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Tucked Away Treasures: State Natural Areas public land often overlooked

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A flock of wild turkeys roams on the Dells of the Wisconsin River State Natural Area just north of Wisconsin Dells

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Whether you're a student doing research for a doctorate, a hunter looking for a big buck or you simply want a leisurely hike in the woods, Wisconsin's State Natural Areas (SNAs) are hidden gems many people have yet to discover.

A separate entity from the state park system — the Department of Natural Resources website describes SNAs as areas that “protect outstanding examples of Wisconsin’s native landscape of natural communities, significant geological formations and archaeological sites.”

There are 674 Natural Areas encompassing more than 380,000 acres in Wisconsin. Locally there are 26 SNAs in Sauk County, 15 in Juneau, 14 in Columbia and six in Adams County. Despite those impressive numbers, you may drive by one without even knowing it. Many are tucked away along rural county roads with no more than a small entrance sign and a parking lot big enough for only a few cars.

Nate Fayram, the DNR State Natural Areas manager, said “A lot of people don’t know that they’re out there, and they may go to a State Natural Area and not realize they’re (on one).” While more popular SNAs like Parfrey’s Glen in Merrimac have noticeable signs visible from the road, others like Ferry Bluff near Sauk City initially have nothing to indicate a beautiful reserve of land open to the public lies only about a mile off Highway 60.

A long gravel road that looks more like a private driveway extends off the highway eventually ending along the banks of the Wisconsin River where visitors know they have arrived. A small parking lot along with informational signs are at the base of a trail that rapidly ascends 300 feet to stunning views of the Wisconsin River, Blue Mounds State Park to the southwest and the villages of Sauk City and Prairie du Sac to the east.

Fayram said while the DNR welcomes the public to Wisconsin’s SNAs, the agency is keeping things low-key. “Some of them don’t even have parking lots and there’s no designated trail. With some of the sites there’s nothing to direct people to.” Fayram jokingly said the DNR is not going to start placing large billboards along county roads advertising State Natural Areas.

Josh Mayer, a research assistant at UW-Madison, is on a quest to visit every natural area in Wisconsin, but may have a hard time keeping up. Mayer was recently featured on Wisconsin Public Television's "A Wisconsin Life" saying "They keep adding them faster than I can go see them all."

A storied history

Wisconsin's State Natural Area program began in 1951 and is considered to be the oldest and largest statewide nature preserve system in the U.S., thanks in large part to Clifford Germain.

Germain, who studied under Aldo Leopold at the University of Wisconsin in the 1940s, was honored in 2014 by the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame as the first ecologist and chief of the State Natural Areas program. Under his guidance, he more than quadrupled the program from 48 nature preserves upon his hiring in 1966 to 211 when he retired in 1985.

The DNR initially labeled the land reserves "scientific areas," but eventually realized it needed a public-relations overhaul.

Thomas Meyer, a conservation biologist for the Wisconsin DNR, said the areas originally were set aside for university research and not necessarily for use by the public.

"For the first 40 years of the program we really didn't go out of our way to promote the program because we had this science base where we were trying to protect rare stuff," he said.

Meyer said while the DNR always kept natural areas open to the general public into the 1980s, the SNA culture within the DNR changed as the '90s approached. "We recognized that we really needed to have a constituency that could support us when the chips were down," he said. "We wanted to promote the fact that these were great places to learn about nature."

Meyer said the agency did an about-face about the time the Internet emerged and developed web pages promoting SNAs. By 2000 the DNR created a guide book for natural areas which further promoted the reserved lands. Meyer added “we told the public these are not hands-off places and you can bring your fishing pole or your shotgun.”

The majority of SNAs are on state-owned property, but many are also on property owned by private nature conservation organizations and even private landowners. Meyer said there is sometimes confusion among visitors, or even would-be visitors, with the program’s namesake.

“Even though they use the term ‘State Natural Area’ (sometimes) they aren’t state-owned and people don’t make that connection that these are public accessible properties,” he said.

To serve and protect

While the public can enjoy the serenity and recreational opportunities SNAs have to offer — even including snowmobiling at some locales — at the end of the day the state continues to strive toward keeping nearly a half million acres in Wisconsin the way it may have looked hundreds, if not thousands of years ago.

Whether it’s managing the land through prescribed burns or keeping out invasive plant species, protection is the key word for the DNR.

Jon Robaidek is the Central Sands Field Ecologist for the Wisconsin DNR. A typical day for him may include desk work from his office in Wisconsin Rapids or field work at one of many SNAs in a seven-county area he keeps an eye on, including all of Juneau and Adams counties.

At a recent field mission at Quincy Bluff and Wetlands State Natural Area north of Wisconsin Dells in Adams County, Robaidek kept busy posting a snowmobile regulation sign after a recent snowfall. Further down 14th Court he switched gears and

started mapping out an area where the DNR plans on conducting a controlled burn in the spring. The burn will reduce the tree canopy and remove unwanted brush so native plants can continue to thrive.

When asked “why not let nature take its natural course,” Robaidek said human activities over the course of decades have led to a destruction of what Wisconsin looked like hundreds of years ago. “That’s why some of the species that utilize that landscape become very rare. We’ve been putting out the fires and not allowing things to burn and that’s paralyzing (growth),” he said.

Robaidek added that not only does the DNR revitalize rare plant species and get rid of invasive non-native ones, wildlife also comes back to life. He noted a Quincy Bluff SNA entrance sign that was riddled with what looked like large bullet holes. “Once we started doing some of the work out here, you got to see a lot more red-headed woodpeckers,” which were responsible for the holes in the sign, he said.

Robaidek and fellow DNR ecologists appear to have their work cut out for them in some of the region’s SNAs. The Quincy Bluff SNA spans over 6,500 acres and contains forests, rock outcroppings, wetlands and bluffs. However, Robaidek said the agency puts its energy and resources into the SNAs that need it most.

“You have some SNAs where not much management is going on because you want to protect what’s there and then you have SNAs where you do have a lot of management going on because it needed management to maintain that,” he said.

Educating the public

After 65 years of the program the DNR still holds true to its original mission of preserving thousands of acres of Wisconsin land for research opportunities. This past fall two red vans marked with Southern Illinois University emblems unloaded several college students at Baxter’s Hollow State Natural Area near Baraboo.

Students picked and chopped away at rock samples while a professor shouted out instructions guiding the students to traverse a steep hill.

Meyer, the DNR conservation biologist, said organizations or universities must get proper permits if they want to collect any type of samples — whether it is rocks, flowers or even moths that Robaidek observed one group of college students collecting.

The Baraboo Range, which extends from near Portage to just south of Reedsburg, has become a “world-wide destination” for geologists, according to Meyer. Within the range are several SNAs that offer key geological and archaeological landscapes that Meyer said allow scientists and students to “understand how the Earth was formed and how it has eroded.”

“The glaciers did quite the handiwork on our landscape and people from all over the world who study glacial geology come to Wisconsin to see that,” Meyer said. “When they’re here they’re also poking around looking at other bedrock geology sites such as the Baraboo Hills.”

He added the southern half of Wisconsin is “the Mecca for unusual geological features and formations.”

Posted: Hunting allowed

Meyer said there has always been a myth about SNAs that hunting and fishing are not allowed because the land is designated as protected. In fact, the opposite is true. The DNR and various conservation agencies actually encourage hunting because an over-populated deer herd often leads to the animals over-consuming native plants the state wants to preserve.

Hannah Spaul is Wisconsin’s director of land management for The Nature Conservancy — an international charitable environmental organization based in Arlington, Virginia.

“I think a lot of people would say, ‘The Nature Conservancy — they must be protecting deer.’ Deer eat a phenomenal amount of native vegetation to the point where it no longer thrives,” she said.

Thinning the deer populations allows many rare or uncommon plants or flowers along with oak trees to regenerate, she said.

“We want as many people to be out to decrease the deer herd,” she said, noting that Sauk County in particular has an “astronomically high” deer population.

State Natural Area hunting rules and regulations can be found on the DNR and The Nature Conservancy websites at **dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/naturalareas** and **nature.org/wisconsin**

If you go

Visitors to Wisconsin’s SNAs not only can simply enjoy natural beauty and the calm of few or no other human beings, but can educate themselves, too. Spaul encourages SNA visitors to first research what types of protected plant and animal species each conservancy has to offer by going to the organization’s website.

Spaul also said an excellent place to start is at the DNR’s website, which is linked to the Nature Conservancy’s site. Here users can use interactive maps, buy a guidebook and view visitor guidelines, among other things.

Some SNAs have regulations requiring visitors to stay on marked trails while others do not — allowing hikers to roam wherever they choose. Spaul said typically when an SNA is owned by the state, visitors can go wherever they want, but encourages people to first find out what regulations apply at a particular site.

Spaul said regulations vary among SNAs owned by The Nature Conservancy. Some allow visitors to roam freely while others don’t. She referred to the organization’s SNA in the bluffs near Spring Green. “We do ask that people stay on the trail while hiking because it’s a very fragile system and the plants that are off the trail would get damaged.”

If one is worried about getting lost in hundreds of acres of relatively remote territory, Spaul said modern technology can come to the rescue. Visitors to The Nature Conservancy’s website can download georeferenced maps that show hikers on their

smart phones exactly where they're located in a preserve.

Whether it be exploring the wetlands of the Swan Lake Sedge Meadow SNA near Portage or an ancient mountain range near Baraboo that geologists say was once as high as the Rocky Mountains, there are many hidden treasures to be found right here in southcentral Wisconsin.

Madison explorer Josh Mayer may have summed it up best.

“It’s just something fun for me. It gets me outside. I get to take pictures and I get to see the state,” he said. “What more could you ask for?”