



# Splendor in the Grass...

Grass River Natural Area is one of Michigan's best

By Mike Terrell

Natural trails, wildlife, waterfowl and lots of swamp, marshland and bogs to explore, and if you're a kid, what's not to like? Dirt & mud are natural attractions.

That pretty much describes what you will find at Antrim County's Grass River Natural Area (GRNA). The good news is that with lots of boardwalks to keep your socks dry and shoes clean, parents won't have to worry about kids knee-deep in black ooze. Kids love the boardwalks and so will their parents for keeping them dry while exploring this fascinating area.

The Natural Area borders the 2.5-mile Grass River, part of Antrim County's Chain 'O Lakes' 50-some mile waterway. It protects over 1,300 acres, 6 miles of shoreline and features 7.5 miles of trails winding through upland forests and boardwalks snaking through floating sedges.

## INTRIGUING AREA

The crystal clear waterway flows through a wetland area made up of extensive floating sedge mats and marshy bogs; home to hundreds of species of plants and animals. The area is so intriguing that when developers proposed filling wetlands in the 1960s it prompted fundraising efforts among county residents to purchase the land, and it was dedicated as a natural area in 1976.

Today the GRNA is one of Michigan's premier nature preserves attracting annually over 30,000 visitors. The focus of the organization is protecting the watershed, education and providing access to the environment for families with opportunities to learn and explore, according to office manager Tina Schrader.

"We are all about education. We have

over 80 classes scheduled throughout the summer," she said. "Topics are varied such as animal tracking, spring wildflower identification, summer bird-watching and fall mushroom hunting just to name a few. Naturalists are available weekends May through October from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and weekdays June through August from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m."

There is a cost for the classes and advance registration is required. You can log onto <http://grassriver.org/index.php> for more information on all the offerings and to sign up for classes.

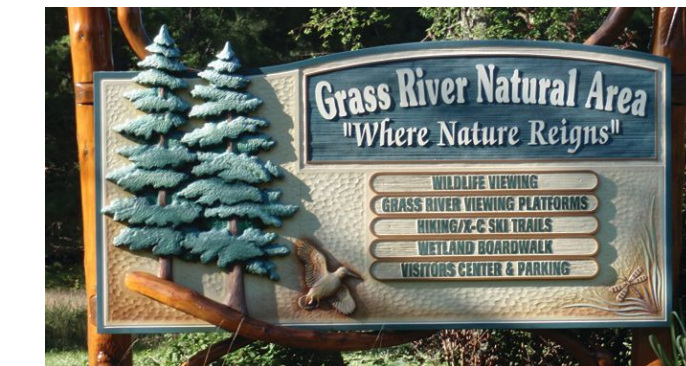
The area is open seven days a week dawn to dusk to enjoy a hike on their well laid-out trail system. When you pull into the parking lot, a large map directs where to go. It details the trails and segment lengths.

## THE TRAILS

The southernmost trail, Algonquin, leads out by the highway and barn that you pass when first entering the preserve off CR-618. The Bluebird Trail connects to the eastern portion of the rail-trail. Follow the Chippewa and Nipissing Trails to reach the rail-trail.

The Woodland Wildfire Trail, at a little over two miles, is the longest trail in the natural area. It begins on the west side of the entrance road to the parking lot. You cross Finch Creek three times on bridges, trek through wetlands and upland forests on the way out to the old railroad grade before returning. It's one of the most interesting nature loops at Grass River.

The Sedge-Meadow Trail and other boardwalk trails begin just behind the cabin/interpretive center. Plants have been identified and numbered posts correspond with a trail guide for easy identification. There are even some bug-eating pitcher plants, which



will excite the kids. The trail leads out to viewing platforms along the river, which you can dock at to access the Natural Area's trail system from the river.

I've kayaked over from a public put-in at the end of a short paved road off M-88 just after it crosses Shanty Creek. It's about where the Grass River starts flowing south from Lake Bellaire. There's no sign, dock or much parking space. Perhaps residents along the short road want to keep it downplayed. The river current is slow so no problem paddling back upstream. It's about a three-mile paddle round trip.

## WILDLIFE TOO

You can often spot marsh hawks, ospreys and bald eagles circling the large marsh. Some of the wildlife you might spot from the low observation tower includes river otters, mink, and white-tailed deer. Elusive bobcat, although you probably won't see one, also live in the area. Dawn and dusk are the best

clockwise from top:  
Over a mile of boardwalks offer access through beautiful sedge meadows that make up the Grass River Natural Area. Photos by Mike Terrell

Welcoming sign to Grass River Natural Area says it all.

times to visit for wildlife viewing.

There's also a trail called Perception Pathway for the visually impaired that is wheelchair and stroller accessible.

Along the lines of education, all of the trails have information signs placed strategically along the pathway explaining what flora and fauna you are viewing and how it fits into the environment. Sometimes it's a history lesson on how the land has developed since the last glaciers moved through here 10,000-some-years-ago shaping the land as we see it today.

It's an area I never get tired of visiting, and it's visually stunning all times of the year; always interesting.