

Introduction

On October 2, 1968, the US Congress ratified the National Trails System Act, legislation designed to promote the preservation and enjoyment of America's natural areas and historic resources and to provide for the population's increasing need for trails-based outdoor recreation. Two trails—the Appalachian and the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trails—were designated as the first in the National Trails System, but the act also provided for the study of additional trails for possible future inclusion, including one that traversed and linked America's "Great North Woods." Congress authorized the North Country National Scenic Trail in 1980. Today, there are eleven National Scenic Trails.

The North Country National Scenic Trail (colloquially, the North Country Trail, or NCT) is the longest of these trails, spanning 4,600 miles in seven states. But it's not only its length that distinguishes the NCT. The diversity of the places and people connected by the trail is another highlight—as is its accessibility. More than twice the length of the Appalachian Trail, the NCT is within a day's drive of fully 40 percent of all Americans.

There are places along the NCT where it navigates pristine wilderness, expansive wildflower meadows, virgin stands of timber, extraordinary overlooks, and the third largest waterfall east of the Mississippi; other segments take hikers on strolls through towns, past tempting ice cream parlors and aromatic bakeries. Throughout, the NCT is deeply connected with American history, following the footsteps of the country's first peoples, voyageurs, surveyors, soldiers, canal boaters, sailors, lumbermen, runaway slaves, miners, and aeronauts, as well as a few less savory characters here and there. America's greatest scenic trail is a national treasure, a peoples' trail, linking and celebrating our natural heritage and the cultural and historic diversity of our northern heartlands. The featured hikes found in this guide are just a sample of what's waiting to be discovered on the NCT.

How to Use This Guide

A comprehensive covering of all 4,600 miles of the NCT isn't possible in a single guidebook. For one thing, the NCT is a work in progress; a little less than half of the trail still needs to be located off-road, which makes keeping a guidebook up to date pretty problematic. Instead, this book is designed to introduce readers to the sport of hiking and initiate a relationship with the NCT and its community of trail builders and maintainers—

the Red Plaid Nation, as they enjoy calling themselves. It's an invitation to get out on the trail and celebrate the heritage of the North Country and its mythical "Great North Woods." It's also an invitation to join fellow red-plaiders to help bootstrap the trail into being in its entirety.

Local experts have selected 40 hikes from within the NCT that represent a range of geographic locations, difficulties, distances, and terrains. These hikes are some of the gems on a 4,600-mile necklace encircling America's northern heartlands. The NCT contains hikes suitable for novice and experienced hikers alike, and this guide will help readers choose and match the experience most suitable for their particular interests and ability levels. Many of these featured hikes begin and end at the same place (i.e., they are loop trails or "out-and-back" trails), and many have easy or even flat grades, making them perfect for families with young hikers.

This guide is divided into seven chapters—one for each of the seven states through which the NCT runs. After reviewing the introductory material, pick a state, find its chapter, and skim through the featured hikes. Each has information about mileage and ease of hiking and navigation, where to start and finish, and so on. GPS coordinates are provided because so many today have access to this technology—even on cell phones.

Local information sources are provided for each featured hike, as well as the contact for the local chapters who maintain that section of the trail. Hikers are strongly encouraged to use these contacts and to check the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) website (www.northcountrytrail.org) for current trail conditions, up-to-date maps, and other information helpful in planning a successful hike. As with any outdoor activity, trail conditions are influenced by the weather; to avoid disappointment, always get the latest info before going.

The trail guide provided for each hike briefly describes what to look for and how to get from one end of the hike to the other. Waypoints are often provided for key landmarks. All of this guidebook's hikes are labeled as easy, moderate, or challenging. This rating is anecdotal and based solely on the author's observations. The factors include length of the hike, terrain and elevation changes, navigation difficulty, and suitability for families and younger children. Strenuous hikes requiring good physical conditioning, located in remote areas, and calling for higher levels of experience, skills, and judgment are identified as challenging. Hikes lending themselves to a leisurely saunter with young children are rated as easy. Of course, there are variables such as temperature, weather, bug prevalence, and so on that

hikers need to factor in on the spot. Any of these can change an easy hike into a more difficult one.

Where Exactly Does the NCT Go?

The NCT traverses seven states. From east to west, they are New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and a good bit of North Dakota. From the eastern terminus at Crown Point on Lake Champlain at New York's border with Vermont, the trail meanders through the Adirondack Mountains, traverses the Mohawk Valley, and skirts the southern end of the Finger Lakes before heading southwest into the Allegheny Mountains. Cutting off the northwest corner of Pennsylvania, the trail enters Ohio just north of Pittsburgh and continues south into the Wayne National Forest, connecting with the Buckeye Trail. After looping farther south through the Shawnee State Forest, the NCT heads north through Dayton into Ohio's canal country. From there, it wanders into Michigan, which hosts more of the NCT than any other state (1,150 miles). After the farmlands and forests of southwestern Michigan give way to larger wooded tracts, the trail moves into the big timber country of northern Michigan, crossing the Straits of Mackinac into Michigan's wild Upper Peninsula, where it turns west again, blazing its way through Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore all the way to the Porcupine Mountains before heading into Wisconsin's portion of the Great North Woods. At Duluth, Minnesota, the NCT again follows the Lake Superior shoreline, this time northeast on the Superior Hiking Trail all the way to the Canadian border, which it then follows after again turning west. From the Boundary Waters, the NCT heads ever westward through Minnesota's Iron Range to the lakes region and then stretches out on the prairies into North Dakota, where it finds its western terminus at Lake Sakakawea State Park near the Garrison Dam, which creates Lake Sakakawea on the Missouri River.

What Can You See on the NCT?

The NCT climbs mountains in the Adirondacks, Alleghenies, Porcupines, and Sawtooths; it crosses the Iron Range of Minnesota and the Laurentian Shield. The NCT passes through major watersheds, including the mighty Hudson, Susquehanna, Allegheny, Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri Rivers. NCT-touched waters eventually flow into the Atlantic Ocean

via the St. Lawrence, Hudson, and Susquehanna Rivers and the Gulf of Mexico, through the mighty Mississippi (which the NCT leaps across at its source). It touches Lake Champlain, New York's Finger Lakes, and the Allegheny Reservoir. It spans Lakes Michigan and Huron on the Mighty Mac—Michigan's Mackinac Bridge. It leaves over 40 miles of footprints on Lake Superior's shoreline beaches. It pauses at Tahquamenon Falls and many smaller waterfalls and cascades along the way. The NCT traverses 10 national forests.

The NCT shares towpaths with the historic Erie Canal in New York as well as Ohio's Miami and Erie Canal. It follows historic railways, including the famed Wabash Cannonball. Winding its way through the Great North Woods, the NCT retraces the footsteps of America's first peoples—portage paths used by indigenous Americans, missionaries, and voyageurs and, later, by the lumbermen, miners, oilmen, and farmers who tried to eke out a living from the North Country's natural resources. Escaped slaves made their way north along the Underground Railroad. More recently, there are the vacationers immortalized in Gordon Lightfoot's "Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald"; "the islands and bays are for sportsmen," as well as the rivers, streams, fields, and mountains. The North Country epitomized by Hemingway, Zane Grey, and many others is a recreation destination and unique experience. The NCT experience aggregates and links the best of America's Great North Woods and its hardy peoples. A hike anywhere along the trail is an immersion in the natural and cultural landscapes of the region.

Because of its length and diversity, there's no single thing that sums up the NCT experience, unlike the case with most of its sister trails in the National Scenic Trails System. With the Appalachian, Pacific Crest, or Continental Divide National Scenic Trails, for example, it's immediately apparent what they're about—they follow mountain ranges. The NCT is about mountains as well as river bottoms, people as well as places, all connected by the sweat of human endeavor, the essence of the NCT experience. Even so, the trail is full of surprises.

You expect big skies while hiking Dakota prairies on the NCT, but not a lush, wildflower-filled river valley and even a waterfall. You expect solitude in North Woods wilderness, but not day after day without seeing another soul. You expect vineyards during a saunter on the trail through New York's Finger Lakes region, but not the intoxicating perfumes of spring blooming or fall harvest. You might expect evidence of America's North Country past along the trail, but not the birthplace of the United States

Navy. Hikers can sense the presence of Algonquin and Ojibway, Jesuit and voyageur, escaped slaves reaching for freedom, miner, logger, sailor, or canal boat driver, all sharing their stride. You expect an occasional interesting character when you hike the North Country Trail, but never the number of folks offering tired hikers a hot shower, cold drinks, warm meals, a backyard in which to pitch a tent, or a blessing from the heart. With the NCT, you learn to expect the unexpected. Wherever you are in America's northern heartlands, when following the blue blazes of the NCT, you are getting to know the Red Plaid Nation. Your adventure always starts nearby.

Is the NCT Complete?

Although the NCT spans two-thirds of the North American continent, from great eastern forests to tall grass prairies, the entire trail is not yet “on the ground.” About half of it is physically completed—signed, blazed, and mapped accordingly. The rest of it is a series of road walks and connector trails that get hikers from one point on the completed trail to the next. Hikers *can* hike the entire NCT, and at this writing, 11 intrepid folks have either segment-hiked or thru-hiked the entirety. The hardworking volunteers of the NCTA and partners are putting more trail on the ground

Status of the Eastern and Western Extensions of the NCT

Extending the NCT eastward has proved much easier than going in the opposite direction. Only about 40 new miles of trail need to be located and constructed between Lake Champlain and the crest of the Green Mountains to link the NCT with the Appalachian Trail. The feasibility study is completed, and public meetings have concluded, with a preferred corridor approved by the National Park Service. The task that remains is getting congressional authorization of the terminus extension into Vermont.

The NCT's current western terminus at North Dakota's Lake Sakakawea State Park may eventually be moved to the Rocky Mountains. This extension will never become a reality without significant local support—difficult to imagine in that empty landscape stretching through western North Dakota and eastern Montana. Volunteers and donations are needed to make this happen in time for the 50th anniversary of the National Trails System. It would create something really exciting for that 2018 celebration.

every year (see more later in this introduction about the NCTA and how to help). Furthermore, plans are afoot to expand east into Vermont to connect with the Appalachian Trail. Eventually, hiking enthusiasts hope to extend the trail west into Montana to connect with the Continental Divide and Pacific Northwest Trails and thus forge a link going from sea to shining sea. But the NCT continues to be a work in progress and will not be fully completed for many years to come. Progress in trail construction is recorded at NCTA headquarters, and the most current maps and trail conditions can be found at www.northcountrytrail.org.

What Is the North Country Trail Association?

The NCT is administered by the National Park Service, but building, maintaining, and telling the story of this national park that is 4,600 miles

End-to-Enders

Though the hikes featured in this guide were selected primarily to please day hikers, the North Country Trail is wonderfully well suited for long-distance walking. Thru-hikers typically hike 500 miles or more at a stretch. They go farther (and often faster) than anyone else. Though they constitute only a tiny minority of all hikers, their dedication, curiosity, and adventurousness set a high standard. Their feats are inspirational, and their effects are aspirational—they make the rest of us want to be able to do the same. As of this publication, the following end-to-ender (E2E) pioneers have completed the entire North Country Trail:

Peter Wolfe (E2E 1974–80)

Carolyn Hoffman (E2E trip 1978)

Chet Frome (E2E 1992–95)

Ed Talone (E2E 1994)

Andrew Skurka (E2E 2004–5)

Don Beattie (E2E 1980–2005)

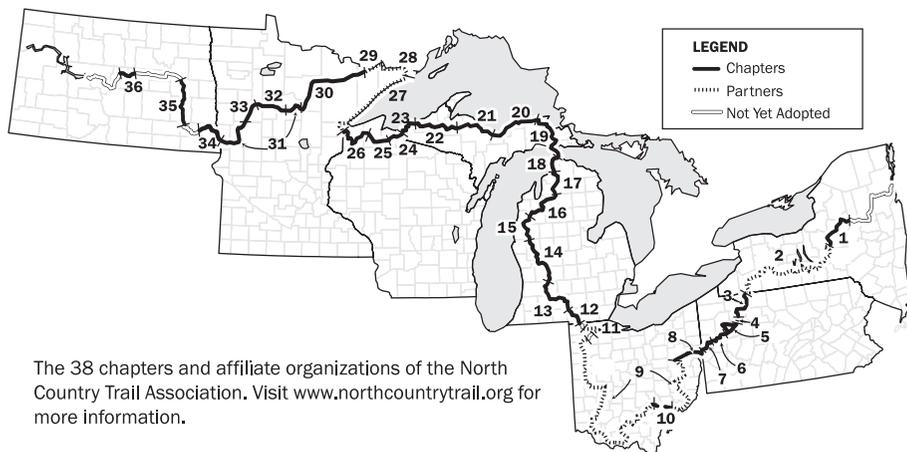
Allen Shoup (E2E 1995–2005)

Bart Smith (E2E completed 2007)

M. J. “Eb” Eberhart (E2E 2009)

Joan Young (E2E 1991–2010)

Judy Geisler (E2E trip completed 2011)



long by 4 feet wide is mainly a volunteer effort. The NCT, like most long-distance hiking trails, would be nothing without volunteers. Erecting signs, painting blazes, clearing brush, constructing bridges, cutting weeds, maintaining shelters, and removing all-too-frequent storm debris are just some examples of the sweat equity volunteers invest over many thousands of hours each year so that hikers can experience the NCT at its best. These volunteers are members of the North Country Trail Association and its partner and affiliate organizations.

The NCTA is a private, membership-based, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, whose mission is *to develop, maintain, protect, and promote the NCT as the premier hiking path across the northern tier of the United States through a trail-wide coalition of volunteers and partners*. Building the trail is impossible without the grassroots mobilization of talent, money, and ideas supported through the partnership of the National Park Service with the NCTA. The NCTA has a small professional staff headquartered in Lowell, Michigan, as well as regional trail coordinators in Minnesota and Wisconsin. At its Lowell headquarters, the NCTA manages the association's finances, engages in fund-raising and marketing programs, provides training and mapping expertise, advocates for the NCT in Congress and at the capitols of the seven states through which the trail travels, and builds the capacity of chapters and affiliate/partner organizations doing grassroots work where it matters most.

It is the grassroots work in chapters and several additional affiliate and

partner organizations along the entire length of the NCT that gets the trail built and keeps it maintained. Each chapter's charter defines its assigned length of trail for building, maintaining, and monitoring. Many sections of the NCT within a chapter's boundaries are "adopted" by members, who regularly patrol them, report on conditions, and conduct routine maintenance. Trail adopters usually take their responsibilities very seriously. They are among the many unsung heroes devoted to bringing a quality hiking experience to all.

Partner and Affiliate Organizations

The NCT has benefited from visionary leaders in the hiking community who pioneered regional trails, such as the Finger Lakes, Buckeye, Superior Hiking, Kekekabic, and Border Route Trails, which now host portions of the NCT on their tread. These preexisting trails were built by dedicated volunteers before the NCT was authorized by Congress, and their existence likely contributed to the effort to obtain authorization. In agreeing to cohost the NCT with the NCTA, these partner and affiliate organizations maintain their own trail and their own identity—and in some cases, their own trail maps, waypoints, guidebooks, and other resources. From east to west, these groups include:

Finger Lakes Trail Conference (www.fltconference.org), which maintains the 420 miles of the Finger Lakes Trail shared with the NCT in New York);

Join the NCTA

With local chapters in communities scattered along the trail, as well as many at-large members elsewhere, the NCTA unites individuals as well as local and regional trail organizations in a legacy effort to give the trail to America. NCTA members not only provide sweat equity; they contribute time, talent, and treasure toward building the trail and telling its story, from local trail towns to Washington, DC. To apply for membership, visit www.northcountrytrail.org/get-involved/become-a-member/ online or contact NCTA Headquarters at 229 East Main Street, Lowell, MI 49331, 866-445-3628 (toll-free).

Buckeye Trail Association (www.buckeyetrail.org), which maintains the 800-plus miles of the Buckeye Trail shared with the NCT in Ohio;

Superior Hiking Trail Association® (www.shta.org), which maintains the 300 miles of the Superior Hiking Trail shared with the NCT in Minnesota;

Kekekabic Trail Association (www.kek.org), which maintains the 41 miles of the Kekekabic Trail shared with the NCT in Minnesota; and

Border Route Trail Association (www.borderroutetrail.org), which maintains the 65 miles of the Border Route Trail shared with the NCT in Minnesota.

The National Park Service

Like the better-known Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails, the NCT is managed by a federal agency and built and maintained by a nonprofit organization. In the case of the NCT, that agency is the National Park Service. A National Park Service superintendent and trail manager provide financial, technical, and planning support as well as set standards that determine when sections of the trail can be formally certified as NCT, as opposed to temporary connectors or uncertified trail.

Who Owns the NCT?

Neither the NCTA nor the National Park Service actually own or manage most of the land on which the NCT is located. Yet every inch does belong to somebody. By comparison, the Appalachian Trail is almost entirely protected via public ownership or easements. The NCT is more complicated. As much as possible, the NCT uses public lands, and the National Park Service and the NCTA work with government partners to ensure the quality of the NCT experience. However, private property (corporate or individual) accounts for a very significant percent of the NCT's mileage.

This means that different sections may have different regulations. For instance, some managers and owners may forbid camping, hunting, or open fires. There may be closures for certain hunting seasons on private lands leased for that purpose. Often, signs alert hikers about what is permitted and where. When in doubt, be extra careful to behave in a consid-

erate manner. One hiker's "commando camping" could lead to the loss of access for all.

Today's hikers have a responsibility to travel lightly on the land, whether it be public or private. Most people understand the importance of not only taking care of their own trash but also picking up after the more thoughtless. However, if the actions of even a few people impact a site, its managers and owners may react against the entire trail community. The NCTA endorses the principles of the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics (www.lnt.org/programs/principles.php).

Leave No Trace

Plan Ahead and Prepare

Know the regulations and special concerns for the area you'll visit.

Prepare for extreme weather, hazards, and emergencies.

Schedule your trip to avoid times of high use.

Visit in small groups when possible. Consider splitting larger groups into smaller groups.

Repackage food to minimize waste.

Use a map and compass to eliminate the use of marking paint, rock cairns or flagging.

Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

Durable surfaces include established trails and campsites, rock, gravel, dry grasses or snow.

Protect riparian areas by camping at least 200 feet from lakes and streams.

Good campsites are found, not made. Altering a site is not necessary.

In popular areas: Concentrate use on existing trails and campsites. Walk single file in the middle of the trail, even when wet or muddy. Keep campsites small. Focus activity in areas where vegetation is absent.

In pristine areas, disperse use to prevent the creation of campsites and trails.

Avoid places where impacts are just beginning.

Dispose of Waste Properly

Pack it in, pack it out. Inspect your campsite and rest areas for trash or spilled foods. Pack out all trash, leftover food, and litter.

Deposit solid human waste in catholes dug 6 to 8 inches deep at least 200 feet from water, camp, and trails. Cover and disguise the cathole when finished.

Pack out toilet paper and hygiene products.

To wash yourself or your dishes, carry water 200 feet away from streams or lakes and use small amounts of biodegradable soap. Scatter strained dishwater.

Leave What You Find

Preserve the past: examine, but do not touch, cultural or historic structures and artifacts.

Leave rocks, plants and other natural objects as you find them.

Avoid introducing or transporting non-native species.

Do not build structures, furniture, or dig trenches.

Minimize Campfire Impacts

Campfires can cause lasting impacts to the backcountry. Use a lightweight stove for cooking and enjoy a candle lantern for light.

Where fires are permitted, use established fire rings, fire pans, or mound fires.

Keep fires small. Only use sticks from the ground that can be broken by hand.

Burn all wood and coals to ash, put out campfires completely, then scatter cool ashes.

Respect Wildlife

Observe wildlife from a distance. Do not follow or approach them.

Never feed animals. Feeding wildlife damages their health, alters natural behaviors, and exposes them to predators and other dangers.

Protect wildlife and your food by storing rations and trash securely.

Control pets at all times, or leave them at home.

Avoid wildlife during sensitive times: mating, nesting, raising young, or winter.

Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.

Be courteous. Yield to other users on the trail.

Step to the downhill side of the trail when encountering pack stock.

Take breaks and camp away from trails and other visitors.

Let nature's sounds prevail. Avoid loud voices and noises.

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