

Pebbly Prairie

discovering Oscoda County's lost prairie and other treasures



Northern Outings

By Erin Fanning

“I’m about to see something I’ve never seen before,” the elderly woman announced as she clambered out of a blue pickup truck. Despite her diminutive size and the cane she leaned on, she seemed sprightly, and her enthusiasm spread across the dirt parking lot to where I stood.

The Au Sable High Banks Overlook was new to me too. Part of the 58-mile Jack Pine Wildlife Tour, a self-guided route that follows the winding path of the Au Sable River in Oscoda County and spills into Alcona County, the High Banks Overlook had lured me off paved F-32 with its promise of breathtaking views.

And I wasn’t disappointed. A short gravel pathway led to a ledge with a wooden fence spanning its length. Below the fence, a sandy hillside crumbled down to the Au Sable River, its murmuring reaching me before I could actually see it. Two islands sat in the middle of the wide river, and trees, stretching out from the riverbanks, cover any trace of mankind.

As I walked back to my truck, the woman, her white hair fluffing in the breeze like a halo, leaned against the fence, her head barely reaching the top rung. A gray coat, hiding a pink-and-green plaid skirt, hung almost to her knees. As the woman spoke to her burly, baldheaded companion, her hands fluttered in the air, gesturing constantly toward the river.

Cutting a jagged gash through the middle of Oscoda County, the Au

Sable River draws you in like an angler reeling in his catch. In a sense it is the heart of Oscoda County, its constant beat dictating the rhythm of day-to-day life. As the seasons unfold, fly fishermen wait patiently for the tug of trout; kayakers paddle the river’s gentle rhythms; canoeists pitch tents in one of the many campsites that line the riverbanks; and horsemen, replaced when snow falls by cross-country skiers, follow the trails that parallel the river.

But Oscoda County is much more than just the Au Sable River; it is a place of hidden treasures. Way off the beaten path, down hilly Valley Road, Huron National Forest biologists are busy unearthing Oscoda County’s lost prairies. In the 1990s, National Forest employees discovered that the Valley Road area contained more grasses than other sections of the county. They also found distinctive plant life, like yellow-flowered pale agoseris and grassy rough fescue.

The biologists determined that the area was actually a dry glacial drainage, not conducive to growing trees. At one time the entire county was more open; a look at historical photographs of Oscoda County confirms

that. In fact, it was this openness that inspired 19th century explorer Henry Schoolcraft to name Oscoda County after two Indian words: *ossin* (pebble) and *muskoda* (prairie). Today, the Forest Service actively manages the old prairie land by encouraging grass growth. There is hope that it will make a good habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, which are rare in Michigan, and upland sandpipers.

There aren’t any signs or brochures advertising Oscoda County’s rediscovered prairies. Simply look for the large clearings north and south of the intersection of Valley Road and Howard Road, about four miles west of M-33. Here the sky is uninterrupted by trees and rare plants hide among tall grasses. Observant hikers may stumble across the bright yellow petals of prairie dandelion, the only place in the Huron National Forest that is home to these wildflowers, or the purple spikes of Hill’s thistle.

Oscoda County also boasts another, better known form of wildlife—the tiny Kirtland’s warbler. Although it only weighs a half-ounce, the yellow-and-gray bird is somewhat of a giant in Oscoda County and attracts bird enthusiasts from around the world. Practically all Kirtland’s warblers spend their summers in the area’s jack pine forests, building their nests on the ground, where their enemy, the opportunistic cowbird, likes to lay its eggs. To increase awareness of the endangered warbler’s plight,



Traveler's Notes

For more information about Oscoda County and the Huron National Forest contact the Mio Ranger District at 989-826-3252, www.fs.fed.us/r9/hmnf/ or the Oscoda County Chamber of Commerce at 1-800-800-6133, www.oscodacounty.org.

the Huron National Forest sponsors summer tours of the songbird's nesting areas, and the community holds an annual Kirtland's Warbler Festival in May.

Oscoda's outdoor charms, however, do not end there. About 200,000 acres of state and federal land roll across the county, offering several established hiking trails and miles and miles of rugged two-tracks that beg for exploration. The 1.2-mile Island Lake Trail climbs through hardwood hills, and the 7.5-mile Loud Creek Trail System rambles past beaver ponds and crosses streams as it follows the ridges and hills near Mio, the county seat.

Additionally, a large segment of the Shore-to-Shore Trail, a pathway that stretches from Lake Huron to Lake Michigan, runs through Oscoda County. Although the route is primarily a horse trail, it is still appropriate for hikers but cyclists may find the hoof-pocked pathway a little jarring. Scrambling along the trail on a chilly but clear morning, I hugged the Au Sable River before dipping inland. In a low-lying area, mud sucked at my hiking boots but as I climbed higher I sank into

sandy soil. A grouse burst from the underbrush as I neared the end of the hike, and a scrap of white cloth, caught in a tree branch, fluttered in the breeze like a Halloween ghost.

Oscoda County also contains many manmade treasures. In Mio, Our Lady of the Woods Shrine, an enormous stone grotto with hidden niches and alcoves, sits next to St. Mary's Catholic Church. Within one of the alcoves, sunlight filters through green, red, orange, and purple stained glass windows, turning the stone on the opposite wall a rainbow of colors.

A little north of Mio on Kittle Road, Amish shops dot the area, and in Fairview, the Family Bookshelf, a diverse store with folk music, hiking guides, and crafts from around the world, features a colorful mural that fills the side of the building. People dance against a blue sky; a giraffe looks down on the crowd; a woman with a long, flowing dress and brown braid plays a tambourine; and a blonde wearing a pink dress, her eyes closed, grooves to the music of the mural musicians.

History can be found farther north at the Steiner and Michigan Maga-

zine Museums, between Fairview and Comins. The Steiner Museum specializes in Oscoda County history, and old farm machinery and wagons litter the museum's yard. The log North Fairview School, founded in 1885, practically bumps into M-33, and under the protection of trees sits the wheel and stone from the Royce Mill, the first water mill in Oscoda County. The Michigan Magazine Museum houses a collection from its namesake PBS program with hosts Dell Vaughan and Barry Stutesman. Outside, a giant Indian head made of native limestone, on loan from Onaway's Moran Iron Works, draws you from the road with its enormous size and noble dimensions.

In Oscoda County, however, you almost always find yourself drifting back to the Au Sable River. Winding along F-32, I followed the Au Sable's twisting path, as sunlight flickered through pine trees, and rundown log cabins from a long-closed resort flashed by. In McKinley, a historic logging town, a carefully restored log cabin, its shutters trimmed in forest green and shining with a shellac finish, looked like a Christmas tree ornament.

Overlooks along the road promised views of the Au Sable and glimpses of soaring bald eagles or fishing blue herons. It is this raw beauty, impossible for man to duplicate, that makes one want to speak out loud and announce to complete strangers, like the charming elderly woman I had seen earlier in the day, "I'm about to see something I've never seen before." 🙌

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Illustration by Rod Lawrence.