



Nichols Lake North 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

This lake-studded section of trail is arguably the most visually scenic section of the NCT in Newaygo County. The forested route features hilly terrain punctuated by six picturesque, teardrop-shaped woodland lakes. Most of these small lakes lie in steep-sided basins considered **glacial depressions**, remnants of the retreating glaciers that once covered Michigan. The lakes are surrounded by US Forest Service land and spur trails lead to four rustic, drive-in **Forest Service campgrounds**, all within ½ mile of the trail.



To the South

In addition to three scenic streams in the initial part of trail, this section's most picturesque feature is certainly 153-acre Nichols Lake. This is the largest body of water directly on the NCT in Newaygo County and 85% of the lake is on Forest Service property. Nichols Lake has no inlet or outlet streams, yet supports a healthy fish population popular with anglers. Boat launch areas lie on the south and the north sides of the lake, but high speed boating and wakes are prohibited and gives the lake a quiet, wilderness feel. It also makes the lake very hospitable for migrating birds, water fowl, and **loons**. Hikers who stop at the North Nichols Lake Recreation Area can take a refreshing swim at the north side beach. This shoreline also provides a habitat for breeding and migrating **monarch butterflies**.



Please scroll down for more detailed information.



Nichols Lake North Trailhead Sections

(Updated 5/1/25)

Directions to Trailhead: Take M-37 five miles north of Brohman and turn left (west) onto 14 Mile Road. Turn left (south) on N. Bingham into Bitely and turn right (west) on Main Street, which bends into North Cleveland Drive. Follow Cleveland Drive about 2.5 miles to North Nichols Lake Recreation Area. Turn left (south) on an access road into the large trailhead parking area that has a USFS/NCT kiosk.

Northbound Overview & Trail Usage: The NCT travels **6.0 miles** from Nichols Lake North Trailhead (at Cleveland Drive) to 16 Mile Road. This northbound segment traverses hilly terrain on single-track trail tread open for hiking only. No mountain bikes or horses are allowed north of the Nichols Lake North Trailhead. On-trail water for drinking is in abundance from the lakes along this section. Be sure to treat or filter all water collected along the NCT.

Northbound Trail Description: The short spur trail to the NCT starts behind the USFS kiosk. At a junction, turn right (north) onto the NCT, cross paved Cleveland Road, and sign in at a trail box register in several hundred feet. Hikers will encounter these noteworthy waypoints:

- **In 0.5 miles:** Arrive at the crest above a swamp area where the trail dips sharply to the left and an unsigned spur trail branches right (east) to pretty Walkup Lake and a USFS campground (12 rustic campsites, water, and pit toilets)
- **In 1.5 miles:** Back at the NCT, drop down to and along the wetlands, climb over a ridge to the swampy headwaters of Leaf Lake, and climb up to and pass several overlooks
- **In 2.3 miles:** Hike above and along three beautiful forest-lined lake basins:
 1. Condon Lake (spur trail to six rustic USFS campsites on the southwest side)
 2. Sawkaw Lake (two-track to several rustic USFS campsites on the southside)
 3. Highbank Lake (signed spur trail to a popular USFS campground)
- **In 1.7 miles:** Descend rolling terrain, cross seasonal FS 5311, and cross Cedar Creek on a sturdy, twisting bridge
- **In .02 miles:** Arrive at 16 Mile Road at this section's end

Southbound Overview & Trail Usage: The NCT travels **6.7 miles** from Nichols Lake North Trailhead to Pierce Road. The southbound NCT is single-track trail tread which is open to both hiking and mountain biking. No horses are allowed. The first quarter of this section is hilly terrain that climbs along the forested rim on the west side of the Nichols Lake basin. The next three quarters of the trail is easy hiking over flat terrain crossing four lovely, shaded streams, all of which provide good water sources.

Southbound Trail Description: The short spur trail starts behind the USFS kiosk. At the junction, turn left (south) on the NCT. Hikers will encounter the following waypoints:

- **In 0.5 miles:** Pass forest-shrouded Atodd Lake (bushwack down to the pond and try to catch a glimpse of beavers before they slap a warning signal on the water with their tails)
- **In 1.0 miles:** Drop down to briefly to hike along the western shores of Nicholas Lake and listen for loons as you arrive at the south end boat launch
- **In .03 miles:** Climb to a signed spur trail that points left (east) toward South Nichols Lake USFS Campground (nice campsites, water, and pit toilets)
- **In 0.6 miles:** Cross the paved access road to the boat ramp, pass above long wetlands on the right and cross paved 11 Mile Road
- **In the next 4.4 miles:** Pass a trail box register and cross over three streams in succession (Tank Creek, West Michigan Creek, and Bear Creek)
- **In .2 miles:** Arrive at Pierce Road at the end of this section