

Trip Planner

Maps: The route is covered by the USGS topo, *Yuma*, which includes the NCT but not the Manistee River Trail. There is also the Manistee River Trail brochure from the U.S. Forest Service and the *North Country Trail Map: Freesoil Trailhead to Cedar Creek Road* (Map MI-05) published and sold by the North Country Trail Association (866-445-3628; www.northcountrytrail.org).

Getting There: To reach Seaton Creek Campground head north on M-37 9 miles from its intersection with M-55 and then turn left on 26 Mile Road for 1.7 miles. Turn right on O'Rourke Drive for 1.3 miles then right on Forest Road 5993 and follow it a half mile to the campground.

If beginning from the Red Bridge river access site, turn west on 30 Mile Road from M-37. Follow 30 Mile Road to its end and then bear left at the curve onto Warfield Road. Drive south for 1.5 miles and watch for Coates Highway. Turn right on Coates Highway to Red Bridge over the Manistee River.

Fees & Reservations: You need a National Forest vehicle permit (\$3 daily, \$5 weekly) to park at Seaton Creek Campground. Dispersed campsites along the Manistee River Trail are free while a site at Seaton Creek is \$12 a night

Information: Maps and brochures on both trails are available from the Manistee Ranger District of the Manistee Forest (231-723-2211; www.fs.fed.us/r9/hmnf) and the North Country Trail Association (866-445-3628; www.northcountrytrail.org).

Trail Guide

Day One (3 miles) Seaton Creek Campground has 17 rustic sites well spread out on a bluff above the backwaters of the Hodenpyl Dam Pond. Amenities include tables, vault toilets, drinking water, and a small picnic area with a series of steps to the water below.

The Manistee River Trail is posted in the picnic area parking lot, and from there leads you along bluffs above the sluggish Seaton Creek. There is a great view of Hodenpyl Dam Pond from its south end just before the trail swings away and crosses O'Rourke Road a half mile from the trailhead, followed by No. 1 Road, an overhead power line, and Milepost 1.

The trail, an old two-track at this point, swings north and within a quarter mile reaches the suspension bridge that spans across the Manistee River, linking the Manistee River Trail with a mile-long spur to the NCT. The Manistee River Trail swings south here, and 1.5 miles from the campground returns to the edge of the Manistee River and begins a very scenic stretch. You stay in view of the water as you skirt the flat river bluffs along a trail that is a surprisingly easy hike.

Just before Milepost 3, you pass dispersed campsites No. 3 and No. 4, both posted along the trail and near a small stream. Beyond the milepost are

the famed waterfalls of Manistee River Trail, discovered when the trail was being flagged. It's a spot where a spring-fed brook is leaping its way down the bluff to the river. If it's raining, the stream might even live up to its billing as an eight-foot high cascade. If not, then you're assured of a pleasant evening and great views from the campsites.

Day Two (10 miles) This is your longest day and that's by design for a weekend backpack. Cross your fingers for good weather and get an early start.

The day begins with easy trekking, and good views of the river continue as the trail cuts across Flower Flats past Milepost 4 and Milepost 5. Just beyond Milepost 5 is perhaps the best vista of the day, a view from the edge of a 50-foot bluff where you can watch the Manistee River sweep through a long oxbow bend. Nearby is dispersed campsite No. 6.

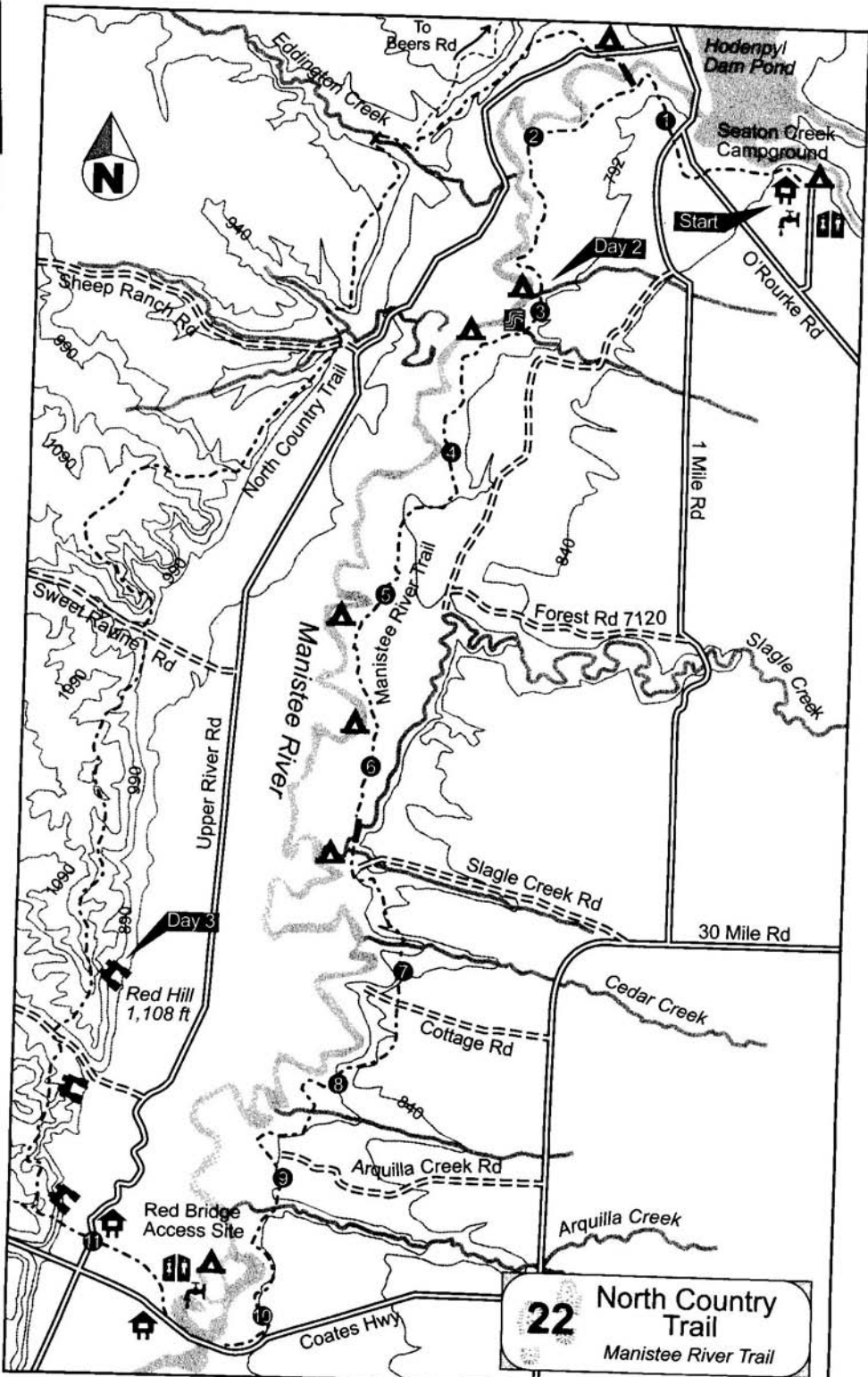
The grand view is followed by the longest descent of the day where the trail drops more than 70 feet to finally reach the edge of the Manistee only to begin immediately climbing the bluff again, topping off at dispersed campsite No. 7. You swing out of view of the Manistee, past Milepost 6, and in less than a half mile arrive at Slagle Creek. The creek flows through a beautiful cedar-filled ravine and is crossed by a unique arch-timber bridge.

Just beyond the stream the trail climbs out of the ravine and crosses Slagle Creek Road, a dirt forest road, where nearby are dispersed campsites No. 8 and No. 9. This makes Slagle Creek a scenic place to spend the first night for those looking for a longer first day. But keep in mind that occasionally people, mostly trout fisherman looking to hook a brookie, will drive into a parking area at the end of Slagle Creek Road.

From Slagle Creek Road, the Manistee River Trail heads south and within a half mile climbs in and out of the Cedar Creek ravine and then passes Milepost 7. Just beyond the milepost you cross Cottage Road, a dirt road, and eventually the trail merges with a two-track for a half mile, passing a private cabin along the way. Keep an eye out for the gray diamond markers as the trail swings away from the two-track near Milepost 8, a spot that is easy to miss.

You descend back to the river where it forms an oxbow curve. This stretch is marshy but the trail uses a floating boardwalk to cross it before ascending back to the edge of the bluffs and another great view of the valley near Milepost 9. After crossing Arquilla Creek, the trail returns to the river bluff at a spot where you can see Red Bridge downstream though you're still a mile away. The trail stays at the edge of the bluff, passing Milepost 10 just before you begin a long climb to Coates Highway.

You emerge at the pavement a quarter mile from Red Bridge at a spot that is posted "Hiker's Trail." Head west and the trail will cross the vehicle bridge and descend to Red Bridge boat access. Located here, besides a boat ramp, are vault toilets, drinking water, dispersed campsites No. 10-14, and a trailhead for the spur to the NCT. If you're planning to spend the night at



Red Hill, make sure your water bottles are filled and you're carrying enough to make it through dinner and breakfast.

Continue west on the spur and within a half mile you arrive at Milepost 11, the Upper River Road and a trailhead with parking and an information display for the North Country Trail. The spur continues west and a mile from the Red Bridge climbs almost 200 feet before arriving at a junction with the NCT. Welcome to the North Country! Get ready for a little uphill hiking.

Heading north, the NCT climbs a bit more and then quickly breaks out to your first overlook along this portion of the NCT. Beyond the view the trail follows the rugged contour of the ridge, and in less than a mile from the spur trail junction, you arrive at a second vista, a small clearing from which you can see ridges and the river to the southeast. The overlook is followed by a steady descent that bottoms out at Pole Road (Forest Road 5344), more of a two-track than a dirt road.

On the other side of the road you undertake the longest uphill march of the trek. It's a 276-foot climb in roughly a half mile as the NCT returns to the crest of the ridge and then swings around Red Hill to a junction with a spur trail posted "Red Hill Overlook." The spur is reached 2.5 miles from Red

Michigan's Undiscovered Waterfall

The two hikers in front of me on the Manistee River Trail paused on a small bridge, stared down at the stream, and then asked for my opinion when I caught up. "Think that's it?"

None of us were expecting Tahquamenon Falls. But we weren't too sure that this little leap was the "spectacular discovery" news reports proclaimed in 1990 when U.S. Forest Service rangers flagging the trail stumbled on only the second waterfall in the Lower Peninsula.

"Maybe they saw it during a flash flood," I said.

The only other natural waterfall in the Lower Peninsula is Ocqueoc Falls in Presque County. There's no question those are waterfalls. The Manistee River Trail falls (no one has named them yet) is where a spring-fed brook is leaping its way down the bluff to the river. More of a gush than a cascade.

But take note, the cascade may be ho-hum but that's it. With or without a thunder of whitewater, the rest of this 11-mile trail is nothing short of spectacular. Anywhere along the Manistee River Trail you might spot a variety of wildlife, canoers silently floating the current, or possibly a brook trout fisher working the deep pools of Slagle Creek.

What you won't see is a lot of development. There's not a strip mall for miles around and only one cottage is passed along the entire trail. To those of us who have hiked the trail, this is the "spectacular discovery"; not a waterfall, but a remote stretch of hills, rivers, and streams so close to home.

Bridge and 10 miles from the waterfall. There are spots to pitch a tent near the junction or head 200 yards farther up the spur trail. This short side trail ends at Red Hill, a 1,108-foot high point where you can see for miles to the southeast. It's hard to spot the Manistee River, but looming in front are the rugged ridges you've just hiked across. Pitch a small tent here and you can spend the evening studying what led to your sore feet.

Day Three (8.5 miles) From the junction at the overlook spur, the NCT follows the crest of the ridge to the north, paralleling a dirt road briefly and putting you 376 feet above the Manistee River. Eventually you begin an almost mile-long descent to Sweets Ravine along a rugged stretch of the NCT that makes for the most interesting hiking of the day. Several times the trail swings west into a small gulch before climbing out and over the next slope. It's impressive country, and it makes you feel like you're deep in a wilderness that's somewhere remote and exotic.

The trail bottoms out in steep-sided Sweets Ravine and crosses Sweet Ravine Road (Forest Road 8060) 2.3 miles from Red Hill and then swings west and begins a long climb back out. You ascend 270 feet in just 0.7 mile before the trail tops off and swings to the north. In the next mile the NCT hugs the edge of the ridge that is so steep you catch glimpses of the Manistee River Valley through the trees.

At 4.6 miles from Red Hill, the trail descends to cross a junction of three two-tracks, the main one being Sheep Ranch Road (Forest Road 8020). There is also a small stream here, but it can be hard to spot at times during the summer. You have to climb out this ravine, an uphill trudge of almost 90 feet, before the trail levels out along the ridge for a spell. The NCT then descends to Eddington Creek. Reached 6 miles from Red Hill, the creek is a beautiful spot where you head upstream into a wooded hollow briefly to reach a foot bridge across the creek.

Within a quarter mile of Eddington Creek, you reach a signposted junction that marks the spur to the Manistee River Trail. Head northeast (right) on the spur and within a mile you'll cross Upper River Road, pass dispersed campsites No. 1 and No. 2 and arrive at the suspension bridge across the Manistee River. On the other side of that impressive foot bridge you climb up to the Manistee River Trail and head left to backtrack the 1.3 miles to Seaton Creek Campground.