

Photo Destination: Lower Michigan (The Other Peninsula)

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I have been spending a lot of time in the "other" peninsula of Michigan in the last 12-18 months as part of my latest book project. My discussions of Michigan as a photographic destination usually focus on the Upper Peninsula and other locations of interest (of which there are many). However, there are plenty of interesting locations to visit in the Lower Peninsula, and I thought it might be worthwhile to discuss some of them for those that may not be aware of the various possibilities within the state.

First, let me explain a bit about my focus as a photographer. I shoot landscapes and flora almost exclusively, so my experience is biased from that perspective and I'll be discussing locations from that standpoint. Information about wildlife shooting will be included, but that is not my area of expertise. Since I'm a visitor from a neighboring state, this area is truly a destination for me. As a visitor, I can offer some idea of the experience of traveling to this part of the country and how to approach it.

Second, the biggest draws and attractions, from a photographic standpoint, are the Great Lakes (with shoreline bordering on Lakes Michigan, Huron and Erie), the corresponding dunes bordering the lakes, the extensive forest areas including both state and national forests, and the wide range of wetlands and waterways that stretch across the area.

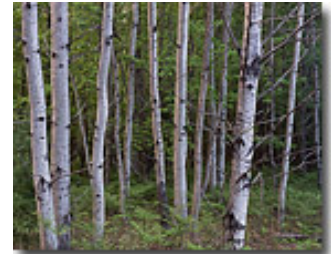
The Great Lakes

Many of the state parks and natural areas within the Lower Peninsula are located along the shores of the various Great Lakes. The Lake Michigan side of the peninsula tends toward sandy beaches and includes the largest collection of freshwater dunes in the world. The Lake Huron side is a bit rockier, but still with lots of beaches and sandy portions. I have not yet visited the Lake Erie shore, though I know from photographs and research that this area includes a number of beaches as well, and some very large marshy areas. In addition, there are at least 3 wildflowers that bloom only along the Great Lakes shore - the dwarf lake iris, Pitcher's thistle, and Houghton's goldenrod - and can be found in various Lower Peninsula locations.

Lake Michigan

As previously mentioned, the system of freshwater dunes along the shores of Lake Michigan is the largest in the world, and this system includes some very impressive examples along the shore of the Lower Peninsula. Starting from the south and working northward, there are excellent examples at Warren Dunes State Park, Grand Mere State Park, Saugatuck Dunes State Park, Muskegon State Park, Silver Lake State Park and Ludington Dunes State Park. Immediately contiguous to the Ludington Dunes is the Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness, the only federally designated wilderness in the Lower Peninsula and part of the Manistee National Forest. Finally, as you reach the Leelanau Peninsula, you will find the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, a portion of the National Parks system that stretches along 35 miles of the Lake Michigan shore. This area preserves examples of various ecosystems including open dunes, grass and forest covered dunes, ghost forests (forests that were killed and buried by moving dunes, then subsequently uncovered), inter-dune wetlands, and inland lakes and rivers that empty into Lake Michigan. While the Ludington, Nordhouse, and Sleeping Bear Dunes are the area's largest natural locations, any one of these destinations can yield interesting photography opportunities.

One additional location worth noting is Wilderness State Park, at the very northwestern corner of the Lower Peninsula. This 10,000-acre park has an extensive trail network, though much of the interior of the park is newer forest that is still a bit scruffy (personal opinion). However, the main attraction is the extensive Lake Michigan shoreline that includes marshy, sandy and rocky sections, depending on where you are in the park. In addition, Waugoshance Point is a very interesting peninsula that extends into the lake and includes grasslands, reedy wetlands, rocky pools and an extended shoreline. The area requires a bit of time and careful exploration to find



images that work, but I've found it a rewarding area to visit. It's also been exceptionally quiet when I've visited, which is always a bonus.

Lake Huron

The Lake Huron coast has some dune areas, though they are generally smaller and less extensive than the Lake Michigan side. The Huron coast tends to be a bit rockier, though it should be mentioned that both coasts have interesting examples of cobblestone beaches. Some excellent photographic locations along the Huron coast include P. H. Hoefft State Park, Thompson's Harbor State Park, Negwegon State Park, Tawas State Park, Bay City Recreation Area, and Port Crescent State Park. Worthy of mention specifically is Bay City Recreation Area, which contains Tobico Marsh, one of the largest remaining coastal wetlands in the entire Great Lakes area and a designated National Natural Landmark. This marsh/wetland natural area covers a total of 1652 acres and was formed by waves depositing sand along the Huron shore and cutting off a large section of former shoreline that then became an inland lake. This is an excellent area for birders and bird photography, given the variety of ecosystems within the area.



Lake Erie

The Lake Erie shoreline is south of Detroit, and includes more examples of Great Lakes wetlands/marsh areas. A main attraction of this area is the extensive marshy areas along the shore that include very large beds of American Lotus flowers. These beautiful aquatic flowers bloom in June or July and form large communities of plants. When they are all in bloom, it is quite a sight and worth a visit at the right time of year. There are also smaller areas of prairie and oak savanna either in Sterling State Park or in smaller nature preserves nearby.

Forests

The system of national and state forests in the Lower Peninsula is impressively large. While I haven't actually done a formal comparison, I'm willing to bet that the system of forests across the state (including the Upper Peninsula) is one of the largest in the country, and certainly one of the largest east of the Mississippi River. The Manistee-Huron National Forest stretches clear across the northern section of the Lower Peninsula and between the two co-administered forests, which includes almost a million acres of forestland. State forests include the Au Sable State Forest, Mackinaw State Forest, Pere Marquette State Forest, and the Pigeon River Country State Forest. Management of state forestlands is divided into Forest Management Units, and the Department of Natural Resources estimates they have approximately 2 million acres of forest set aside for various outdoor recreation activities within the eight Management Units. The vast majority of these forests are at least second growth, as Michigan was extensively (in fact, almost completely) logged during the 1800s and early 1900s. However, small areas of old growth forest do remain, including a section in Hartwick Pines State Park. However, many of the forest areas (as well as the parks along the Great Lakes shores) still boast impressive spring wildflower displays and are well worth a visit. Fall color in the Lower Peninsula can also be spectacular. It is worth noting that fall color in the north central part of the state will normally reach peak as much as 1-2 weeks prior to those forest areas along the Great Lakes shore due to the moderating influence of the Lakes on local weather/temperature patterns. This requires careful planning and attention to local conditions if you are looking for fall color at a very specific location. On the positive side, any visit in early to mid October is likely to yield good fall color in some portion of the Lower Peninsula. Flexibility is obviously very important. Also, a note for wildlife photographers: the Pigeon River Country State Forest has a well-known and well-established elk herd living in the forest. People actually gather at certain locations within the forest at dusk to watch them.

Wetlands And Waterways

Finally, the Lower Peninsula is a water lover's dream. Between the previously discussed Great Lakes and the impressive number of inland lakes, rivers and streams, and various types of wetlands, there is some sort of interesting water to be found no matter where in the Lower Peninsula you are. I personally find the lakes and wetlands the most interesting areas to explore and photograph. Lakes and ponds range in size from very small to very large inland lakes. There are man-made lakes, but many of the lakes and ponds are natural, with interesting reeds or plant areas along the shore. Wetlands include every conceivable type, including swamps, marshes, bogs and fens. Waders are a major bonus here but interesting images can be taken from the edges of these areas as well. In general, rivers and streams are relatively calm and don't yield many water-over-the-rocks images. They also frequently run through lowland areas that are also swampy or marshy, but nice images can be found here as well with some patience and searching. Interestingly, there are only one or two locations in the entire Lower Peninsula that include a waterfall. Only one of these is easily accessible, and it's not a large waterfall at all. If you want good waterfalls in Michigan, head to the Upper Peninsula, which has many.

Photographic Possibilities

The Lower Peninsula has a very extensive network of State Game areas for hunting and fishing, but obviously these areas would support bird and wildlife photography as well. The Lower Peninsula also has a number of lighthouses along the Great Lakes shoreline, interesting small towns, and other photogenic spots of interest if you prefer to mix other types of photography in with your nature shooting.

Camping And Lodging

There are many locations for camping in the state parks and recreation areas, state forests, national forests, and of course, the National Lakeshore. In addition, basically all of the natural areas in the state are also relatively close to towns or cities with plenty of lodging opportunities. This can make staying close to where you want to photograph convenient, but finding a truly isolated area that has a wilderness feel is somewhat challenging.

Travel And Weather

Parts of the Lower Peninsula can be affected by lake effect snow. If you find snow and ice interesting for photography, then Michigan is a wonderful winter destination. Many of the roads that provide access to worthwhile photographic sites within both the Lower and Upper Peninsula are dirt or gravel, and can be "interesting" in wintry weather. Most of these roads are not plowed, so caution is advisable in bad weather, especially snowy or icy conditions. There are locations that, at times, are not accessible unless you are snowmobiling. Whatever the season, though, there is always something of interest to be photographed on the "other" peninsula.

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Christopher Jordan lives in central Indiana and specializes in natural landscape photography in the Great Lakes and Midwestern regions of the United States. Many of his images from Michigan will be featured in the upcoming book *Of Woods and Water: A Photographic Journey Across Michigan*, to be released in the fall of 2008, in collaboration with Ron Leonetti. For more information, please visit www.christopherjordanphotography.com.



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