

Did You Know?

The land that comprises the Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary has a well-documented history of human activity. Before and after European settlers discovered Alpena's rich landscape, Native Americans utilized the vast fish and fowl resources teeming in the Thunder Bay River. Local Indian chiefs included Mich-e-ke-wis (Spirit of the West Wind) of the Chippewa Tribe and Sah-gon-ah-ka-to (Thunder Cloud), Alpena's last Indian chief. The latter was born in 1776 near the "OxBow" of the Thunder Bay River, a peninsula formed by a large bend in the river, probably not far from the present day Island Park. There were no dams at that time and the Thunder Bay River in this location would have looked quite different from the present. Historians tell us that chief Sah-gon-ah-ka-to died in 1869 at the age of 93 and was originally buried less than half a mile from his birthplace.

The river's OxBow area would later take on an entirely new spirit as the lumbering era consumed all that was Alpena and the Thunder Bay River. To see the river in the heart of the logging era would have been truly amazing. Huge logs, some 90 to 100 feet long, floated their way down the river from camps typically 20-50 miles up river in the heart of the timber country to mills and shipyards in Alpena.

After the logging boom settled in the early 1900s, Alpena residents utilized the river in a new way by engineering a large hydroelectric dam downriver from the Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary on Ninth Avenue. The resulting backwaters formed Lake Besser and flooded what was formerly the OxBow of the river. The current character of the Sanctuary, with its open waters punctuated by many small islands, provides ideal nesting habitat and supports a variety of wetlands vegetation. The Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary now hosts many different bird species year-long residents and migrants alike.



The Blue Heron Water Trail provides visitors a resource of leisurely recreation and visual splendor. This trail is dedicated to the memory of O.B. Eustis, whom in 1974 described the Sanctuary in these colorful words:

"It's a place of quiet waters, waving reeds, shaded shores and water lilies... a goose nesting on a muskrat house, mallard ducklings crowding close to mama, a deer watching from behind the tag alders, the slap of a beaver's tail."

What You Might See



Mute Swan



Red-winged Blackbird



Great Blue Heron



Blue Flag Iris



White-tailed Deer



Otter



Painted Turtle



Leopard Frog



Green-winged Teal

For the health, safety and enjoyment of all, please keep your distance from the wildlife.

The Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary **Blue Heron Water Trail**



Northeast Michigan's Premier Self-Guided Water Trail

City of Alpena
Wildlife Sanctuary Board
208 North 1st Ave
Alpena, MI 49707
www.alpena.mi.us



Blue Heron Water Trail features nine buoys, each highlighting a different aspect of the Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary. Follow the interpretation as you paddle your way through this unique and beautiful treasure.

Possible Routes

Long Route: Time is 1.5 to 2 hours. Follow buoys starting at 1 ending at 9.

Short Route: Time is approx. 1 hour. Follow buoys 1-4, then skip to buoys 7-9.

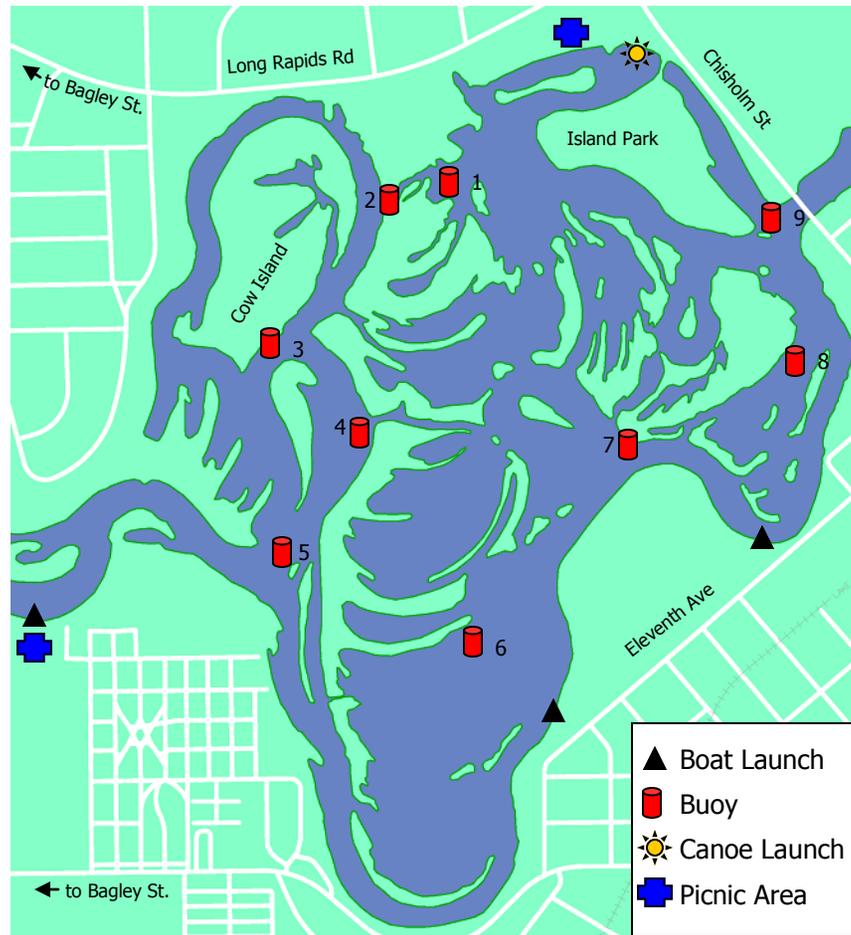
Buoy 1: From this buoy, you have a great view of several wetland communities. Wetlands are ecosystems that depend on saturated soils. Often called "nature's nurseries," these unique communities provide habitat for many species of plants and animals. They also benefit humans by filtering and slowly releasing rain water and snow melt thereby recharging groundwater, recycling nutrients, and mitigating flooding.

Buoy 2: Here at "Cow Island" channel you may either continue straight, or cut right around the island for exceptional wildlife viewing. The 22-acre Cow Island was named for its former purpose as a grazing ground for cattle. The Thunder Bay Audubon Society maintains a portion of the land providing for exceptional bird watching.

Buoy 3: We hope that you remembered your pole and tackle as you've now reached a prized fishing area. These waters are a hub of ichthyoid activity. Large Mouth Bass, Yellow Perch, and Rock Bass are only a small example of catches that await you. While the presence of dams throughout the watershed has limited fish passage, migratory species such as Walleye and Brown Trout can still be found in lower reaches of the river.

Buoy 4: The Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary offers an abundance of plant life. Sedges, rushes, and cattails paint the water's edge in shades of yellow and green while the leaves and flowers of Viburnum, Dogwood, and Willow decorate the upland slopes with autumn foliage and springtime floral displays. (Long route continue to buoy 5, short route continue to buoy 7)

Buoy 5: A few examples of stream bank erosion can be seen here in the exposed, sandy stretches of the Sanctuary. Human activity in these areas prevents plant roots from taking hold and stabilizing these slopes.



Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary

Buoy 6: The Great White Egret and the Great Blue Heron are readily seen throughout the Sanctuary. In this area of the Sanctuary evening paddlers can often see congregations of egrets not only standing in the waters, but also flying around the sky.



Buoy 7: Other issues affecting the watershed include the proliferation of invasive species such as Mute Swans, Rusty Crawfish, Eurasian Water Milfoil and Spotted Knapweed.

Buoy 8: Migration is a biannual journey that is both energy intensive and filled with obstacles. As such, it is responsible for the majority of adult mortality in land birds. If you visit the popular viewing location in the autumn, you may see an animated flock of Bufflehead ducks feeding in this area. Michigan also is a wintering site for several northern nesting bird species. Along with bird and fish species, most paddles will have an opportunity to see the many mammal species that live in the Sanctuary. White-tailed deer can be seen swimming across the river, as well as staring at paddlers from the land. There have also been many occurrences of river otter and muskrat.

Buoy 9: Island Park is now on your left hand side. This highly-treasured, 17-acre public park features a network of paths that lead photographers, fishermen and nature lovers alike through a variety of unique ecosystems. The Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary Board utilizes Island Park for numerous educational, recreational and research activities and maintains a handicapped accessible viewing platform along with several fishing platforms.

Each season offers different animals, flora and fauna, and amount of activity in the Sanctuary. We'd like to remind paddlers that what you may see during one season, may not be there during another. It's best to enjoy the Sanctuary during all four seasons!

Give the wildlife their space. Some animals can become very protective. If you see any wildlife throughout the sanctuary, be sure to leave enough room for both animal and explorer to pass.

Comments or Questions??

We always appreciate comments from the public on how to make the Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary and Island Park more accessible to everyone. If you have any questions or comments you'd like to share please do so by emailing: Adam Poll: adamp@alpena.mi.us

You can access more information about happens at the Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary and Island park by visiting our exhibit at the Maritime Heritage Center, or by visiting www.alpena.mi.us/rivercenterhome.html. Find us on Facebook!