



Alley Lake Trailhead



Sections



The North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) is a long-distance hiking trail that stretches across eight states from Vermont to central North Dakota. Part of the National Trails System, the NCT links scenic, natural, historic, and cultural areas and allows visitors to experience a variety of landscapes.

When completed, the Trail will be the longest continuous hiking trail in the United States. The total projected length of the North Country Trail is 4,800 miles, of which more than 3,100 have already been completed. In Michigan, the NCT also serves as the hiking route of the DNR's Iron Belle Trail. Newaygo County is home to about 70 miles of the NCT.

To the North

The most significant geographical feature of this section is the [White River](#), which the NCT crosses on an impressive steel bridge. The White River is a state-designated "[Natural River](#)", which involves controlled development to preserve the natural state of this 24-mile long river. Through most of Newaygo County, the White River is a slow-moving, shallow, and log-jammed body of water. The serene setting of the river makes it an appealing point for hikers to pause and soak in its beauty at the bridge crossing.

A second interesting feature lies just north of the White River in the ecologically rich [wetland](#) and cedar swamp bordering Rattlesnake Creek, a riparian habitat for the Federally Threatened Massasauga rattlesnake. These perpetually water-saturated lowlands are crossed on 1,800 feet of puncheon-style boardwalk.

To the South

The highlight at the north end of this southbound section is the impressive [boardwalk](#) crossing the coastal marshland between Cucumber Lake and Alley Lake. Constructed in 2019 by NCT volunteers and Forest Service personnel, the 605 linear feet of elevated boardwalk serves two purposes; it protects the fragile [marsh ecosystem](#) and prevents hikers from suffering wet feet.

Through the eyes of time, this section treks through a series of undulating beach sand and [coastal ridges](#), now heavily forested with Oak and young White Pine. Layers of heavy clay are in lower intradune areas and under the sand beneath your hiking boots. This combination of soils tends to hold water at the surface, so be prepared to slosh through ankle-deep water in the spring or after a heavy rain.

There are several [coastal plain marshes](#), identified as "Critically Globally-Imperiled", with less than 3% of these original ecosystems remaining worldwide. Rare plants and insects make their homes here, so please "hike gently." You will also encounter beautiful [coniferous swamp](#) ecosystems which provide habitat for diverse wildlife, water birds, and trees, including red maple, northern white cedar, and black willow.

Skunk Cabbage



Marsh Marigolds



Please scroll down for more detailed information.

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(Updated 5/1/25)

Directions to Trailhead: At the stoplight on M-37 in White Cloud (an officially-designated "NCT Trail Town"), take Wilcox Ave. west until it bends around to become Echo Drive. Continue on Echo Drive for 2 miles to the Alley Lake parking area, with parking on the left.

Northbound Overview & Trail Usage: The NCT travels **4.3 miles** from the Alley Lake parking spur north to the M-20 Trailhead on single-track trail tread that is open to hikers only. Mountain bikes and horses are prohibited south of M-20. Two flowing water sources provide reliable water within in the first 2+ miles of this section.

Northbound Trail Description: Walk east along Echo Drive spur from the parking area and turn left (north) where the trail crosses Echo Drive. Hikers will encounter these waypoints on the route:

- **In 1.0 miles:** Cross a short boardwalk over a marshy area, hike up along the southern wooded ridge above the White River, turn left (north) at a trail junction and cross the White River on a bridge
- **In 0.5 miles:** Pass by a signed spur for the White Cloud Loop Trail that branches to the right (and loops clockwise into White Cloud), and continue northwest to the high ground above the swampy marshlands adjacent to Rattlesnake Creek
- **In 0.6 miles:** Hike across the wetlands on the puncheon-style boardwalk and cross a bridge over nicely-flowing Rattlesnake Creek
- **In 0.7 miles:** Branch to the left at an unsigned junction just past the bridge, hike through an old pine plantation, turn left (west) on dirt/gravel Baseline Road, and in 100 yards turn right to resume your single track trail
- **1.5 miles:** Cross and parallel seasonal FS 5507 (also an ORV track), then cross it again before ducking in and out of several grassy meadows to pass by a trail box register and arrive at the M-20 Trailhead and parking area

Southbound Overview & Trail Usage: The NCT travels **8.5 miles** from the Alley Lake parking spur to the 40th Street Trailhead on single-track trail tread open only to hikers. Mountain bikes and horses are prohibited. Two slow-flowing creeks offer marginal on-trail water at about 3 and 4 miles along the southbound route. Be sure to treat or filter all drinking water collected on the NCT.

Southbound Trail Description: Walk east along Echo Drive spur from the parking area and turn right (south) where the trail crosses Echo Drive. Hikers will encounter the following waypoints:

- **In 2.0 miles:** Cross the long boardwalk over the marshland near Alley Lake, pass to the north of a small lake, and cross dirt Centerline Road
- **In 1.0 miles:** Pass a trail register box, and cross a bridge over Coonskin Creek
- **In 3.25 miles:** Pass through a large cedar swamp, cross a slow-moving stream in a drainage ditch, pass a series of wetland ponds, cross an isthmus of land between two marshes, and cross at seasonal 28th Street and an interpretative sign board
- **In 1.5 miles:** Skirt the east end of a coastal plain marshland, hike through low-lying areas, cross over a low ridge to an old pine plantation, and cross sandy FS 5531 (and ORV track)
- **In .75 miles:** Pass a spur trail going left (east) to the M-37 Roadside Park (with pit toilets and picnic tables, but no water), cross paved 40th Street, and turn right (west) on a spur trail to the 40th Street Trailhead and parking area