10. Parks

Marathon County has an exceptional system of County parks, with a history dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century of providing well designed and maintained parks for the enjoyment of County residents. The system consists of seventeen County parks with a total of over 3,370 acres administered and maintained by the Wausau and Marathon County Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department. Marathon County also owns and maintains nine County forest units, all of which are open to the public for recreational purposes. The County forest units occupy a total of 28,662 acres of land.

The Wausau and Marathon County Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department is organized in partnership with the City of Wausau to plan and maintain the City's park system. The County system also works in partnership with private recreational leagues and organizations to coordinate the use of County facilities for active recreation, but the County does not provide active recreational programming itself. Over the last decade the County has transferred ownership and responsibility to local units of government for some parks that served specific community needs in Weston, Athens, Elderon, Easton, and the Town of Eau Pleine. The County plans to concentrate its efforts and resources on fewer, larger parks, with exceptional natural features. The primary mission of the Wausau and Marathon County Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department is to serve the recreational needs of Marathon County residents and conserve the County's unique natural resources.

Existing Parks, Trails and Open Space

The primary components of the Marathon County parks system include County parks and forest units. This section will focus on properties under the County's jurisdiction. However, it also describes the State parks, trails, and wildlife areas located in Marathon County that add to the outdoor recreation opportunities available to area residents and visitors.

County Parks

Marathon County parks have a unique style that reflects the geology and geography of the County, and the history of the park system. Many of the County parks are built along rivers or river impoundments, which form reservoirs that provide opportunities for swimming and fishing. The first director of Marathon County parks department worked for the United States Forest Service and brought the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) stylistic identity to Marathon County parks, characterized by use of materials common to the area (e.g., timber and granite) and rustic designs. Many of the system's parks still have vintage CCC-era shelters, which the department works to maintain. In fact, some buildings at the County fairgrounds in Marathon Park are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Roads into the parks are typically made of crushed granite gravel and parking lots are often surrounded by small boulders of locally quarried granite.

Following is a brief description of the 17 parks administered and maintained by the Marathon County Parks Department. These parks are also shown on Figure 10-1.

Amco Park – This park is located in the Town of Halsey, off CTH F, between Meridian Road and Dietsch Road. Amco Park is a 40-acre park on the Big Rib River. Park facilities include picnic tables, grills, restrooms, a park shelter, a drinking fountain, and children's play equipment. Amco Park also has a hiking trail along the banks of the Big Rib River.

Ashley Park – This 160-acre park is located on Lake DuBay, one mile west of Guenther in the Town of Knowlton. Currently, Ashley Park is under-developed, with poor lake access and no swimming beach, however, boat access is provided. The County would like to acquire more land and improve the park.

Big Eau Pleine Park- Located in the Town of Green Valley, this 1,450-acre park is on a peninsula surrounded by the Big Eau Pleine Reservoir. The park has an extensive trail system and two active recreation areas. Big Eau Pleine facilities include campgrounds, picnic tables, grills, restrooms, shelters, boat launches, swimming beaches, and play equipment.

Big Rapids Park - This 33-acre park is located on the Big Eau Pleine River in the Town of Eau Pleine. The river is impounded in the park to create a swimming area and fishing opportunities. Facilities include picnic tables, grills, restrooms, changing rooms, a shelter, play equipment, and hiking trails.

Bluegill Bay Park - This 68-acre park is located on the west shore of Lake Wausau between Cloverland Lane and Parrot Lane in the Town of Rib Mountain. The park provides access to Lake Wausau at its boat landing with piers and a boat trailer parking lot, which can become overcrowded at times. The

park's picnic area has 20 tables, four grills, three shelters, flush toilets and 104 parking spaces. A fishing area, including a handicapped pier is also available. Forty-eight acres of the park are undeveloped. The County's tree nursery is also located in the park.

Cherokee Park – This park is located in the Town of Hull, approximately three miles south of Holton on CTH F. Cherokee Park comprises 69 acres located on the Big Eau Pleine River, with an impoundment that provides for swimming and fishing. A handsome and well-maintained CCC-era shelter overlooks the river and provides space for group gatherings. Facilities at Cherokee Park include benches, picnic tables, grills, restrooms, play equipment, and a hiking trail.

D.C. Everest Park - This 5.5-acre park is located on the west bank of Lake Wausau on the tip of a small peninsula at the south end of Third Avenue in the City of Wausau. The park provides one of two county access points onto Lake Wausau and receives heavy use at its two boat landings. Other facilities include restrooms, benches, picnic tables, and portable bleachers. The park is also home to the Wausaqua Water Ski Club.

Dells of the Eau Claire Park - Located off CTH Y in the Town of Plover, this is one of the special jewels in the Marathon County park system. The Dells of the Eau Claire Park surrounds fantastic geologic features created by the Eau Claire River. Ancient volcanic rock palisades and potholes carved in the rock by the falling water create a unique place at the dells and gorge. The river bisects this 190-acre park. A dam upstream from the falls creates an impoundment, which

provides for a swimming beach. A large CCC-era shelter is located north of the falls area. Park and campground facilities include picnic tables, grills, drinking fountains, and children's play equipment. There are also changing rooms for the swimming beach. There are extensive trails located along both sides of the river, including a portion of the Ice Age Trail.

Marathon Park - Located in the City of Wausau, this 78-acre park provides a large number of facilities and programs. Marathon Park is the home of the Wisconsin Valley Fair, the second largest fair in the State. There are several historic exposition buildings in the park that are used during the Fair and for other events. The park is characterized by a large stand of mature white pines, which are highly visible along Stewart Avenue and serve as a sort of landmark gateway into the City of Wausau. The park also contains a wide variety of recreation facilities, including basketball and tennis courts, skating rinks, and a new grandstand area.

Mission Lake Park – This is a 122-acre park located on the west bank of Mission Lake in the Town of Reid . Facilities include three shelters, restrooms, picnic tables, grills, children's play equipment, and drinking fountains. The main features are a sand beach and boat launch, with fishing a poplar activity. A planned segment of the Ice Age Trail will also be constructed in the park.

Rietbrock Geographical Marker - This interesting special feature found in the Town of Rietbrock, marks a point at 45 degrees latitude, half way between the equator and the North Pole, and 90 degrees longitude, or one-quarter of the way around the globe from the prime meridian at Greenwich,

England. The 0.1-acre park, located on Meridian Road, contains a surveyor's marker and a monument sign explaining the geological significance of the location.

Rib Falls Park - This 315- acre park is located off CTH S at the intersection with CTH U in the Town of Rib Falls. Park facilities include an open shelter, toilet, well, and children's play equipment. The majority of the park is currently undeveloped and is the temporary site of a County gravel pit and asphalt plant. The park's main feature is the Big Rib River, which flows through the park and over a dam and rapids, with an impoundment that allows for swimming. The gravel pit is currently being developed as an artificial lake for recreational use.

Shooting Range Park - This is a 100-acre park located within Nine-Mile Forest Unit. Facilities include an archery range, rifle and pistol shooting range, trap/skeet area, and police range.

Sunny Vale Park - This park consists of a narrow strip of land located in the Town of Stettin and the City of Wausau, south of STH 29 at 72nd Avenue. Also known as "Manmade" Park, Sunny Vale is a popular 299-acre park with facilities for swimming in Manmade Lake, picnicking, fishing, and model airplane flying.

Sunny Vale Softball Complex – This is a 71-acre facility managed by the Wausau Area Softball Association through a contract with Marathon County. The complex has six lighted softball diamonds, each with a dugout, bleachers, and scoreboards.

Trappe River Dells Park – Located in the Town of Texas, this undeveloped park consists of 80 acres of woods. It is not accessible from other public lands or roads. The County has no current plans to develop the woods into a functioning park. Rather, it will remain as a passive open space.

County Forest Units

Marathon County owns and maintains nine County forest units, eight of which are open to the public for recreational purposes. The forest units are popular for timber management, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, hiking, bird watching, and camping. The County seeks to balance the recreational uses of its forests with timber production. The forest units are shown on Figure 10-1 and include:

Bern Wetland Forest Unit – Located in the Town of Bern east of Lekie Drive and north of Frahm Road, this forest is approximately 269 acres in size. The Bern Wetland is over 50 percent wetland with the remainder consisting of aspen/hardwood forest. A parking lot is located off Frahm Road. Two trail segments through the woods are maintained. Camping is allowed with a permit obtained from the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department. Public hunting is allowed when legally permitted.

Burma Road Forest Unit - This forest is located in the towns of Mosinee and Emmet. The 1,480-acre forest is a mix of aspen and northern hardwood, with recreational opportunities including an ATV trail, hunting, snowmobiling, and camping.

Elderon Forest Unit – This forest is located south of Pike Lake Road at Tower Drive in the Town of Elderon. The forest is 280 acres in size, with the majority of the vegetation oak and northern hardwood, and some pine plantations, aspen, and cedar swamp. The forest is open to recreational uses such as hunting, snowmobiling, hiking, and camping.

Harrison-Hewitt Forest Unit – This 9,116 acre forest is located on both sides of the border between the towns of Hewitt and Harrison. Roughly one-third of the forest is in Hewitt. The forest is made up of mixed upland woods, marshes, and water impoundments. Recreational opportunities include hunting, snowmobiling, and hiking. One of the forest's special features is the Bitzke Bird Walk trails completed in 1992. The Bitzke Bird Walk encompasses a number of wetlands and impoundments, with some sections including boardwalks through wetlands. The trail includes interpretive displays and many opportunities for viewing waterfowl. Improvements to Bitzke Bird Walk completed in 2003 include pit toilets, boardwalks, and trail work.

Kronenwetter and Leather Camp Forests – These are located south of Weston in the Village of Kronenwetter and Town of Guenther. Together these County forests are nearly 10,000 acres in size. The land is a mix of upland forests and marsh. The unit is open to recreational hunting, horseback riding, snowmobiling, and hiking. Improved and forest trails are maintained for access.

Nine-Mile Forest Unit – This forest unit is known as a recreation area with many miles of hiking, mountain biking, and cross-country ski trails. Skiing is promoted with a ski chalet and over 30 kilometers of one-way loops. The forest is open to hunting and snowmobiling. There are over 10 miles of single-track mountain bike trails. Nine-Mile is comprised of 4,900 acres of mixed uplands, marshes, and water impoundments.

Ringle Marsh Forest Unit - Located in the Town of Ringle south of STH 29, the 2,016-acre Ringle Marsh Unit contains a mix of upland forest, primarily aspen, northern hardwoods, and red oak and a large marsh. A wide variety of wildlife is present, including Sandhill cranes, which use the marsh for habitat. The unit is open to recreational hunting, snowmobiling, and hiking. A portion of the Ice Age trail passes through the Ringle Marsh, and other hiking trails are also maintained.

Wisconsin River Forest Unit— This special use county forest is undeveloped, with roughly half of its 290-acres located on the west bank of the Wisconsin River in the Town of Maine, the other half located is in the Town of Texas. There are some archeological resources located in this forest unit. Long range plans are to develop this special use county forest unit include extraction of extensive gravel deposits. The pit resulting from the gravel extraction will be used to create an artificial lake for recreation. Other long range plans include development of facilities for picnicking, camping, swimming, hiking, and boat launch/access to the Wisconsin River.

State and Federal Park, Trail and Wildlife Areas

In addition to the parks and forest units owned and maintained by the County, there are several State owned recreation facilities and natural areas in Marathon County. These facilities are shown on Figure 10-1 and described below:

Rib Mountain State Park, located in the Town of Rib Mountain, became part of the State Park system in 1924. The park's main feature is Rib Mountain, which at over 1,900 feet above sea level is one of the highest elevations in Wisconsin. The park includes several facilities, including: picnic areas, a camping area with 31 developed sites, three hiking trails and a nature trail naturalist programs, two observation decks and a 60-foot observation tower. Granite Peak, a private downhill skiing area located within the State Park, includes numerous runs, six lifts, a renovated chalet dating from 1938, and a ski school.

Mountain Bay State Trail - Built on a former railroad right-of-way, this trail stretches 83 miles from the Village of Weston to Green Bay. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), which owns the trail, worked with the parks departments of Marathon, Shawano and Brown County to develop the Mountain-Bay Trail. It is currently maintained through the generous contributions and volunteer efforts of the Friends of the Mountain-Bay Trail of the three counties through which the trail passes. The current western most trailhead is adjacent to the Village of Weston Municipal Center, where parking and trail passes are available. The trail has a crushed granite surface and passes through the rural countryside and several villages as it makes its way from the

Rib Mountain area to Green Bay on Lake Michigan. Several municipalities are cooperating to plan and complete the final leg of this trail between the Village of Weston and Rib Mountain State Park. Funding has been allocated to construct a bicycle/pedestrian bridge over the Wisconsin River in the Village of Rothschild, thus eliminating a major barrier to completing this connection. In addition, several metro area communities have expressed interest in building on the trail along the Wisconsin River in the City of Wausau envisioned in *Rivers Edge Master Plan* (described below).

Ice Age National Scenic Trail – This is one of eight national scenic trails in the United States. It spans 1,000 miles on a course that extends across Wisconsin along the approximate terminal edge of the most recent continental glaciation. To date, about 600 miles of the trail are open for use. About 35 miles have been completed in Marathon County, where the trail follows an end moraine for several miles north of Ringle before turning west and entering the Dells of the Eau Claire County Park.

McMillan Marsh – This is a 4,172 State Wildlife Management Area which straddles the border between the towns of McMillan and Spencer. A bicycle and hiking trail provides access to the McMillan Marsh on an abandoned railroad right of way.

George W. Mead Wildlife Area - This very large WDNR conservation and recreation area is located in the southeast portion of the Town of Day, extending across the Town of Green Valley and into the Town of Bergen, creating a conservation area of approximately 20,000 acres. Much of the

area consists of wetlands surrounding a series of lakes and flowages connected by the Little Eau Pleine River. Portions of the Mead Wildlife Area are open for public hiking, hunting, and fishing.

Special Regional Recreation Facilities

There are several unique recreational facilities, mostly located in the Wausau metro area, that serve the larger region and County. These include:

Wausau Whitewater Kayak Park – Located along the downtown riverfront, this park evolved from efforts by paddle sport enthusiasts, beginning in 1974 to establish a kayak race course. The race course utilizes the east channel of the Wisconsin River that includes natural rapids and dam controlled waterflow. This course has developed into one of the best slalom courses in the nation and Wausau's whitewater program has been named a Center of Excellence by the United States Canoe and Kayak Team, making it a top U.S. Training site. Spectator seating and trails have been developed along the course, which is within easy walking distance from downtown Wausau.

Historic Athletic Park – Located in a residential neighborhood in the City of Wausau, the original stadium grandstand dates to 1936. Since then several upgrades have taken place, including the addition of concession and a family picnic area. This park is the home of the Wisconsin Woodchucks, 2001 Northwoods College League Champions.

Sylvan Tubing Hill – Located in Sylvan Hills Park in the City of Wausau, this is the only tubing hill in the area. The facility features a chalet and a tow rope to pull tubers back up the hill. The tubing hill is typically open between mid-December and early March.

Greenheck Field House – This facility is located on the DC Everest Senior High campus. It contains an Olympic size indoor skating rink, three basketball courts, a fitness center, racquetball courts, classrooms, and a pro shop. It also houses the DC Everest Community Service Office, which provides adult community education and recreation programs. The Boys and Girls Club also runs its programs out of this facility.

Weston Aquatic Center – Located in Kennedy Park in the Village of Weston, the Weston Aquatic Center offers a water slide, diving board, 13,223 square foot swimming pool, volleyball court, bath house with lockers and concession area. The center is open every day during the months of June, July and August and a small fee is charged for entry.

Rothschild-Schofield Aquatic Center – This facility is jointly owned and operated by the City of Schofield and the Village of Rothschild. Located west of Business Highway 51 near the border between Schofield and Rothschild, the Aquatic Center includes a swimming area, volleyball court, play equipment, and open space along the Lake Wausau frontage.

Rivers Edge Parkway – A master plan to establish a bicycle/pedestrian trail along the banks of the Wisconsin River through the City of Wausau was adopted by the City in June 1995. The *Rivers Edge Master Plan* outlines a long-range (20-

30 year) framework for improving access to the riverfront and enhancing the riverfront environment. While the master plan technically only includes the City of Wausau, interest is growing in communities throughout the Wausau metro area to work cooperatively to establish a connected trail system that will eventually extend the length of the Wisconsin River valley through the metro area and beyond. To date, slightly over 3 miles of trail have been constructed, mostly along the downtown riverfront. There is also broad community support for connecting the riverfront trail system with the Mountain-Bay state trail and other local municipal trail systems.

Park System Needs

A Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan for 1999-2004 was completed for the County parks system in May 1999. This plan received a one-year extension from the State and is currently being update, with completion anticipated in spring 2006. The current plan identified several needs related to parks and recreation and outlines several actions to address those needs. The identified needs are summarized below

- Acreage Needs According to the plan, 509 additional acres of active use recreation area are needed to meet current user needs and an additional 569 acres will be needed to meet user needs through 2010.
- **Service Area Needs** Most of Marathon County is well served by existing parks and forest recreation units. However, the plan identifies two areas in the County that are not adequately served by County parks and forests. One is the area between Spencer and Marshfield, which lacks a

County park, although the County developed the McMillan Park Trail in the area next to the McMillan Marsh State Wildlife Area. The second area with a service deficiency is the Knowlton/Lake DuBay area. The main access to Lake DuBay is at DuBay County Park in Portage County. Demand for access to Lake DuBay is anticipated to increase however, there is little space to expand access in Portage County. Ashley Park in Knowlton was identified as needing improved access to the park and access to Lake DuBay, which currently does not have a swimming beach. The County would like to acquire more land at Ashley Park to address these needs.

- Recreational Study and Resource Protection Needs

 There is a product the state, regional and county level to
 - There is a need at the state, regional and county level to consider provision of additional facilities to accommodate trail use activities and access to water resources. The plan also identifies the need to develop land management plans, lake management plans, and river management plans for certain areas.
- **Facility Needs** Master plans are needed for all major park properties and "base" recreation facilities (access roads, parking, restrooms, drinking water, etc.) should be provided in all County parks.

Areas of High Demand

High demand for certain recreation facilities or opportunities underscores the need to balance the desire to meet growing demands given limited budgets, while minimizing use conflicts and resource impacts.

Water Based Recreation – As the number of people participating in water based recreation grows, providing more or improving existing access to water resources has become a priority. Concerns have also been expressed regarding overuse of facilities, uncontrolled use, or inappropriate use and conflicting uses of lakes and rivers. In particular conflicts between motorized and non-motorized water-craft are becoming more common.

Trail Development - There is strong public support for development of more trails for year-round recreational activities. The *Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan for 1999-2004* recommends that trail development be given high priority. As with water based recreation, balancing the needs of a wide variety of trail users can be a challenge. Issues can arise regarding trail damage by higher intensity users such as mountain bikers and ATVs, safety concerns, particularly where motorized and non-motorized users share trails, and conflicts with hunting in joint use areas. In addition, trail maintenance and enforcement of trail use rules are common concerns of the various trail user groups, requiring coordination.

ATV Facilities – Demand for ATV facilities has grown steadily in Marathon County. ATVs represent a specific type of trail user with unique needs. Given the high intensity of ATVs, conflicts between ATVs and other trail users is a growing concern. To meet the high demand for ATV facilities, the County is considering designating a specific area for summer ATV use within an existing County park or forest area, rather than try to acquire more land for new trails, which could also be used by other trail users. County staff believes

such a facility could have a regional draw and would help reduce the potential for conflicts with other, less intensive trail users.

Opportunities and Challenges

The Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan for 1999-2004 identifies several needs that present opportunities to enhance the existing park and recreation system and challenges to implement improvements and better coordinate management and development of the park system. Some of the key opportunities and challenges include:

- Development of a county-wide conservancy plan and conservancy park classification.
- Development of more trails to meet growing demand for year-round recreational trail opportunities.
- Expanding and improving access to water-based recreation.
- Preservation of historic park structures.
- Expand availability of recreation facilities and services on a year-round basis.
- Cooperation with other governmental units to ensure that investments in recreational development are cost-effective.
- Coordination of park security efforts among County sheriffs, parks and forestry departments, and appropriate municipal police departments.
- Cooperation with private sector entities, when appropriate to meet recreational needs.

Creation of a Park District – Maintaining a consistent source of funding to meet park and recreation needs is always a challenge. Creating special use districts, such as a park district,

can provide a means to generate funds for specific public purposes. Having a consistent and predictable source of funding is essential to implementation of long-range objectives and plans. Without a consistent funding source, priorities regarding park development, acquisition, programming, etc. are continually subject to change. In tight budgetary times, this generally results in reduced maintenance levels and other efforts, deemed non-essential may be deferred to solve immediate budget shortfalls. Over time, this approach can result in underutilization of facilities and reduced levels of service and public benefits.

The State of Wisconsin does not currently provide enabling legislation to allow creation of special use districts. However, a bill is currently being drafted that would allow for creation of special districts that would cover a broad range of uses, such as parks, utilities, police/fire, rather than focus on one type of use (e.g., parks).

Issues

- **Limited Resources** Given limited budgets and anticipated growing demand for recreation activities, prudent use of available resources is essential. To do that, the County intends to concentrate limited resources on its larger parks with exceptional natural features.
- Agency Coordination There are numerous public agencies and private organizations involved in the provision of recreational facilities and opportunities. Coordination is necessary to make sure that efforts related to administration, operations, and development of

recreational programs and new facilities complement each other and don't result in unnecessary duplication or other inefficiencies.

- Balance Recreation and Timber Production Uses It is an adopted goal of Marathon County to develop and manage County forests for optimum production of forest products, together with recreational opportunities and natural resource protection. It is anticipated that demand for recreation will continue to grow, resulting in more people using County forest land to meet their recreational needs. At the same time it is anticipated that demand for timber products will increase and it is recognized that paper, lumber and wood products provide important manufacturing jobs in the County.
- **Protect Historic Resources** Several County parks contain CCC-era structures that lend unique character and charm and provide a sense of history and connection to the past. Some structures may be candidates for formal recognition as historic landmarks. Such recognition would involve a formal documentation and survey of these structures. In addition to formal recognition, protection of historic resources requires careful attention to maintenance and repairs to ensure any alterations are done in a manner that protects the historic integrity of the structure.
- Limits on Expansion of County Forests Land surrounding County forests is being lost to residential and non-metallic mine development. This limits opportunities for public acquisition of land adjacent to existing forest. The Marathon County Forest Ten-Year Comprehensive





