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25 Reasons to Love Life Up North

Cherries, pasties, lighthouses, fudge. Sure, we're proud of the North's marquees. But for most of us, it's the understated pieces of the North that capture our hearts and call us back: a two-track heading into a shadowed forest, a fish market right on the pier. Here, then, is a tribute to the things we love about life Up North—25 wonders that capture the spirit of this place in subtle, soulful ways. Let our list inspire you to spend time exploring this spring, falling in love with your own personal icons.

May 23, 2008 Emily Bingham

Quiet

Bone-humming, hold-your-breath, cotton-in-your-ears quiet: the tonic to the maddening pace of the modern world, and one of the main reasons why city-weary urbanites have journeyed North for decades. There's infinite quiet to be found here—Sand



Todd Zawistowski

Lakes Quiet Area, a 3,500-acre

Williamsburg preserve that's part of Pere Marquette State Forest (231-922-5280) is only 10 minutes from Traverse City; a motorless fishing haven, Lake Dubonnet, is off Wildwood Road four miles north of Interlochen (231-922-5280); and the peaceful Pine River Campground (231-862-3471), in Huron-Manistee National Forest, is seven miles from Wellston.

Swimming Holes

Holler away and cannonball in—if you're lucky enough to stumble upon a true blue swimming hole, make it yours for plenty of wading, splashing and playing around. Find these perfect, Mother Nature-made pools along rivers and near falls; we found ours (pictured) on a pal's property in Lake Country, the hilly, water-logged region south of Traverse City.

Peninsulas

It seems to go on and on: In a state comprised of two peninsulas, there are yet more peninsulas, smaller peninsulas, and even those peninsulas have peninsulas, fingers of land jutting out from bigger fingers until the only way you could further surround yourself with water would be to just roll up your pant legs and wade in. These peninsulas have personality, too, so it's worth getting to know them all—Leelanau and Old Mission are each worth a day to themselves, but don't overlook Ludington's Buttersville Peninsula, with its adorable name and beachy vibe, or the Keweenaw Peninsula's rugged shores, rich mining history and unspoiled wilds, and the Garden Peninsula's lush, fertile land and daytrip-worthy ghost towns, and ...

Cool Crossing Signs

Moose crossing. Bear crossing. Tractor crossing. Tank crossing. (As in military tank crossing—near the Grayling National Guard camp, before the sign vanished a few years ago.) Can't help but love the novelty of the North's crossing signs, which speak of all the beasts—natural or not—in our collective backyard.

Deer Paths

Our whitetails blaze their own trails through meadows, woods and, yes, our backyard gardens. But if you can't beat 'em, join 'em—by taking a day-hike detour along one of their narrow, meandering, gently beaten paths.

Roadside Stands

Pull over, honey, because it doesn't get any fresher than this. Fruit pies, pasties, homemade preserves, tumbling stacks of apples and sweet corn, cardboard pints of dark cherries so sinfully ripe they're practically splitting their skins. The farm stands along our lazy two-lanes remind us that super-fresh food and trusting neighbors (we still thrill at the cashbox honor system) are two of life's sweetest pleasures. A delicious drive: U.S. 31 from Traverse City to Charlevoix is flanked with stand after roadside stand offering, in season, the freshest flavors of the North. (For a complete listing of farms, visit localdifference.org .)

Animal Sightings

Bobcats, bald eagles and bears—oh my, indeed. The most recent "sighting" to make headlines: a line of snow-embedded cougar tracks confirmed in March in the U.P.'s Delta County.

Orchards in Bloom

Here's one way to see how spring paints its way across the North—a country-road cruise through Leelanau's pastoral interior, quilted with color as vineyards, orchards and fields come into bloom. Follow Setterbo Road (on M-22 just north of Suttons Bay) westward across the peninsula, ending at the century-old Bohemian-built church, St. Wenceslaus.

Scenic Overlooks

Thank you, glaciers, for leaving us a land of breath-stopping precipices. One of our faves? Deadman's Hill—a rapturous overlook above the 18,000-acre Jordan River Valley, west off U.S. 131 north of Mancelona. Been there? Check out another splendid Jordan River view at the lesser-known Landslide Scenic Overlook (pictured), north off Harvey Road via Alba Road. Near Fife Lake, find Eagle Ridge, a gem tucked into Springfield Park and Recreation Area overlooking the Manistee River. Take M-66 south, Lund Road west, then swing a left onto Creighton Road to access the park.

Yacht Club Races

The flutter of starch-white sails, the sharp slap of rigs against the mast, the brilliantly colored spinnakers stretched across the water like floating flowers. Even if you know not the slightest bit about sailing, yacht club races are a beautiful spectacle to behold. Paddle or motor out west of Harbor Point to catch Little Traverse Yacht Club's Tuesday night racing series, which starts June 10. Beginning in early May, Grand Traverse Yacht Club races on West Bay every Wednesday evening around 6 p.m. (pictured); former GTYC commodore Bud Cline suggests bringing a picnic to Traverse City's waterfront Open Space or sipping a drink at Park Place Hotel's tenth-floor Beacon Lounge for a great view of the weekly event (231-946-5000).

Two-Tracks

Where does that dusty two-track lead? No better way to find out than to put some good tunes on the car stereo and bump around in the backcountry for a few hours. Bring a GPS unit and you've got yourself a full-on off-road adventure.

Ghost Farms

There's a rusty grace in farmsteads that sit fallow for years, abandoned and slowly unraveling over time: dilapidated barns, wild grass-filled fields, decaying

plows wedged in old furrows, forsaken mid-till. Valley Road (pictured), off M-72 northwest of Kalkaska, is a rambling drive through rolling farmland—some fostered, some long forgotten.

Rock Shops

You could spend a lifetime beach combing and still not come up with what you'd see in a single outing at a mom-and-pop shop like Nature's Gems in Northport: think fist-sized polished Petoskey stones and three-foot-long fossils housed in a cabin-cozy corner storefront right downtown (231-386-7826). For geodes, agates and other Great Lakes gems, try C&M Rock Shop in Beulah (231-325-2309) and Alden's Dinger's Rock Shop (231-377-4098)—a funky former chicken coop run by the daughter of late shop founder Betty Dinger, lovingly dubbed "Ole Lady Got Rocks." A tip before you go stone crazy: Many rock shops are seasonal, so for off-season visits, call ahead.

Sunrises

A sweet way to catch a sunrise: Float a kayak just before dawn on Round Lake, the Harbor Springs cove on Little Traverse Bay, to paddle through mist and watch the first pale hints of light whisper along the horizon. Launch from the public dock at Ford Park, on Bay Street just east of downtown (harborsprings-mi.com).

Tourist Traps

Tacky and kitschy, yes, but total roadside Americana. Ishpeming's Da Yooper Tourist Trap ain't afraid to whip out the big guns to snag the attention of passersby—"Big Ernie," the world's largest working rifle, is here, along with U.P.-themed loot and gag gifts galore (dayoopers.com).

Wild Berry Picking

Stumbling upon a wild cache of sweet, sun-warmed berries is the Up North equivalent to unearthing buried treasure: it's difficult not to be overcome with the urge to hoard it all, stuffing your pockets (or your mouth) with these tiny jewels. Most wild berries are found through summer and early fall, growing on creeping or low bushes along the edges of roads and meadows; hot spots include the Keweenaw Peninsula for the coveted thimbleberry (pictured), and the sandy ridges along Lake Superior in the northeastern U.P. for the wild blueberry, which has helped sustain generations of the area's indigenous people.

Roadhouses

Rev up and rally over to a roadhouse, which we love for the laid-back atmosphere and the way they randomly appear, oasislike, along lengthy drives through Nowheresville. At the log-sided Rico's Roadhouse (231-723-3721) in Manistee, tables are sidled into half-moon brick alcoves and the weekly specials are totally classic: Wednesday rib day, Thursday steak night, Friday fish fry with hand-battered perch, cod and pollack. More local flavor awaits at Fischer's Happy Hour Tavern, a rustic Northport version of Cheers; the Sanders hot fudge cream puffs are legendary (231-386-9923).

Waterfalls

When it comes to romantic natural phenomena, waterfalls are right up there with sunsets and stargazing—but because accessing some of the North's falls requires extra effort, the payoff is even sweeter. The Upper Peninsula is home to some 200 waterfalls (give or take, depending whom you ask)—from the wide, tumbling Upper Tahquamenon Falls to the feathery cascades of Tannery Falls—and early spring is when they're the most dramatic, thanks to surging snowmelt. The 60-foot Chapel Falls in Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore are the breathtaking reward to a pretty 1.5-mile hike through stands of jewel weed, about 15 miles east of Munising (906-387-2607, nps.gov/piro).

Bridges

Of course, there's the grand dame of our state's bridges—the Mighty Mac, our million-ton steel-and-concrete stunner. But quaint wooden footbridges, like Ransom Lake Natural Area's intimate overpass above an unnamed creek (pictured), give us reason to pause, lending us a new vantage, letting us consider where we are. Take a peaceful walk at Rapid City's Seven Bridges Natural Area, a historic sawmill site and 300-acre preserve where four of seven original rustic bridges have been rebuilt over the Rapid River—a blue ribbon trout stream—and its tributaries. From Rapid City, follow Valley Road west about three miles to the preserve's parking area (gtrlc.org).

Old-Growth Forests

Like living time capsules, these stands that somehow dodged the lumberman's ax allow us a glimpse into the pre-logging era Up North. South of the U.P.'s Copper Harbor, Estivant Pines Nature Sanctuary is home to 350 acres of native hardwoods, including centuries-old white pines and beautiful virgin cedar (906-337-4579, keweenaw.info). For an old-growth forest below the Bridge,

Hartwick Pines State Park in Grayling has historically untouched Jack pine, oak and lowland conifer forests—and it boasts the largest stand of virgin white pine in the Lower Peninsula (989-348-7068).

Niche Farms Eggs, irises, even heaps of raw wool are elevated to art in the hands of skilled niche farmers, who dedicate their lives to cultivating just one product. At Darnit Char's Icelandic Wool-n-Sheep Farm (tucked behind a stand of pines off a Kalkaska dirt road) everything is nurtured, nothing is wasted, and the end results are beautiful and earthly real: impossibly soft yarn, creamy sheep-milk lotions and soaps, felted wool hats and purses, hand-knit angora scarves and gloves. Char Barkus welcomes visitors by appointment (darnitchars.com); to find other niche farms across northwest Michigan, visit Taste the Local Difference (localdifference.org).

Fish Markets

For more than 100 years, Thill's (locals say *Till's*) Fish House—a squat quonset hut on Marquette's downtown waterfront—has dished up just-caught Lake Superior whitefish, plus smoked whitefish sausage, pickled trout and sound advice, if you should ask, on the best ways to cook the day's catch (906-226-9851). New generations keep the family business alive at similar markets like John Cross Fisheries in Charlevoix (231-547-2532) and Carlson's of Fishtown in Leland (231-256-9801); Bortell's Fisheries in Ludington offers absolutely addictive fried fish dinners to be eaten hot out of paper-lined plastic baskets at picnic tables just outside the shop (231-843-3337).

Champion Trees

Every few years, the who's-who of our state's superlative trees are listed in The Michigan Botanist's "The Big Trees and Shrubs of Michigan" report; unsurprisingly, many notables are rooted in Northern soil. Take a cruise to see champs like this willow (pictured) at the grounds of the Grand Traverse Commons; a grand juniper on South Manitou Island; a red osier dogwood in Frankfort at the corner of M-22 and Anderson Road. To download the report for a complete listing, click the "Big Trees Project" link at michbotclub.org.

Summits

At more than 700 feet above Lake Superior, Brockway Mountain is surely the most spectacular summit around. It claims to be the highest scenic roadway between the Allegheny Mountains and the Black Hills of South Dakota, serving

up sweeping views of mighty Superior and the Keweenaw countryside. The nine-mile Brockway Mountain Drive offers overlooks, hiking trails and a bird sanctuary along the way to the summit; the drive closes for the winter, usually opening in late May when the snow recedes. The drive is located on M-26 between Eagle Harbor and Copper Harbor (906-482-5240, keweenaw.org).

General Stores

Buy penny candy while renting a canoe. Mail a postcard after stocking your picnic basket. Fill your gas tank, pick up a paperback and sit down to enjoy a spot of tea—our historic general stores have it all, plus heaps of local flavor. A few to love: Omena Bay Country Store, where you can rent a video and buy beer steins for decanting your cooler-bought bev (231-386-5850); Good Hart General Store, a historic post office with homemade pot pies (231-526-7661); and Old Mission General Store, where pickles and peanuts are still sold out of barrels, and cups of coffee cost a nickel (231-223-4310).