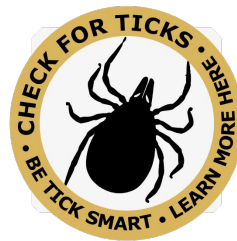




Croton Dam Trailhead

Sections



The North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) is a long-distance hiking trail similar to the Appalachian 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 allowing visitors to experience a variety of northern 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 68.4 miles of scenic trails.

To the North

You've just crossed the [Muskegon River](#), Michigan's 2nd longest river! Historically, the river boasts a rich legacy as a primary waterway for Native American hunting, fishing, and trading. Later, it served as the lumber industry thoroughfare for [floating logs](#) to the sawmills in Muskegon. Today, hikers retreat to the silence of the Northwoods as they ascend the stepped remnants of the river's ancient riverbanks and leave behind the rafters and tubers who flock to the river on hot summer weekends.

In addition to the forests, lakes, and streams that lie ahead, the route also highlights another noteworthy geographical feature: the newly-developed [Brooks Oak Pine Barrens Nature Sanctuary](#). Created in 2019 by a Conservation Fund grant to the [Michigan Nature Association](#), this 40-acre sanctuary showcases the dry-sand [prairie](#) and dry-mesic forest landscapes found in this specific part of Newaygo County. Because this is a "globally imperiled" [ecosystem](#) and home to rare, savanna-oriented species, there are no trails into this fragile area the trail borders.



To the South

Ironically, "flat as a proverbial pancake" is perhaps the best way to describe this section's most unique highlight. While originally covered by heavy forests, there was also a huge 3,500-acre tract of [wetlands](#) known as Rice Lake. Farmers drained the area in the 1930's to exploit the nutrient-rich muckland soil to grow onions, carrots, celery, and mint. The NCT crosses the far southeast corner of the former wetland areas turned to agricultural land. Kosten Drain, located in the heart of the muckland, is the southern drainage for the former Rice Lake. It is the primary headwaters and tributary of the Rogue River, whose banks the NCT traverses in the [Rogue River State Game Area](#).

Historically, three tribes of Native Americans gathered at Rice Lake each autumn to collect [wild rice](#) and hunt vast flocks of migrating waterfowl. Today, stone bird-points and arrowheads can be found on the area's muck farms. In 2022, another relic of the past was discovered just east of the trail when a mastodon skeleton was unearthed. The [Clapp Family Mastodon](#) is currently housed at the Grand Rapids Public Museum.



Please scroll down for more detailed information.

Croton Dam Trailhead Sections

Directions to Trailhead: Drive 7.0 miles east from Newaygo on Croton Drive and turn left (north) on Swan Avenue, then immediately turn right (east) into a large Consumers Power parking area used for NCT Trailhead parking near an USFS/NCT kiosk.

Northbound Overview & Trail Usage: Welcome to Michigan's Northwoods! Just below impressive Croton Dam, the NCT begins its trek northward 50+ miles through Newaygo County's Manistee Forest, 96% of which is on single-track trail. On this short section, the NCT travels **2.6 miles** north from the Croton Dam Trailhead to 56th Street, which is open to hiking only. No mountain bikes or horses are permitted. After leaving the Muskegon River, there are no on-trail water sources on this northbound stretch.

Northbound Trail Description: From the Croton Dam Trailhead parking, follow the blue blazes down a set of stairs to the river. NCT hikers will encounter the following northbound waypoints:

- **In 0.4 miles:** Hike under the Croton Drive Bridge, climb the stairs from the boat launch to cross the boaters' parking lot, then enter a single track trail at the south end of the parking lot before hiking up and along the river crest with nice river views, then turn right (away from the river) at a trail junction, marked by blue blazes
- **In 1.0 miles:** Pass a trail register box, ascend series of steps or shelves (remnant riverbanks), and cross diagonally across Croton Drive at Pine Road
- **In 1.2 miles:** Hike back into oak/pine forest, drop into several shallow, wooded basins, briefly pop out into a remnant of dry-sand prairie, and arrive at dirt-tracked 56th Street
NOTE: The Brooks Oak Pine Barrens Sanctuary lies to the west of the trail at the midway point of this stretch. Please contact the Michigan Nature Association about access.

Southbound Overview & Trail Usage: Say "goodbye" to Newaygo County! The name "Newaygo" means "many waters" in Algonquin. In fact, hikers can look forward to passing several lakes and streams along this **14.9-mile** (mostly) road walk from Croton Dam Trailhead to 22 Mile Road. Due to large stretches of private property and farmland, there are only a few short segments of single track trail in this section. Options for new, off-road sections of single-track trail continue to be explored by Trail planners, so watch for reroutes marked by carsonite posts. Pay attention since the road walk is not blue-blazed! There is one reliable on-trail water source mid-point at the inlet stream to Bill's Lake.

Southbound Trail Description: Walk out to Croton Drive, turn left (southeast) on the pavement, and observe these waypoints on your zig-zagging route to the Kent County line:

- **In 1.5 miles:** Cross the Muskegon River, turn left after the bridge onto a bike/walking trail below Croton Dam, walk up a stairway to a parking area, cross Croton Drive and ascend a staircase into Dr. M.K. Conklin Park. Pass through the parking lot, staying on the Croton Drive/Muskegon river side of the park to continue on the trail and follow the trail to Elm Ave.
NOTE: There are NO blue blazes through the park, so watch for a limited number of NCT directional post markers.
- **In 4.0 miles:** Turn right (south) on paved Elm Avenue, and in succession: go west on 76th Street, south on Locust Ave, west on 56th Street, south on Pear, west on 80th Street, south on Swan Road, cross M-82, continue on Swan, west on 80th Street, south on Pear, and cross the inlet stream to Bill's Lake
- **In 4.8 miles:** Continue briefly on Pear, turn east on 92nd Street (south side of Bill's Lake), go south on Locust again, cross 120th Street and continue straight on a dead-end dirt road to the end of Locust and pass around a gate by a blue blaze
- **In 4.6 miles:** Turn right at blue blaze and hike 0.5 miles on single track trail (NOTE: Trail is closed during hunting season 11/15-11/30), turn right at dirt Locust Avenue, turn west on 128th Street, turn south on Oak Avenue and continue to 22 Mile Road