



A VIEW WITH ROOM: The granite ledges of Michigan's Trap Hills offer rest stops and campsites with views to Lake Superior and the Porcupine Mountains.

Out Of Sight

In Michigan's Trap Hills, you'll find space to wander and wonder, and quiet rock outcrops with panoramas so wide you'll be blinking in disbelief.

BY ERIC HANSEN

IMAGINE A RIDGELINE HIKE with vistas stretching 50 miles and more, providing some of the grandest views in the Upper Midwest. Now imagine enjoying such splendor, or maybe a sunset, from rock balconies so quiet and deserted the moss doesn't show any boot scuff marks.

Welcome to the Trap Hills, one of the hidden gems of Michigan's Upper Peninsula backcountry. This craggy land is so little known that you won't find descriptions in guidebooks or postcards

trumpeting its charms. Scan the Internet, though, and clues to this treasure emerge: rare plant surveys, a wilderness-preservation group championing the Trap Hills, and cliff-top photos taken by members of the local North Country Trail chapter.

To Upper-Midwest hikers familiar with the region's paths and topography, the Trap Hills ridge might remind you of the Escarpment Trail in Michigan's Porcupine Mountains or Minnesota's Oberg Mountain on the Superior Hiking Trail. But to equal the Trap Hills I experienced last October, you'd have to make those other ridges 20 stunning miles long, scatter viewpoints all along their length, and make the large parking lots disappear. You'd also have to remove all the hikers, because I spent 4 days hiking the Traps without seeing another's footprints.

HALFWAY THROUGH a 28-mile traverse of this remote ridgeline, I paused on a high ledge, looked west, and spotted a massive granite face in the distance—one from which I'd watched the sunrise the day before. By this point in the hike, I was used to broad views from the parade of rock outcrops. But this one transcended the visual, bringing together the best moments of the trip into one glorious panorama. Lake Superior, a full eighth of Earth's fresh water, glistened a perfect blue to the north, its waters nudging up against the broad-shouldered Porcupine Mountains. Deep-blue skies wisped with thin clouds stretched to the southwest, past Lake Gogebic to Wolf Mountain. Golden aspen lined the streams on the valley floor below. To the south, the endless forests of the Upper Peninsula, with their amber and bronze hardwoods and evergreen pines, swept to the horizon.

Huge views are only part of the Trap Hills story, however. Grouse, sometimes 20 or more, exploded out of pines as I passed. Toads the size of my pinky fingernail hopped along the trail, celebrating a warm afternoon. A bald eagle soared overhead, riding thermals rising from south-facing cliffs. Magnificent stands of mature maple lined the trail on the tall bluffs above Cascade Creek. In the evenings, owls hooted and coyotes yelped.

There's a mystique about the Trap

Hills, a whiff of the unknown and a feeling that exploration reaps rich rewards. The open, older forests invite off-trail rambling and discovery, as do the moist nooks and crannies of the Gleason Creek and Whiskey Hollow Creek gorges. Rock ledges abound, providing sun-splashed perches to those willing to climb. I saw a dozen overlooks I'd gladly spend the night on, each a private veranda with perfect sunrise and sunset views.

A few years back, I visited a fire-tower ranger and commented about stunning views. He swept his arm across the horizon and replied, "Yep, after this, anything else will seem like a basement apartment."

I had a similar feeling after sleeping on the high ledges in Trap Hills, finding the space to ponder broad questions like, "Aren't those bumps on the eastern horizon the (60-mile distant) Huron Mountains?" Or, "How did fairy bells (a rare plant) become isolated here in the Porkies, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and in the Cascades of Oregon and Washington?" Great questions demand answers, so I'll have to return, with binoculars, topos, and lots of time.

EXPEDITION PLANNER TRAP HILLS, MI

GETTING THERE: From Bergland, Michigan, at the north end of Lake Gogebic, drive 10 miles north on M-64, then 4.5 miles south on old M-64 to the Gogebic Ridge Trail.

TRAILS: The author's 28-mile hike started at the Gogebic Ridge Trail on old M-64, turned a half-mile east to the North Country Trail (NCT), and followed that path east to Old Victoria (a restored historic mining village that features an Adirondack-style trail shelter). Some of the western segments of this section of the NCT are faint, but navigable thanks to blue diamond markers. Shuttle rides: Ontran, (906) 884-2006; check for availability.

GUIDES: The best source around is the Web site of the Peter Wolfe Chapter of the North Country Trail Association (www.northcountrytrail.org/pwf/). It features topographical trail maps, elevation profiles, trail notes, conditions, water sources, and phenology. USGS quads include Bergland NE, Matchwood NW, Oak Bluff, and Rockland (\$4.95).

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