

North Country Trail in Minnesota Laurentian Lakes Chapter Itasca State Park to Ottertail County

Historical Data

The Laurentian Lakes Chapter (LLC) is responsible for the NCT trails in Clearwater and Becker Counties, from Itasca State Park to Ottertail County. The Chapter was founded in 2007 with John Backes, Chuck Church, Bob LaFleur, Hank Ludtke, Willis Mattison, Gary Narum, Karen Stenberg and Ray Vlasek as founding members. The Chapter has grown to approximately 80 members and has built trails with numerous volunteers working in cooperation with governmental agencies. In the years prior to the formation of the LLC, Itasca State Park staff, the Star of the North Chapter of the NCT and members of the Bad Medicine Lake Association built trails from the DeSoto Campsite in Itasca State Park to the Highway 39 Trailhead.

Electronic maps of the trails can be accessed at
northcountrytrail.org/trail/maps

Detailed descriptions of the trail are available in the “Guide to Hiking the North Country Trail in Minnesota” by Linda Johnson and Susan Carol Hauser.

In the following pages you will find historical descriptions the trails along with information of when they were built and by whom. You will learn that the trail crosses federal, state, county and private land and passes through many landscapes to include the Laurentian Divide, a state park, county forests, a scientific and natural area, a wildlife refuge, private pastures and county roads. Those who enjoy history will be interested to know that a private railroad once carried logs on one section of the trail while other trails are rich in Native American culture. All of the trails give hikers a chance to view wildlife, native plants, birds, and different varieties of trees as well as enjoy some quiet moments in nature.

Itasca State Park South Entrance Trailhead to 540th Avenue Trailhead

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

The Itasca State Park was established in 1891 and has the distinction of being the first state park in Minnesota and the second in the U.S. Known for being the Headwaters of the Mississippi river, its 33,000 acres offers 49 miles of hiking trails, many lakes and beautiful forests.

Itasca Moraine

While hiking the NCT in Itasca, take note of the landscape. It was formed during the glacial period, which brought material as far away as the Hudson Bay under an ice sheet thousands of feet thick. As the glacier advanced and retreated, knobs (mounds of debris) and kettles (depressions that became lakes) formed to create the moraine you can view on the trail.

Building the Trail: 6.5 miles

The trail route in Itasca State Park to Highway 39 was built before the LLC formed in 2007. The Itasca staff built trails within the park – Nicollet, Desoto, Deer Park and Ozawindib while the Star of the North Chapter of the NCT and the Bad Medicine Lake Association built trails from the park to Hwy 39. The Itasca Moraine Chapter of NCT built the trail from the South Entrance of Itasca to the Ozawindib trail. Bob LaFleur's article on hiking the trails in each season is available in the "Guide to Hiking the North Country Trail in Minnesota" and the NCTA website.

The LLC rebuilt NCT sections of these trails where necessary, to include bridges, puncheons, installing blue blazes, and signage. The work was done by LLC members Ray Vlasek, Gary Narum, Jim Eisele, Jim Rakness, Wally Sizer, Don Klein, Roger Hanson, John LaFond, John Backes. Agencies involved were the Minnesota DNR and state historical preservation and archeology departments.

Itasca State Park 540th Ave Trailhead to Anchor Matson Road Trailhead

Note: the 540th Trailhead is .6 mile north from the kiosk located on Hwy 113.

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

Itasca State Park is known for the Mississippi Headwaters. The Douglas Lodge, Forest Inn and other log structures were built from 1933-1942. But the park also has 49 miles of hiking trails that were built to connect the developed east side of the park to the backcountry found in the south. The NCT is part of this trail system. Before the park was organized in 1891, the land was logged extensively as the timber industry was in full swing at that time.

Building the Trail: 4.7 miles

The NCT trail in Itasca State Park to Hwy 39 was built before the LLC was formed in 2007. The Itasca staff built trails within the park while the Star of the North Chapter of the NCT and the Bad Medicine Lake Association built trails from Clearwater County Hwy 39.

The LLC rebuilt sections of the trails, built bridges and puncheons, installed blue blazes, and signage. A re-route of one section, to include a bridge, was completed in 2018. LLC members Ray Vlasek, Gary Narum, Kim Fishburn, Jim Rakness, Wally Sizer, Don Klein, Roger Hanson, John LaFond, John Backes and Bill Sanger were involved in the construction. The Minnesota Department of Transportation and Department of Natural Resources were also involved.

White Earth State Forest Anchor Matson Trailhead to Hwy 39 Trailhead

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

After exiting Itasca State Park, the NCT trail enters the White Earth State Forest, which has numerous undeveloped lakes and backcountry campsites. The remains of the Old Headquarters of the Nicholas-Chisholm Lumber Company can be viewed on an off-trail hike. The company operated here from 1904-1918. A land locked railroad was built to transport logs to stack on frozen lakes during winter months. Come Spring, logs floated down the Otter Tail River to sawmills in Frazee. Rails were pulled up when the company ceased operating and today's hikers can still see where they were once placed. The Headquarters became a CCC camp in 1933 for tree planting and fire protection.

Hikers will experience the Tim-Don-Del overlook on this route. The overlook was named after the Bad Medicine Lake Association members who built it. It gives hikers an awareness of the Laurentian Divide at an elevation of 1,750'. The Smokey Hills can be seen 18 miles to the South of the overlook. The Laurentian Divide is a continental divide that separates the Hudson Bay watershed to the north from drainage to the Gulf of Mexico watershed to the south. The divide runs north and east through northern Minnesota before entering Ontario.

Building the Trail: 7.3 miles

The trail in Itasca State Park to Highway 39 was built before the LLC formed in 2007. The LLC rebuilt sections of the trail where necessary, including multiple re-routes to improve the original trail. An 82' bridge was built in 2009 and another 42' bridge in 2010. LLC members Ray Vlasak, Gary Narum, Jim Eisele, Jim Rakness, Wally Sizer, Don Klein, Roger Hanson, John LaFond, John Backes, Chuck Church, Jim Luttrell, Karen Stenberg, Dick Twomey, Tim Holzkamn and Bill Sanger participated in this work. LLC also worked with the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

White Earth State Forest CR-39 Trailhead to Hwy 113 Trailhead

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

Established in 1933, the White Earth State Forest includes 160,000-acres in Mahnomen, Becker, and Clearwater Counties. Most of the forest is within the boundaries of the White Earth Indian Reservation and is managed by the Minnesota DNR's Forestry Division and county land departments.

The NCT trail is built on a ridge formed by the Laurentian Divide, a watershed boundary. Water flowing west goes into the Red River of the North to Hudson Bay. To the east, water flows into the Mississippi River and then south to the Gulf of Mexico.

Building the Trail 4.3 miles

The LLC began building the trail in 2008 with the assistance of the Minnesota Conservation Corps. LLC construction included a bridge on the spur trail, a boardwalk next to the divide and another boardwalk by Pine Island Lake. An Eagle Scout troop built a Campsite on the trail as well. LLC also installed the blue blazes and signage. LLC members involved were Karen Stenberg, Chuck Church, Gary Narum, Willis Mattison, Matt Davis, John Wager, Ray Vlasek, Jim Luttrell, Diane and Larry Dahl, Ruth Berquist, Merlyn Weslow, Tim DeJong, and John Backes. The Boy Scout Troop 646 from Detroit Lakes also assisted. Harvey Johnson built kiosks. *Agencies involved: Minnesota Department of Transportation (trailheads), State of Minnesota Forest Service (DNR) Clearwater County Land Manager, Becker County Natural Resources*

White Earth State Forest

Hwy 113 Trailhead to the Elbow Lake Road Trailhead

The Elbow Lake Road is a logging road

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

Minnesota State forests are managed for multiple purposes, providing recreational, economic, and environmental opportunities. White Earth is one of 59 forests managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Much of the forest is composed of northern hardwoods and conifers. Approximately 475 acres (mostly aspen) are harvested annually, and 180 acres of conifers are planted. A hiker will note the various age groups of trees because of this timber management. The significant hardwood canopy is especially beautiful in the fall.

This area follows the Laurentian Divide, a continental divide that separates the Hudson Bay watershed to the north from drainage to the Gulf of Mexico watershed to the south. The divide runs north and east thru northern Minnesota before entering Ontario. Because of the height and steep sides of the ridge, it is easy to imagine that precipitation falling there would flow downhill either to the east or west from along the top of the ridge.

Building the Trail: 4.8 miles

The Laurentian Chapter of the North Country Trail built this trail in 2008 with the assistance of the Minnesota Conservation Corps. LLC members involved in the construction include Ruth Berquist, Gary Narum, Ray Vlasek, Deana Johnson, Willis Mattison, Matt Davis, Karen Stenberg, John Wager, Jim Luttrell Arvin Matheny, Tim DeYoung, Merlyn Weslow, John Backes and Dick Twomey. Agencies involved were the Becker County Board of Commissioners and the Minnesota DNR.

Becker County Forest Elbow Lake Road Trailhead to Camp Six Trailhead

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

Becker County has over 360,000 acres of forestland. It provides a source of income to area loggers as well as providing raw materials needed for area communities. These lands also provide public recreation opportunities, wildlife habitat and tourism resources.

Parts of this section pass through a Becker County Forest Preserve Area. Established in 2003 by the Becker County Board of Commissioners, dispersed tracts of old-growth Norway and White pine forest are brought under the blanket protection of the Preserve Area so their natural beauty can be enjoyed now and into the future.

The Laurentian Divide can be viewed on this trail.

Building the trail: 5.7 miles

The Laurentian Lakes Chapter of the North Country Trail Association built this trail in 2010/11 with the assistance of the AmeriCorps and Minnesota Conservation Corps. Several chapter members supervised the crew. Members included Ray Vlasek, Chuck Church, Karen Stenberg, Gary Narum, John Backes, Jerry Schran, Jim and Jeri Rakness. Ruth Berquist was instrumental in developing this section of the trail. Thomas Vlasak and other members of Boy Scout Troop 113 created the campsite Flooded Wood. Agencies involved included the Becker County Board of Commissioners and the White Earth Reservation.

Greenwater Lake Scientific and Natural Area (SNA) Camp Six Trailhead to CR-26 Trailhead

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

The Minnesota DNR Scientific and Natural Areas program preserves natural features and rare resources of exceptional scientific and educational value.

The Greenwater Lake Scientific and Natural Area is 815 acres with a terrain that varies from gently rolling to steep hills. At the heart of the SNA lies 77-acre Greenwater Lake. It is 50 feet deep and, according to the DNR, its water chemistry is affected by calcareous material that was carried by glaciers from the northwest. A single permanent stream flows out of the SNA, running north toward Ice Cracking Lake with its waters bound for Hudson Bay.

Building the Trail 6.4 miles

The late Ruth Berquist, LLC member and longtime volunteer Site Steward, kept a watchful eye over the area. Ruth's love of Greenwater dates back to when she was a child and her family had a summer cabin on nearby Round Lake. The LLC dedicated the Greenwater Trailhead to Ruth in 2018.

The trail that the NCT follows in the Greenwater Lake S.N.A. was built before the trail was mapped to be included in this area. LLC came in 2012 to build seven puncheons and boardwalks, most of which were needed because of beaver damage to the trail. Members included Ray Vlasek, Chuck Church, Gary Narum, Jim Eisele, Jim and Jeri Rakness, Wally Sizer, Don Klein, Roger and Laurie Hanson, John LaFond, John Backes, Steve Sondrol, Ed Gunderson and, of course, Ruth Berquist. Ruth and Ed worked together to maintain the trails for many years.

Becker County Forest CR 26 Trailhead to 400th Ave Trailhead

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

Becker County has 360,000 acres of forestland that provides raw materials needed in area communities as well as recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat and a tourism resource. Roads that were established for logging camps in the early 1900's are now used for recreational vehicles.

Building the Trail 5.2 miles

The Laurentian Lakes Chapter of the North Country Trail Association built this trail in 2010/11 with the assistance of an AmeriCorps crew. LLC members involved in construction were Ray Vlasek, Chuck Church, Karen Stenberg, Gary Narum, and John Backes. Earl Wohlman, Willis Mattison, Don Klein and Jim and Jeri Rakness. A 24' bridge was also built midway on this section of the trail.

The LLC worked with private landowners Daniel Bergstrom and Jonathan Rogstad and Becker County to build this trail.

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge

400th Ave to Blackbird Drive 4.5 miles
Blackbird Drive to Tamarac Lake Access 6.3 miles
Tamarac Lake to Boundary Road 3.1 miles
Bear Paw Spur Trail 1.5 miles
Bear Cub Loop 1.4 miles

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

The refuge was established in 1938 as a breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife. It is one of 545 National Wildlife Refuges in the United States. Historically, the Sioux once inhabited the area, followed by the Ojibwe. The northern half of the refuge is within the original White Earth Indian Reservation established in 1867. The land was logged from 1890-1930. Settlers followed to farm. In the 1930's, the Civilian Conservation Corps developed the land and it was designated a refuge in 1938.

Building the trail: 14 miles

Dedicated in 2013.

In addition to building the foot-path, the LLC volunteer construction crew built many impressive structures. In 2012, a 1,000-foot puncheon was built, followed by a 1,895-foot causeway in 2013/14. The puncheon allows passage over a black spruce/tamarac bog without disrupting the specialized life patterns that inhabit the environment. Heavy timbers were transported 3.4 miles to construct the causeway, taking numerous trips with a powered wheelbarrow. Shorter puncheons were also built. In 2014, the Bear Paw Spur Trail was built to connect the Visitor's Center with the NCT trail. It meets the trail between the Blackbird Trailhead and the Old Indian Trail. The Bear Cub Loop is located within the Bear Paw Spur Trail.

Volunteers included Jeri and Jim Rakness, Gary Narum, Ray Vlasak, Karen Stenberg, Bob Bork, Don Klein, Renee Larson, Peggy McRae, Ken Mattson, Greg Morgan, Connie & Fred Soch, Earl Wohlman, Luke Jordon and Matt Davis. Tom and Mary Moberg from the Dakota Prairie Chapter of the NCT also assisted, along with staff of the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge.

Hubbel Pond Wildlife Management Area Boundary Road to Hwy 34

Interesting notes about this section of the trail:

The 3,500-acre Hubbel Pond Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is named after Orson Hubbel who homesteaded the land circa 1877. The Hubbel Pond is a 600-acre wetland that is a wide spot in the Otter Tail River. The DNR manages it for waterfowl production and upland game.

The Minnesota WMA's started in 1951 when the "Save the Wetlands" program was established to purchase habitats to address the loss of wildlife in the state. Over 1.3 million acres make-up the 1500 WMA's located throughout the state to provide opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping and wildlife watching activities.

Hubbel's name was also given to the Hubbel dam that was used during the logging era to float logs down the Ottertail River to the sawmills in Frazee. The 192-mile Ottertail River begins in Clearwater County and ends in Breckenridge. It joins the Bois de Sioux River to form the Red River of the North, a 550-mile river that flows north into Canada and the Hudson Bay.

Building the Trail 4.7 miles

The Laurentian Lakes Chapter of the North Country Trail Association built this trail in 2014 with the assistance of the Minnesota Conservation Corps. The impressive kiosk located on Hwy 34 was built in 2015/16. Members included Gary Narum, Ray Vlasak, Jim Eisele, Jim and Jeri Rakness, Karen Stenberg, John LaFond, Don Klein, Wally Sizer, Greg Morgan, Edsel Gunderson, Greg Kalinoski, Renae Larson and Mike Doyle, among others, The LLC worked with the Minnesota DNR Wildlife division as well.

Minnesota 34 Trailhead to Frazee

Interesting notes about this section of the trail

This section of the NCT traverses private property and county roads. The NCT is built on county, state and federal land wherever possible. When it crosses private land, it's necessary to obtain easements from property owners. This was done in 2016 for the Holzhauser property. It links the trail from Hubbel Pond to CR 120/Frazee.

The City of Frazee became the first designated NCTA "Trail Town" in Minnesota in 2013, offering resupply opportunities for long distance hikers. Incorporated in 1891, the City was once home to the world's largest sawmill run by the Nichols-Chisholm Company.

Building the Trail 11.3 miles

Because this section of the trail is located on private property, LLC members were responsible for building trail to link it to Hwy 34 and to CR 120. Since this trail crosses pastureland in the Holzhauser property, the LLC built fence styles to assist hikers over the fences. They were designed and built by Gary Narum and Roger Hanson. They were installed by Gary, Jim Rakness, Edsel Gunderson, Ray Vlasak, Willis Mattison, Wally Sizer, Ken Mattson and Jon Holzhauser. Signage was also installed.

