



The Art of Protection

Simmons Wood

Photo Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy/Alisa Hummell

Duel Lake at Simmons Woods, Mackinac County - Michigan It's hard not to romanticize Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Its natural beauty, a dynamic climate, and people strong enough to call it home are just a few things that make it unique. But the area is important for more than just its natural beauty. Simmons Wood is a great example of that – it's beautiful, but its history and ecology mean it's more than a nice place to shoot pictures.

Simmons Woods is located adjacent to Lake Michigan in southwest Mackinac County. The Crow River flows into Lake Michigan in this area. Michigan historians have found letters indicating that Simmons Wood's shore was a first landing for those traveling from Mackinac Straits to Green Bay. It was also a possible travel path for certain Native American tribes in the area, though there was little settlement. Some Europeans remained at Simmons Wood for the winter instead of traveling between Green Bay and Mackinac Island. They worked cutting timber for The Bay de Noc Lumber Company, which slowly evolved into an industry.

It is hard to imagine Simmons was ever booming, since today is it remote and quiet, but from 1906 to 1913, the town of Simmons was. Simmons Lumber Company, the area's primary business, was sold to the Earle Lumber Company in 1907. A fire that year burned down the town store and adjacent buildings. The business was purchased by the Wisconsin Land and Lumber Company, but in a second fire, the sawmill burned down. Most of the town's buildings and homes went with it, marking the end of the village.

The Simmons family retained ownership of a large piece that eventually was sold to Bethlehem Steel in the 1960's. In the 1980's Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI) identified the Great Lakes shoreline of the

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Simmons Wood's property as a unique natural shoreline community, and with the help of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), worked diligently to ensure the area was protected.

The state had wanted to acquire the land as early as the 1980s; it's surrounded by, and an inholding in, the Lake Superior State Forest. The property had assets that were worth public ownership including five miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, nine undeveloped lakes, and many areas of stream frontage. At the time, however, Bethlehem Steel, who owned the 11,000+ acre tract, was not ready to sell. Due to the continuous and cordial contact from the TNC, the steel company eventually agreed to sell, though the purchase agreement was complex and took two years to finally resolve. TNC acquired Simmons Wood between 1995 and 1996 with funding from the Natural Resources Trust Fund, funds that come from royalties from State-leased oil and gas wells, and turned the entire property over to the Department of Natural Resources in June of 1995.

The Simmons and then Bethlehem Steel employees had used the area as a retreat. There were many buildings, camping areas, roads, pine plantations, and much of the property had been actively forested during the time the land's namesake, the Simmons family, owned the property. The property was restored by removing buildings, restoring natural vegetation and allowing nature to once again grow back on man's development.

Today, the Simmons Wood's shoreline features interdunal wetlands that are some of the largest and most diverse in Michigan. Another feature that makes the area unique is the extensive beech flats, wetlands and the open dunes.

The area is cared for by those who use it. An outhouse sits as a generosity, but it is well-maintained. There are various fire pits that mark the grassy area leading up to Duel Lake's small sandy beach, but the beach itself is pristine. Across from the beach and road is an opening to another part of the woods.

Many areas of the forest – especially the dark and complex cedar areas that run along the Crow River, were never cut. Patches of hard wood old growth also remain here and there in a second growth stand. Great Lakes endemics such as Dwarf Lake Iris and Houghton's Goldenrod can be found along the sandy shore.

Directions

To get to Simmons Woods – travel Route 2 west of the Mackinac Bridge and turn south on South Gould City Road. In about 4 miles turn left (east) on Simmons Woods Road. Continue to Simmons Woods Road to Duel Lake.

More Information

http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-31154_31260-54390--,00.html

https://www.michigan.gov/documents/Simmons_woodsFinalDraft6-2005_164730_7.pdf

<http://www.great-lakes.net/lists/enviro-mich/1999-09/msg00066.html>

