is pleasantly hilly, with easy access to the lake for both horses and swimmers. I plop down next to one of the fire pits, relishing the solitude, before the first raindrops fall, soon followed by more, steadier rain. I slide on my raincoat and decide that it's time to move along.

## Directions

From the Intersection of US-2 and Forest Highway 13 (about 14 miles east of Rapid River) drive north 18.7 miles on Highway 13 to County Road 440. Turn right (east) on CR 440 and drive 4.6 miles to FR 2733. Turn left (north) and drive 1.3 miles to the parking area.