

michigan

NORTH CENTRAL STATE TRAIL

Crickets chirping, an early June day opens in northern Michigan. Sunshine peeps through birch trees as fluffy seeds snow across your face. A wolf spider scurries across the smooth, crushed limestone, and 62 miles of woodlands, meadows, lakeshores and riverbanks await you on the North Central State Trail.

For more than 10 miles, the trail follows the narrow beaches and quaint cabins along Mullett Lake.

Springtime in northern Michigan revives the senses. The season brings bundles of sweet-smelling lilacs, electric green forests and fresh pine needles. Waterways ripple at every turn, pastures hum with wildlife, and communities charge up for months of outdoor recreation. With so much vitality on display, it's hard to say what you'll find most memorable about the North Central State Trail.

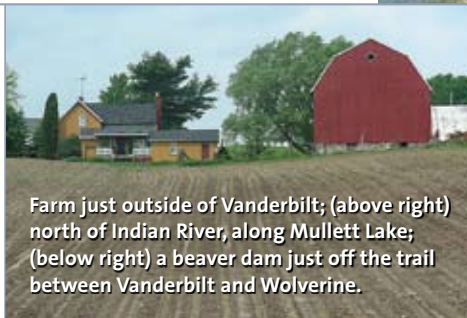
The rail-trail runs northward a bit like a crooked hook, from Gaylord, the highest elevation point on the trail, to Mackinaw City. A good place to start, though, is at the midpoint, in Indian River. The town is squeezed between two lakes, Mullett and Burt, and two rivers, the Indian and Sturgeon. From this trailhead, you can plot out-and-back excursions of any length and difficulty. At every stage, you'll experience a trail as unpredictable as it is rewarding.



The Mackinac Bridge looms over the Straits of Mackinac, connecting northern Michigan to the Upper Peninsula.

Heading south from Indian River toward Gaylord, the trail ventures through a forest of tall birch trees alive with all the bird calls and twitterings of an aviary. About six miles in, you hear the first whispering rush of the Sturgeon River, a popular trout stream for anglers that washes along and occasionally under the trail for the next few miles.

Blue knife-and-fork signs alert you to dining options right off the pathway. One of the first signs you reach is for the aptly named Meadows Bar (231.525.8801). The tavern-style restaurant sits in a nest of glowing dandelions in a plush, grassy meadow where the Sturgeon River has carved an opening in the wooded hills.



Farm just outside of Vanderbilt; (above right) north of Indian River, along Mullett Lake; (below right) a beaver dam just off the trail between Vanderbilt and Wolverine.

You can stock up on refreshments at a market just down the trail in Wolverine, or press on to Vanderbilt. This 11-mile section to Vanderbilt is the most remote and wild of the whole trail. It cuts through long stretches of marsh, wetlands and creeks, and across pockets of open meadow and wildflowers. This slice of trail is the heart of northern Michigan's elk country, so keep an eye out for elk grazing or drinking creekside. Also, about halfway to Vanderbilt, you can see a sprawling beaver dam just west of the pathway.

As you reach the quiet backyards of Vanderbilt, you begin a steady, eight-mile climb. Outside town the scenery shifts fairly dramatically from pastures and hillsides to deep, richly scented pine forests. Twenty-eight miles from Indian River, the trail finally eases into Gaylord at a broad complex of mint-green soccer fields. If you're turning around, the return trip is a mostly downhill breeze.

The northern half of the trail offers a totally different adventure. This leg rolls north from Indian River through impossibly fresh spring forests, with Highway 27 close on your left. At the town of Topinabee, the trail cozies up to Mullett Lake for a run of more than 10 miles. At times you're separated from the water by quaint lake cabins and narrow strands of private beach and docks. Other times, and for long periods, you straddle the shore as the lake spills away, sparkling, to the east.

All along the lakeshore and north to Cheboygan, lilacs purple the trailside as the landscape alternates between forests and open pastures, tall trees and barnyards. At a few points, the trail coasts on a high-wire railroad berm, with steep drops on either side into the woods—poignant



reminders of the enormous labor the Michigan Central Railroad put into building the Bay City to Mackinaw line.

Past Cheboygan, the trail burrows more deeply into tall woodlands on the final 16 miles into Mackinaw City. Lake Huron is always close by, sometimes visible in short clips between tree stands, but you have to head down a side road to get a clear shot of the Great Lake.

In Mackinaw City the northern trailhead drops you only a few blocks from the shore. Seagulls and masts and great sails replace the woodlands vista, and the towering Mackinac Bridge arcs out over the Straits of Mackinac toward Michigan's Upper Peninsula. For centuries, native populations used the waterways and lakes of northern Michigan to trade and move among the Great Lakes. So for a rather fitting cap to your trail experience, consider taking a 20-minute ferry ride out to Mackinac Island, which is entirely free of motorized vehicles. Thousands of bicycles line the streets and cover the island; they are readily and cheaply available for rent, although you can bring your own on the ferry (contact Shepler's for fare information: www.sheplersferry.com, 231.436.5023).

On the ferry deck, squinting into crisp winds and sea spray, you'll wonder how you got here from a trail with woodsy roots. Few other excursions offer such a striking testament to the diversity of northern Michigan's natural gifts—so many of them, incredibly, within easy reach of a single pathway.

GETTING THERE: The closest airport, and one where parking is free, is in Pellston, about 17 miles from Mackinaw City and less than 20 miles from Indian River. But you may find cheaper fares flying into Traverse City, Saginaw/Bay City/Midland (SBM) or Flint. Heading up to the trail from the south, all the major trailheads, except in Cheboygan, are right off Interstate 75. (For Cheboygan, you can take Highway 27 from Indian River or Highway 23 from Mackinaw City.) For more specific directions and amenities at each trailhead, contact the Top of Michigan Trails Council (www.trailscouncil.org; 231.348.8280).

RENTALS: There are hopes for bike rentals closer to the trail, but right now the closest vendor is in Petoskey, about a 20-minute drive from Indian River, and right along Lake Michigan at Little Traverse Bay—itself a wonderful destination stop. Latitude 45 (<http://latitude45.com>; 231.348.5342) on West Mitchell Street rents racks and Giant bicycles perfect for the trail surface.




Snowmobiles are allowed on the trail during the winter. You can find rentals near the trail on Fairview Road in Gaylord at Alpine Snowmobile Rental (www.michigansnowmobile.com/alpinerentals; 989.731.1276).

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT: In Indian River you can find a number of lodging options within a block or two of the trail, including several directly across the street. The Indian River Chamber of Commerce is a good place to start (www.irchamber.com; 231.238.9325); their Web site even lists accommodations by proximity to the trail.

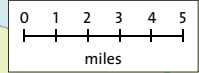
For dining, each community along the trail offers readily accessible choices. Often you won't have to travel more than a few yards to find refreshment, such as casual, low-priced burgers and sandwiches at Breakers Bar & Grill (www.breakersbar.com; 231.238.7544), across a boardwalk from the trail in Topinabee. If you stay in Indian River, other ideas include the Brown Trout (231.238.9441) for great trout chowder and heaping portions of bread pudding, or the Dairy Mart (231.238.1111), directly across from the Chamber of Commerce, for cold treats.

WANT MORE: The Michigan Department of Natural Resources owns and operates the trail, and has an office in Gaylord (www.michigan.gov/dnr; 989.732.3541). For an interactive GIS map, visit www.trailink.com and search in Michigan for the North Central State Trail, formerly the Gaylord to Mackinaw City Trail. The Top of Michigan Trails Council is another good source of information about trails and trail projects in northern Michigan.

North Central State Trail
 Total trail length 62 miles
 Crushed limestone surface

-  Trailhead
-  Parking
-  Restrooms

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLE MARKS



Map for reference only. Not for navigation.

