

Public land access is foundational to America's hunting and fishing traditions. It ensures that outdoor opportunities exist for all of us, regardless of our income, connections, or property ownership.

But in Minnesota and Wisconsin, sportsmen and women are largely losing out on more than 300,000 acres of public land where there is no permanent, legal access.*

These local, state, and federal public lands are surrounded by private land with no public roads or trails to reach them. Landlocked parcels range in size from just a few acres to nearly 4,000 acres and—although they are, as a general rule, legally open to public hunting and fishing—guarantee access to no one except the neighboring landowners and those with permission to cross private lands.

Today, when time in the outdoors is more valuable than ever, unlocking public lands represents one of the most obvious and actionable ways to provide more opportunities for more people to enjoy the woods and waters of our country.

Minnesota

248 K

Total Landlocked Acres

Wisconsin

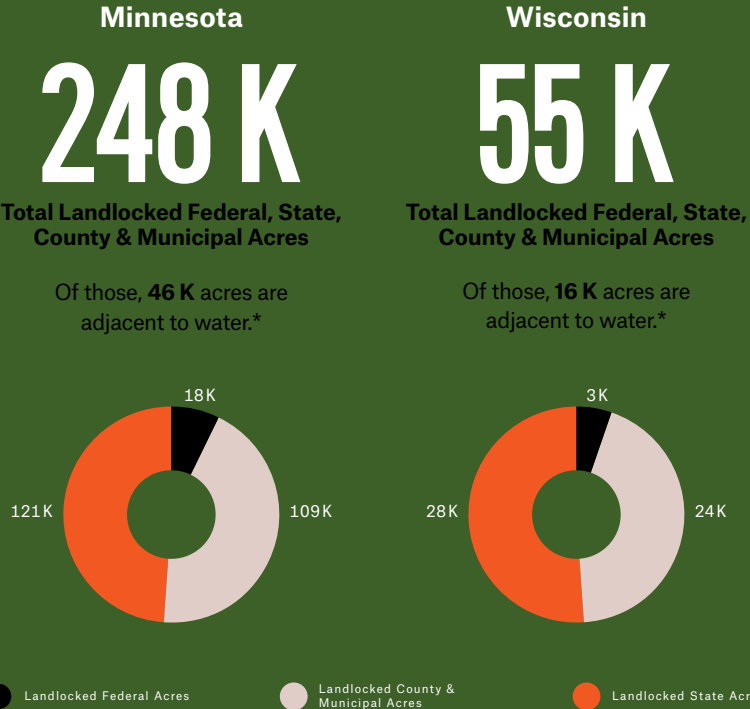
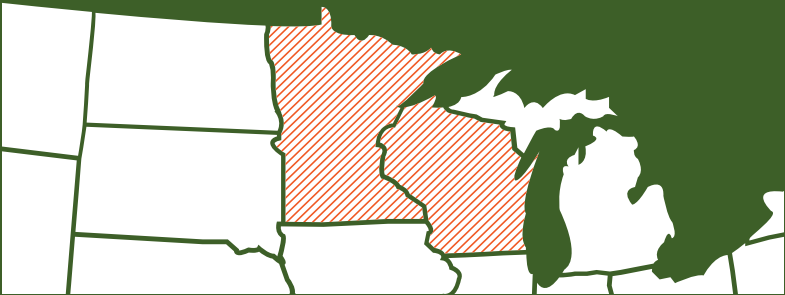
55 K

Total Landlocked Acres

*State walk-in access programs offer a valuable and widely celebrated tool for opening smaller and isolated parcels of landlocked lands to which it would be difficult or impractical to do so by any other means. Because most access agreements require perpetual renewal, however, they are not permanent—enrolled properties can change hands and/or drop out of a program—and thus were not factored into this analysis.

By the Numbers

Inaccessible Public Lands in Minnesota & Wisconsin



* While not all water adjacent lands are accessible by canoe or other watercraft because they might be swamplands or otherwise not suitable for boat access, some are.

To learn more about these figures, visit unlockingpubliclands.org

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Cover photo by The Hunting Public

THE UPPER MIDWEST'S LANDLOCKED PUBLIC LANDS

Untapped Hunting and Fishing Opportunities in Minnesota and Wisconsin

A New Collaborative Analysis by onX and TRCP





Cody Yang

Public Lands in the Upper Midwest

In the media and in popular imagination, public lands are most closely associated with Western snowcapped peaks managed by the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service or vast expanses of sagebrush prairie managed by the Bureau of Land Management. To be sure, there’s a good reason for this: 92 percent of our 640 million acres of federally managed lands are located in the 12 Pacific Coast and Intermountain West states, including Alaska.

But there are public hunting and fishing opportunities in every U.S. state that play a critical role in our ability to recruit, retain, and reactivate license-buying sportsmen and women.

Places like the Superior National Forest in Minnesota offer as much of a chance to immerse oneself in adventure as any of the vast public lands in states farther west. But there are also millions of acres of state, county, and municipally managed lands that provide critical access for outdoor enthusiasts close to home.

These days, anyone with a smartphone can take advantage of the opportunities offered by these smaller public tracts. For a Midwestern hunter looking to hang a treestand for whitetails, set up an ambush

for turkeys, or work a woodlot for grouse, access to an overlooked public parcel could be a game-changer. And easy access to a lake shore or riverbank might give a parent the only place where they’ll be able to teach their kids to fish for walleye, pike, or smallmouth bass.

A lifelong passion for hunting or fishing—and the conservation funding raised by those license purchases—could hang in the balance.

Strategically unlocking as little as a few dozen inaccessible acres at a time could mean the difference between someone having a place to explore the outdoors and not. A lifelong passion for hunting or fishing—and the conservation funding raised by those license purchases—could hang in the balance.

Landlocked by History

As with other states in the West and Midwest, upon statehood the land base in Minnesota and Wisconsin was organized into six-by-six-mile squares known as townships. Each township was further divided into 36 individual one-mile-square (640-acre) sections.

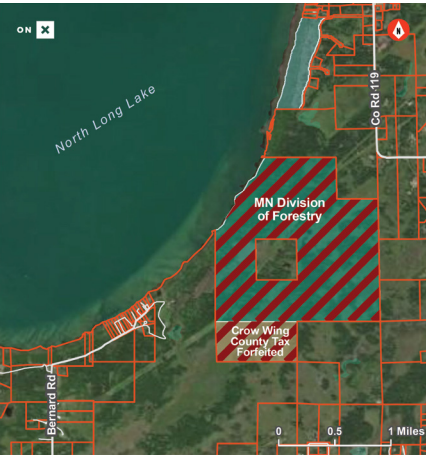
Both states received land grants from the federal government, originally comprised of two sections within each township, which were to be used to support public schools. Following statehood, several subsequent conveyances of federal land were provided to Minnesota and Wisconsin to serve various purposes, such as to support additional state institutions, create state parks and forests, expand agriculture, and retire marginal or unproductive farmland during the Great Depression. Meanwhile, millions of acres reverted back to counties and the states due in part to tax forfeiture.

Later, the Department of Natural Resources in each state began actively purchasing

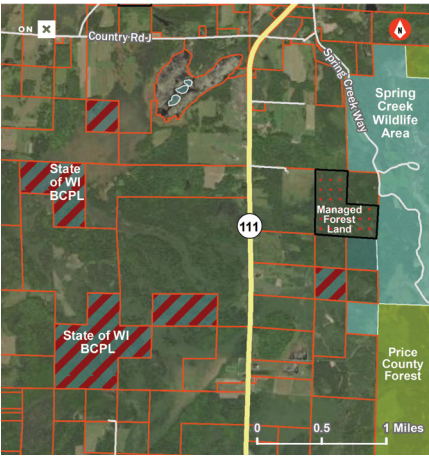
lands to meet management needs, generate revenue, protect vital fish and wildlife habitats, and provide access for sportsmen and women.

There were also vast federal public lands set aside in the Northwoods in the early 20th century, including the Chippewa and Superior National Forests in Minnesota and the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in Wisconsin.

The result today is some of the most diverse public land holdings found anywhere in the nation and, unfortunately, a remnant patchwork of landlocked public lands.



These two adjoining pieces of public land in central Minnesota total more than 600 acres with nearly one thousand yards of shoreline, but have no road or trail access for hunters and anglers.



Sitting adjacent to a state wildlife area and a county forest, a cluster of landlocked parcels in northern Wisconsin sits surrounded by private property, with no access to nearly 525 acres of public land.



Solutions

Landlocked public lands are best made accessible through cooperative agreements with private landowners that result in land exchanges, acquisitions, and easements, but this critical work cannot be undertaken without funding. When it comes to opening inaccessible public lands, even small projects can offer big benefits. Here are four programs that support these efforts:

Land and Water Conservation Fund
The federal LWCF remains the most powerful tool available for establishing and expanding access to public lands and waters. And it just got more powerful, with the recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, fully funding the program at \$900 million annually for wildlife conservation and outdoor recreation, including \$27 million that is dedicated to public access. Importantly, the LWCF is not just limited to federal projects—at least 40 percent of the program must be used for state-driven projects.

Both Minnesota and Wisconsin have innovative state programs for conserving habitat and improving access that should serve as valuable models for other states looking to do the same.

Minnesota

Lessard Sams Outdoor Heritage Fund
This program, established in 2008, empowers projects that protect, enhance, or restore habitat and—when it meets those primary goals—can also be used to open or expand access to inaccessible state wildlife management areas.

Strategic Land Asset Management Program
Since 2014, this program ensures that the state’s public land resources best reflect Minnesota’s conservation, recreation, and economic values and needs. Part of the program evaluates proposed land acquisitions and among its goals is increasing access to public lands.

Wisconsin

Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program
Created in 1999, this program exists to preserve valuable natural areas and wildlife habitat, protect water quality and fisheries, and expand opportunities for outdoor recreation. With a budget of \$33 million in 2019, Knowles Nelson allows the DNR to, among other things, unlock Wisconsin’s state parks, wildlife and fisheries areas, and state natural areas. Knowles-Nelson is set to expire in 2022 and will need to be renewed by the state legislature.