



# 2020 FALL TRAILS CHALLENGE

YOURS TO EXPLORE.  
YOURS TO PROTECT.

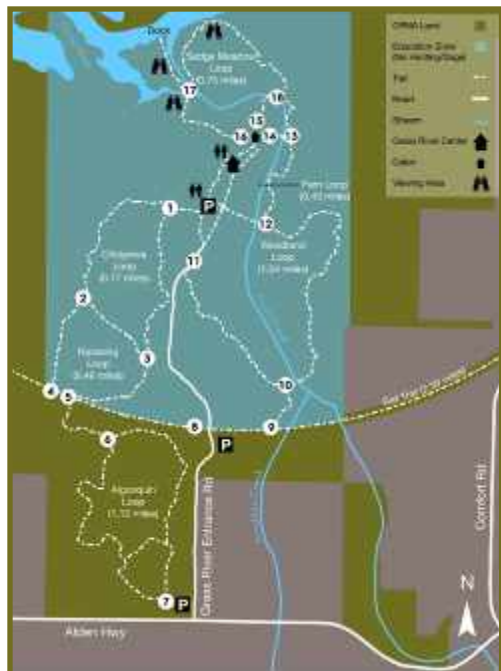




# Welcome to the GRNA Trails Challenge!



We invite you to explore one of Antrim County's best kept secrets and to keep your mind and body fit along the way.



Grass River Natural Area has **7 well-marked trails** with **over 7 miles of hiking** and is open to hiking, snowshoeing and cross country skiing year-round from dawn until dusk. Within these trails you will find contrasting ecosystems with equally contrasting flora and fauna.

**Take the Trails Challenge and discover the beauty and serenity that Grass River Natural Area has to offer in fall by hiking all seven trails between Sept 8 and December 31.**

The Trails Challenge is **free** and is designed **for all ages and fitness abilities**. There is no need to register for this program; just go out and enjoy a hike with your friends, family, or co-workers, or enjoy the solace of being in the forest by yourself.

## Getting Started

Download your GRNA Trails Challenge Guidebook at [www.grassriver.org](http://www.grassriver.org) and hike each of our seven, well-maintained trails by December 31, 2020.

Once you have hiked all of the trails, fill out and submit a brief [online trail log](#) with basic information about your experience on these hikes. You may also download a printable trail log to fill out along the way and hand in at the Grass River Center.

After you complete the trail log, visit the Grass River Center to receive 2 free passes for any GRNA educational program in the next year. Kids ages 11-17 will receive a GRNA water bottle and patch, and kids 10 and under will receive a small stuffed animal of their choice and a Trail Challenge Trekker certificate. Everyone who completes the challenge will get entered to win a sweet GRNA book collection, including the new edition of our Grass River Field Guide. Be sure to check the nature center hours as we are only open on the weekends after October 31.

Don't forget to take pictures of neat or unusual natural features along the way and post them on GRNA's [Facebook page](#) and [Instagram](#).

# LET'S GET OUT THERE!

## Hiking Tips and Trail Etiquette

- Wear sturdy, comfortable shoes. Some trails can be wet depending on the conditions, and many have exposed roots.
- Bring insect repellent if hiking in early fall. Many of our trails meander through wetlands and can have high insect concentrations. Also be aware of and check for ticks.
- Be aware of poison ivy and poison sumac, which often turn bright red in the fall.



- Please don't pick flowers or plants or disturb streams or wildlife.
- Respect others' enjoyment of the quiet of the natural area.
- Do not litter. There are trash receptacles at the nature center to dispose of garbage.
- Have fun and be safe!

## Hiking With Dogs



Because of fragile wetland habitats and because we host many school groups and programs within the education zone of our property, dogs are only allowed on the Algonquin Trail and the Rail Trail.

Please keep your pet on a six foot leash. Service dogs are allowed anywhere on the property.



## Hiking With Kids and Using Your Senses

Hiking is a wonderful and fun way to spend time with your family, and the Trails Challenge is the perfect way to make it happen!

Kids love to feel involved, and they stay interested when they feel a sense of accomplishment. Hiking these trails and checking them off the list will do both of those things.

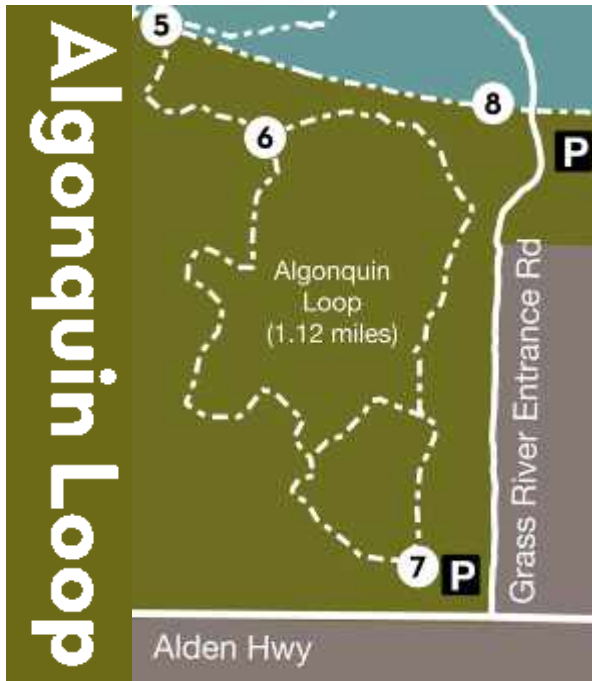
Kids also like to explore and see the little things. Take the time to explore with them. **Ask questions** about what you are looking at. **Notice** the differences in landscapes while you hike. **Listen** for different bird calls and songs. **Watch** for small critters that duck in and out of the water. Can you **hear** any frogs? **Keep an eye out** for unique insects. **Feel** the different texture of bark on the trees. **Hear** the babbling creek over the small rapids.

Take note of different wildlife that you see. How many different species can you count?

## Don't forget the Visitor Center

While at the site, be sure to visit the Grass River Center and see the displays. A naturalist is on staff 7 days a week through Oct 31—and on weekends from Nov 1 onwards—to answer any questions about things you've seen or things you might see while on your hike.

Guided walks can also be arranged. A selection of nature books, including the GRNA Field Guide, are available for sale at the building, with proceeds furthering the educational programming at GRNA.



## Trail Access Points



**Marker 7:** Parking for the southern entrance is just off the entrance road on your left by the green barn.

**Marker 5:** Parking for the north entrance is at marker 8, where the entrance road meets the Rail Trail. From the parking area walk west on the Rail Trail for 1/4 mile and marker 5 will be on your left. **Dogs are allowed on this trail but please keep them on a six foot leash.**

## Trail Notes

The Algonquin Loop is a 1.12 mile loop meandering through upland forests, dry meadows and pine plantations. As you meander through this **upland forest** you can expect to see a mix of **maples, aspens, beech, and red and white pine**. You will also see some noteworthy black cherry trees along this path. Can you find

the 13-trunked cherry tree by the green barn? This barn was a part of a farmstead that was acquired by GRNA in 1998.

In addition to having great tree specimens, there are also a variety of **grasses, ferns and wildflowers** along these trails, such as the colorful blooms of goldenrod in the meadows during September. As always, feel free to take pictures and get a close look but **please do not pick or disturb plants and wildlife**.

As you travel north from marker 7 on the east loop of the trail you will notice perfectly lined rows of red pine. This is one of two **pine plantations** on the property, one planted in 1965 and one planted in 1958. Continuing up the trail you will pass through a small block of **dry meadow**. This was a part of the original farmstead and like many dry meadows, it has been subjected to considerable disturbance from human activities like agriculture and livestock grazing. Here you will see **ferns, wildflowers and a variety of grasses**. The soils on abandoned farmsteads are often

nutrient poor and regeneration after disturbance is slow.



As you proceed north and loop around to marker 6 you can take the spur north to marker 5 and continue to the Nipissing, Chippewa and Rail Trails or continue south back to the parking lot at marker 7. As you travel towards marker 7 you will be in the midst of a typical upland forest at GRNA, meandering through a **canopy of maple trees** with an understory comprised of bracken ferns and wintergreen, a small plants whose leaves remain a dark, glossy green year-round. As you finish off your hike, to the west of the green barn, take notice of the small stand of **musclewood** trees along the trail. The bark of this hardwood tree is hard to miss in that, as the name suggests, it is irregularly fluted and has a muscular appearance.



# Rail Trail



## Trail Access Points

**Marker 8:** Parking at the intersection of the entrance road at marker 8.

**Bliss Road:** Parking at the intersection of Bliss Road and Paige Road. There is a connector trail near the entrance that leads to the Rail Trail.



## Trail Notes

The Rail Trail is a 1.7 mile one-way walk running along the old railroad grade. The railway was built in 1892 as a part of the Chicago & West Michigan and later the Pere Marquette Railway that connected Traverse City to Bay View, MI. A store and a comfort station to serve passengers were built near the natural area along the rail line. Comfort Road is named after this station.

The Rail Trail is primarily made up of upland forests and cedar swamp with different stages of growth due to human disturbance and rail traffic along the way. **Dogs are allowed on this trail** but please keep them on a six foot leash. **Bicycles are also allowed** on this trail.



From marker 8 the trail extends 0.5 miles to the east until it intersects Cedar Lane. Walking east you will pass a small stream, **Scrabble Creek**. This creek connects with Finch Creek approximately 1/4 miles north of here. If you continue east past Scrabble Creek you will cross **Finch Creek**, the southernmost crossing of Finch Creek within GRNA. This bridge is a prime location to observe **warblers and other migratory birds** in the fall. This is also an excellent place to **observe Finch Creek from above** to get a feel for the **dense cedar forest** that hugs the banks of the creek. From here you may continue east to Cedar Lane but we ask that you do not travel past Cedar Lane and respect all Private Property and No Trespassing signs.



Travelling west from marker 8 you will pass the entrance to the Algonquin Trail on the south and Nipissing Trail on the north. As you proceed westerly you will see three fences put up as **beaver exclusions**. These were installed in the late 1990s to stop beavers from blocking culverts, which allow swampy areas to drain to Clam Lake without flooding the railroad bed. You will also notice **tamarack trees** along this stretch of the Rail Trail. These are the only trees with needles in the this region to lose their foliage every fall. If you happen to walk through here in the late autumn you will probably notice a soft covering of **golden tamarack needles** covering nearly everything. While you're out here, **don't forget to look up** as there have been many sightings of **bald eagles** and other raptors along this path.

# Chippewa Loop & Nipissing Loop



## Trail Access Points



**Marker 1:** Trailhead on the southwest corner of the main parking area.

**Markers 4 and 5:** Walk 1/4 mile west from the parking area at the intersection of the entrance road and the Rail Trail (marker 8).

## Trail Notes

The Chippewa Loop is a 0.77 mile loop with connecting paths to the 0.49 mile Nipissing Loop on the south end at markers 2 and 3.

These trails are named after lakes that were formed 4,000 years ago and retreated about 2,500 years ago, named accordingly Lake Chippewa and Lake Nipissing. Along sections of the Nipissing Trail you can see elevated areas where the banks of the lake

once were.

These trails run primarily through **upland forest types**, although there are a few wet areas along the Chippewa Trail and **seasonal vernal ponds** between markers 2 and 3. In the spring, these vernal ponds hold the meltwater from the winter snows, but they dry up by the middle of summer. In the short time that they do contain water, they provide **critical breeding habitat to frogs and salamanders** that require water for laying eggs.

Throughout the forest you will see **maples, aspens, beech and pine**. You may also take note of some large **cherry trees**. Can you spot one between markers 1 and 3? Keep an eye out for a small **stand of hemlock trees** between markers 1

and 3 as well. Eastern hemlocks are slow-growing, long-lived trees that grow well in the shade. A hemlock tree may take 250-300 years to reach maturity and can live 800 years. How

old do you think these hemlocks are? Despite being long-lived, aggressive timber harvesting, low seed viability, and sensitivity to disease, insects, and drought have led hemlock populations to continue to decline.

Continuing through these trails you will encounter larger canopy trees with an understory primarily comprised of bracken ferns. Don't forget to take a minute to sit and relax on one of the benches and **listen for birds** such as **woodpeckers and flycatchers**, and keep your eyes peeled for fall mushrooms on the forest floor.





# Sedge Meadow Loop



## Trail Access Points



**Markers 14, 15 or 16:** Park in the main parking lot and walk past the nature center to the old cabin.

## Trail Notes

The Sedge Meadow Loop is a 0.75 mile boardwalk trail meandering through northern fen and forested and non-forested wetlands, crossing Finch Creek multiple times. This is also the only trail with dock access to Grass River where hikers can see a wonderful mix of terrestrial and aquatic plants and wildlife.

Along the forested sections of the trail you can expect to see **northern white cedar, balsam fir and tamarack** along with a diverse understory rich in **unique wildflowers, mosses, and ferns**. You will also see healthy populations of **speckled alder** along the stream and river banks and areas of near-

surface groundwater. Be sure to also keep an eye out for **snakes and turtles** basking in the autumn sun and **frogs** jumping into the water as you pass.

As you walk through the non-forested sections of this trail and out to the dock, take notice of the changes in landscape, flora, and fauna. Here you can expect to see less tree cover and more shrubs, such as **Labrador tea, bog rosemary and shrubby cinquefoil**. You will also see many grass-like plants, such as **sedges** (hence the name of the trail), **rushes, and reeds**. As you walk along these boardwalks, remember **that sedges have edges** and can easily give you a “paper cut” if you swipe your hand along them.

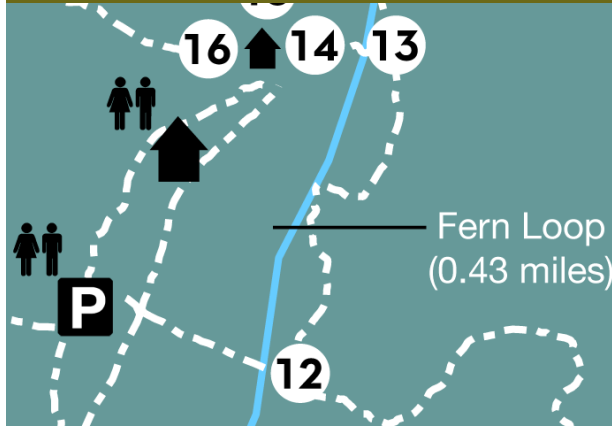
The proximity of a northern cedar forest, a northern fen and the open waters of Grass River and Clam Lake make the boardwalk trails and the many observation decks some of the best places to observe a wide variety of wildlife that require different habitats and food sources. It is not uncommon to witness **muskrat, mink, or river otter** along the water’s edge.



As you cross Finch Creek, take a minute to **put your feet or your hands in the water** if it’s not too chilly outside. **What does it feel like?** Is it warm or cold? **Is it fast-moving or does it flow slowly?** What does the bottom of the creek look like? **Is it rocky or is it sandy?** All of these factors (and more) determine the abundance and type of fish that are present in a stream or creek.

Don’t forget to **listen and watch** while you’re here; there are many beautiful birds often spotted along these trails, like **common loons and great blue herons**. And beaver sign, like gnawed aspen and alder trees, are most prevalent in mid fall.

# Fern Loop



## Trail Access Points



**Marker 12:** Park in the main parking area and entrance is at the east side the main parking lot along the entrance road

**Marker 14:** Park at the main lot and walk to the old cabin past the nature center

## Trail Notes

The Fern Loop is a 0.43 mile boardwalk trail which runs adjacent to and crosses Finch Creek several times and passes the old cabin. This cabin was built in 1934 and was originally used as a hunting cabin by the Delange

Family. This property, along with the cabin, was one of the first properties acquired by GRNA and serves as the main “ambassador property” that the public interacts with. This cabin was also used as the visitor center prior to the construction of the Grass River Center in 2011.

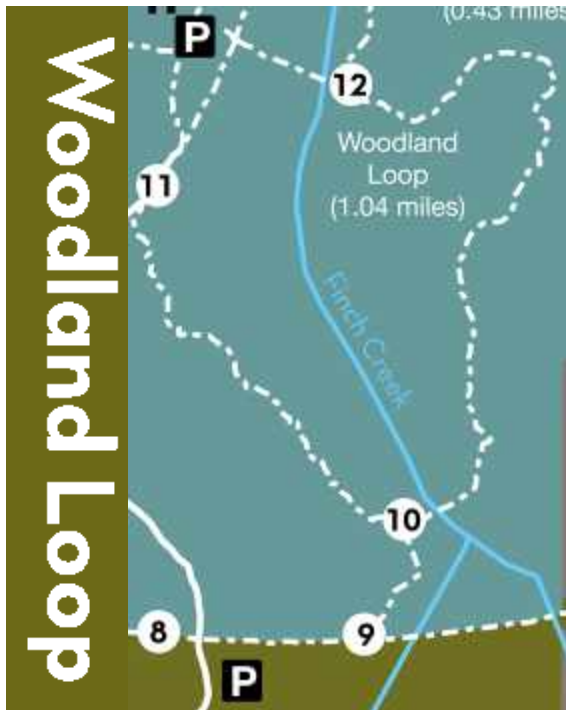
This loop is also know as **Perception Pathway**, as it was designed and developed for the visually impaired to create an accessible place where everyone can enjoy nature in a safe environment. Hold onto the rope along the trail to guide you as you walk. **Close your eyes and listen** to Finch Creek as it ripples past you. **Feel the textures** of bark from different trees. Is there anything extra you noticed from having your eyes closed?



This walk runs through forested wetlands where the flora and fauna are similar to the Sedge Meadow Loop. In addition to **northern white cedar**, you will also see alder and balsam fir, among other tree species. How many can you identify? While you’re enjoying the canopy of trees, don’t forget to look down at the floor of the forest too. This section of trail has a high density of **sphagnum moss** that grows best under acidic soil conditions, contributing to this unique micro-ecosystem. The decay of this moss, in turn, then contributes to the formation of the acids in the soil. As the name suggests, you may also see different types of **ferns and horsetails**. How many different types of ferns can you see?

The Fern Trail is a great place to glimpse **unique and beautiful late-blooming wildflowers**, such as grass of Parnassus, turtlehead, and many types of asters. Feel free to take pictures and get down to look at them closely, but **please do not touch or pick these flowers**. As you cross the bridge over Finch Creek at marker 14, notice the cedar tree with square holes in it. These holes were excavated by a **pileated woodpecker** looking for something good to eat. What types of bugs do you think the woodpeckers are looking for? Can you find other types of holes in trees along these trails?





# Woodland Loop

## Trail Access Points



**Marker 12:** Park in the main lot and the entrance is on the east side of the main parking lot along the entrance road

**Marker 11:** Park in the main lot and walk south on the entrance road until you see marker 11

**Marker 9:** Park at the intersection of the entrance road and the Rail Trail at marker 8 and walk east until you see marker 9

## Trail Notes

The Woodland Loop is a 1 mile loop that takes you through a mix of forested wetlands and upland forests. On this trail you will see a change in landscape unlike any other trail on the property. If you begin the trail at marker 12, you will start out in a **forested wetland** not unlike what you encounter on the Fern Trail, comprised primarily of **northern white cedar, moss, and ferns.**



Don't forget to stop and gently turn over a few logs to see if you can find any **salamanders**. Most salamanders spend the winter deep in the soil below the frost line, but they can be above-ground through September. Please return the logs to their original spot when you're done searching to protect their habitat.



As you continue towards the upland forest, you will start to see a **change in canopy trees**, transitioning from cedar and fir to maple, birch, aspen and hemlock. Do you see any other changes?

You will see another transition as you approach a short section of boardwalk surrounded by **ferns, sedges, and cattails** and a bridge crossing Finch Creek. What other changes do you see in the landscape? Just to the south of here is the **convergence of two streams**, Finch Creek and Scrabble Creek, which springs from the ground 1.25 miles south of here. At marker 10 you may either walk south towards marker 9 and the Rail Trail along Scrabble Creek or continue to marker 11, meeting up with the Entrance Road just south of the main parking area.

If you continue to marker 11, you will wind your way through a forest of tall maples and beeches and an **understory of bracken ferns**, giving this section of the trail an almost **"prehistoric" feeling**. In full fall foliage splendor, it's easy to see where the red maples of this trail earn their name. If you return this trail in the spring, you will find early bloomers such as the delicate flowers of **goldthread and fringed polygala**.

