

Thumb Land Conservancy

4975 Maple Valley Road, Marlette, Michigan 48453 810-346-2584 & mail@ThumbLand.org & www.ThumbLand.org

Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park Summary Thumb Land Conservancy, 2020 February 42-Acre Bidwell Trust Property Acquisition Burtchville Township, Saint Clair County, Michigan

The Thumb Land Conservancy is working to acquire key parcels needed to complete a 4.5-mile coastal forest park and trail along Lake Huron, connecting Port Huron to Lakeport State Park. The proposed Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park will protect most of the remaining beach ridge and swale forest along the eastern Thumb shoreline; a unique landscape complex of parallel sand ridges and muck wetlands of very limited distribution along the Great Lakes. In 2019, the Conservancy negotiated a purchase agreement to acquire the 42.1-acre Bidwell Trust property in Burtchville Township, one of the best remaining examples of the ridge and swale forest from Ohio to the Saginaw Bay. The Bidwell Trust property will be just a part of the larger Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park, but a very important part because of its location, size, recreational value, and high quality natural area. The Conservancy has until July 31 to complete fundraising and close on the Bidwell Trust property.

On June 17, 2019, The Carls Foundation of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan awarded a matching grant of \$150,000 to the Thumb Land Conservancy for acquisition of the Bidwell Trust property. The Carls Foundation has funded many projects in our region and our sincere thanks to them for kickstarting this phase of the project. On January 3, 2020, the Consumers Energy Foundation awarded a grant of \$30,000 for the project and will assist the Conservancy with further promotions. On January 30, SEMCO ENERGY Gas Company of Port Huron pledged a donation of \$2,000 for the project. The latest is that on February 13, the Community Foundation of Saint Clair County made a grant of \$20,000 to the project. The Community Foundation is a partner with Saint Clair County in completion of the County Bay to Bridge Trail. The Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park trail would complete two major gaps in the Bay to Bridge Trail as shown on the attached maps. In addition, the Thumb Land Conservancy has raised about \$15,000 as individual donations and pledges. The Conservancy must raise another approximately \$80,000 for the land purchase, stewardship fund, and other expenses.

The Thumb Land Conservancy has applied for several grants and is in discussion with potential project partners. This past September, the Saint Clair County Drain Commissioner acquired a 60-acre parcel within the coastal beach ridge and swale forest in Burtchville Township located only a few hundred feet northwest of the Bidwell Trust property. We have worked with two Drain Commissioners to protect over 200 acres of land in the County, preserved as mitigation for State-permitted wetland impacts. The latest 60-acre addition will complete a major portion of the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park, located less than a half-mile from Lakeport State Park.

William Collins
Executive Director

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Project Description

A line of several preserves and parks currently extends along Lake Huron through Fort Gratiot and Burtchville Townships. The preserves are generally inaccessible to the public and somewhat disconnected from each other, but not by much. With a little effort, we are within reach of creating a continuous 4.5-mile coastal park connecting the Port Huron area to Lakeport State Park. The proposed Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park would encompass most of the remaining beach ridge (or dune) and swale complex along the eastern shoreline of Michigan's Thumb region, a linear forested greenway connecting Port Huron with shoreline communities into Sanilac County. This coastal forest zone is well-suited for a recreational walking and biking trail with interpretive signage.

The Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project would complete two major gaps in the Bay to Bridge Trail in Saint Clair County, specifically "Gap 20" and "Gap 21" shown on the attached County plan maps. The proposed coastal trail is shown in white on both of these gap maps and would pass through at least two Thumb Land Conservancy (TLC) preserves. Currently, most of the preserves to be included in the larger park are difficult, if not impossible, for the public to access without trespassing on adjoining properties. The proposed Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park and trail would open most of these preserves to the public. Once connected, the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park is likely to become a regional destination for bicyclists, birders, naturalists, and other visitors.

The TLC is currently focused on acquiring one key property, the 42.1-acre Bidwell Trust property, which would become part of the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park. The TLC negotiated a purchase agreement for the 42.1-acre Bidwell Trust property on 2019 May 26. The total purchase price is \$278,000 with a closing date on or before 2020 July 31. All fundraising for this phase of the project should be completed by July 31, including establishment of a \$20,000 minimum stewardship endowment fund. Fundraising has been focused on foundation grants and over half of the project cost has been raised. We are now beginning to shift fundraising to local businesses and individual donors.

Within 6 months of acquisition, the TLC will complete park design for the Bidwell Preserve, complete a stewardship and management plan, place a conservation easement on the property, and initiate park stewardship. While somewhat beyond the current project phase, the TLC will establish a foot trail, construct a small parking area, and place temporary signage identifying the park and trail. We anticipate that most equipment work and materials required for development of the park on the Bidwell Preserve will be donated by local volunteers, groups, and businesses. The Bidwell Preserve property should be a functional park by January of 2021.

Beach Ridge and Swale Complex

The beach ridge and swale complex is a formation of parallel sand ridges and muck wetlands deposited from about 4,500 years ago. This unique Great Lakes landscape is very limited in Michigan and covers just a small part of Fort Gratiot and Burtchville Townships in Saint Clair County where it ranges from about a quarter-mile to a half-mile wide. It originally extended from the Blue Water Bridges into southern Sanilac County. The remaining formation north of Port Huron is the only significant occurrence from Ohio to the Saginaw Bay. The coastal forest habitat supports rare and uncommon species found in few other regions and is vital for migratory birds that move and nest along Lake Huron. Ongoing threats to the beach ridge and swale complex include residential and commercial development along the M-25 highway corridor, speculative land clearing and grading, forest fragmentation, sand mining, invasive weeds, overgrazing by deer, loss of forest canopy due to tree pests or diseases, and incursions by off-road vehicles.

The beach ridge and swale complex along Lake Huron is a big part of what makes the Blue Water Area unique and a desirable place to visit and live. Yet, few understand the character and significance of this land because there is very limited public access to it. Routing a trail through the interior of this coastal forest corridor will provide a great opportunity for recreation, providing a small wilderness experience within just a few miles of Port Huron. The proposed forest trail will increase safe pedestrian access to public parks, as opposed to being squeezed to road shoulders with traffic, noise, exhaust, and major safety risks. Based on a 2019 trail plan commissioned by Saint Clair County, 37% of the population is completely uncomfortable with biking along roadways and 51% are reserved in their comfort. A clear majority prefer biking away from traffic. The Bidwell Preserve and proposed Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park will get people out in nature and educate area residents about significant natural features where they live, not a long drive away in some other place.

Target Population

As part of the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park, the Bidwell Preserve would primarily serve the Blue Water Area community, including the City of Port Huron, City of Marysville, Fort Gratiot and Burtchville Townships. The proposed coastal park and trail will support the health and well-being of the community by providing a wonderful recreational and educational experience focused on unique natural features of the Blue Water Area. About 32,000 people that live in Burtchville, Fort Gratiot, and Port Huron could directly benefit from the park. The population physically able to access the proposed park and walking trail totals about 11,000 people 16 to 70 years old in Burtchville and Fort Gratiot, about 20,000 in Port Huron, and about 150,000 total in St. Clair and Sanilac Counties. As a coastal recreation area and very significant migratory bird corridor, the park is expected to draw visitors from across southeast Michigan and southwest Ontario. Protection of natural areas and associated functions serves everyone.

As proposed, the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park and trail will eventually connect to the Lakeport State Park Day-Use Area, the southern unit of the 565-acre State Park. No fee is required for pedestrian or bicycle entry and the Michigan Recreation Passport is also not required for non-vehicle entry. Lakeport State Park features over 2,250 feet of Lake Huron beach frontage, all accessible at no charge through the Day Use portion of the park. The Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park would directly connect to the Day Use Area and greatly enhance State Park and Great Lakes access for lower-income residents and visitors. Lakeport State Park is only a one-hour drive northeast of Detroit, described by some as having a very "Up North" feel with lots of forest, in-park trails, a pedestrian bridge crossing M-25, and just a short few-minute walk to Lake Huron where families and groups can picnic, hike, bike, swim, and skip stones on the beach.

Transportation in our region is dominated by automobiles. Required infrastructure, maintenance, and the sprawling development enabled by this system has taken a huge toll on the environment. It also excludes a large class of people that, given opportunity for pedestrian and bicycle transport, would benefit greatly in terms of opportunity, health, and access to natural areas. The Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park would help to alleviate this inequity in our region.

Planning Objectives

The proposed Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project will fulfill several objectives of County and regional plans, including the following:

2016 Saint Clair County Master Plan

https://www.stclaircounty.org/Offices/metro/CountyMasterPlan.aspx

- Greater access to healthy communities.
- Connect people to parks and transportation options.
- Utilize inherent connectivity of coastal communities.
- Protect and preserve valuable natural resources and sensitive environments.
- Protect woodlots, wetlands, and other natural vegetation.
- Preserve natural character of shorelines.
- Preserve forest, wetlands, and other ecologically valuable landscapes.
- Develop wetlands mitigation bank to preserve important local wetlands.
- Discourage fragmentation of natural environment.
- Protect and preserve water resources.

2017-2021 Saint Clair County Master Recreation Plan

https://www.stclaircounty.org/Offices/metro/forms/StClairCounty_2017_2021_MasterRecreationPlan_FULL.pdf

- Preservation Of Resources Support conservation and stewardship of land, water, and natural resources. Quality of life is improved by parks and open space.
- Quality User Experience Develop and maintain recreational facilities that draw people to experience nature and to be active outdoors.
- Connected Greenways / Blueways Connect land and water trails within the county to natural areas, recreation areas, and other trail systems.
- Explore potential locations for acquisition of significant property or properties, such as: Significant properties in conjunction with the Southeast Michigan Greenways Plan and the Michigan Natural Features Inventory.
- Encourage propagation of native and indigenous species.
- Develop programs to interpret natural, cultural and physical resources, and educate the public.

2013 Blue Water Trail Towns Master Plan

http://www.bluewaysofstclair.org/downloads/bwttpart1.pdf

- The focus of this Trail Town Plan is on seven communities that define the greater "Coastal Thumb Region" of Michigan, including Lexington and Port Huron. The Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park would establish a high quality connection between shoreline communities in Saint Clair and Sanilac Counties. Recommendations in the plan include:
- Promote the trail corridor as a tourist destination.
- Build partnerships with community groups and stakeholders to develop local interest and buy-in.

2014 SEMCOG Green Infrastructure Vision for Southeast Michigan

https://semcog.org/Reports/GIVision/index.html

- Protect high quality wetlands.
- Connect green corridors to parks and other natural areas.
- Increase public access along Great Lakes.
- Fund trail improvements to fill gaps in Southeast Michigan trail network.
- Coordinate non-motorized trail planning with green infrastructure planning.

Project Supporters

To-date, project funding has been provided by The Carls Foundation, Consumers Energy Foundation, SEMCO ENERGY Gas Company, Community Foundation of Saint Clair County, and individual donors. The TLC anticipates the balance of funding will be provided largely through foundation grants and business donations.

Development of park facilities at the Bidwell Preserve entrance, including a parking area, pavilion, information kiosk, exercise stations, and other structures, will likely involve local businesses and service organizations. Placement of interpretive nature signage along the proposed trail will involve local environmental groups and experts. Saint Clair County would take the lead on final development of the Bay to Bridge Trail. Routing through the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park would be planned in consultation with the TLC and other landowners, including the Saint Clair County Drain Commissioner, Fort Gratiot Township, and Burtchville Township.

The Saint Clair County Drain Commissioner has taken the lead on acquisition of wetland properties throughout the County to be preserved as mitigation for State-permitted wetland impacts, particularly for County drain projects. The TLC has worked with both the previous and current Drain Commissioners to protect over 200 acres of land in the county, most recently, the 60-acre tax-foreclosed parcel in the beach ridge and swale complex just a few hundred feet northwest of the Bidwell Trust property.

Project Budget

The following table summarizes the current project expense budget:

Expense Item Description	Total Project Expenses
Land Purchase	\$278,000
Consultants and Professional Fees	
land appraisals	\$3,000
Insurance	
annual liability premium increase	\$300
Equipment	\$250
Supplies	\$250
Printing and Copying	
fundraising letters	\$500
Postage and Delivery	\$200
Marketing	\$500
County Drain Assessment	\$1,000
Property Taxes (first year)	\$1,000
Preserve Stewardship Endowment	\$20,000
Total Expenses	\$305,000

- Land purchase cost is based on 2019 May 26 signed purchase agreement.
- Land appraisal cost is based on a quote by a local appraisal firm.
- Insurance cost (increase for 2 years) is based on discussion with TLC provider, Alliant Americas.
- Printing, postage, and marketing costs are estimates based on similar projects.

The following table summarizes the current project revenue budget:

Revenue Item Description	Committed	Estimated Pending
Grants/Contracts/Contributions		
Local Government	0	0
State Government	0	0
Federal Government	0	0
Foundations	\$170,000	\$50,000
Corporations	\$32,000	\$30,000
Individuals	\$7,000	\$6,000
Other	0	0
Earned Income		
Events	0	0
Publications and Products	0	0
Membership Income	0	0
In-Kind Support	\$10,000	0
Total Revenue	\$219,000	\$86,000

Project Promotions

The Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project and proposed Bidwell Preserve has been featured in the Thumb Land Conservancy e-mail news, issued quarterly or more to about 100 members and similar organizations in southeast Michigan. Project updates will continue through the TLC e-mail news and TLC web site at ThumbLand.org. Project supporters will be featured on the TLC web site, in press releases to local and regional media, on the TLC Facebook page, on local web sites, and on various printed materials. Major project supporters will be featured on signage at the Bidwell Preserve entrance.

Promotions will include at least one local fundraising event in 2020. Following acquisition, continued events on the Bidwell Preserve will include guided nature walks. The TLC will gauge public use and comments on the Bidwell Preserve through a web survey. User data will be used to direct and promote future phases of the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project.

The TLC anticipates cooperative activities on the Bidwell Preserve and Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park with local naturalist groups. Species surveys and other information resulting from these activities will be compiled and posted on the TLC web site and made available on various web sites, such as eBird.org, which already attracts naturalists from across southeast Michigan to the Thumb region.

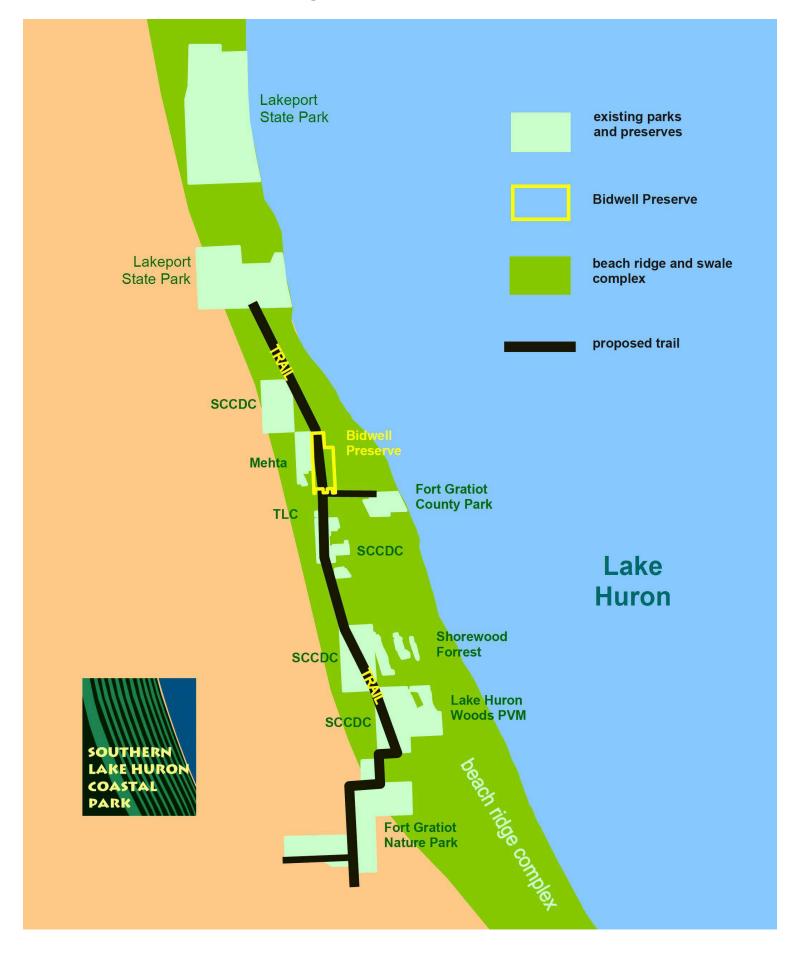
Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park

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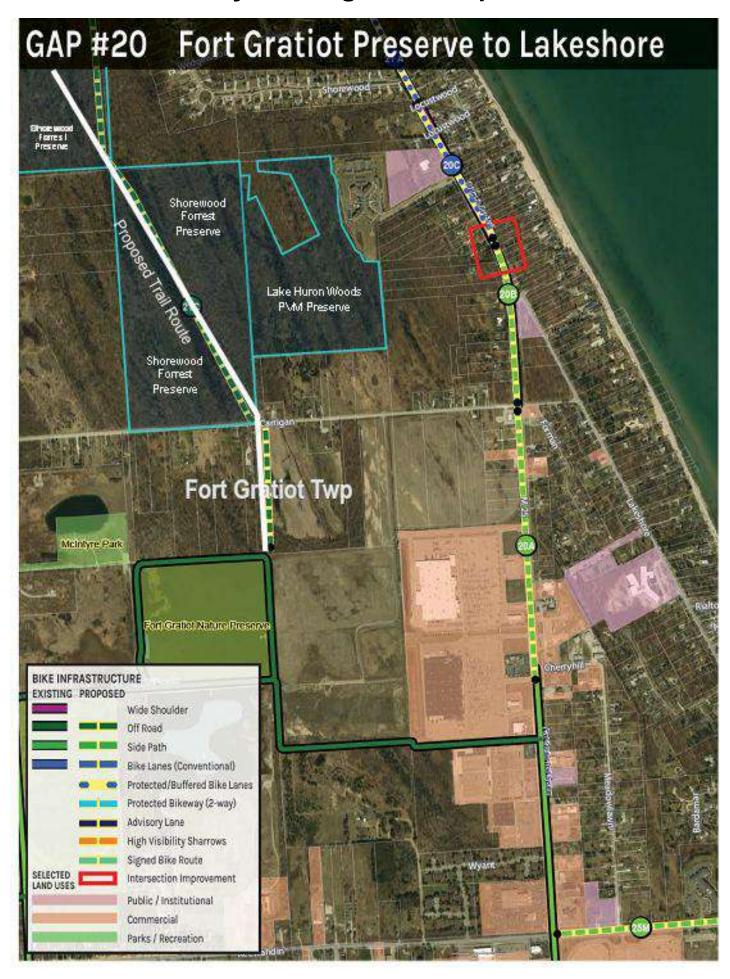




Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park Proposed Trail Route



Bay to Bridge Trail Gap 20



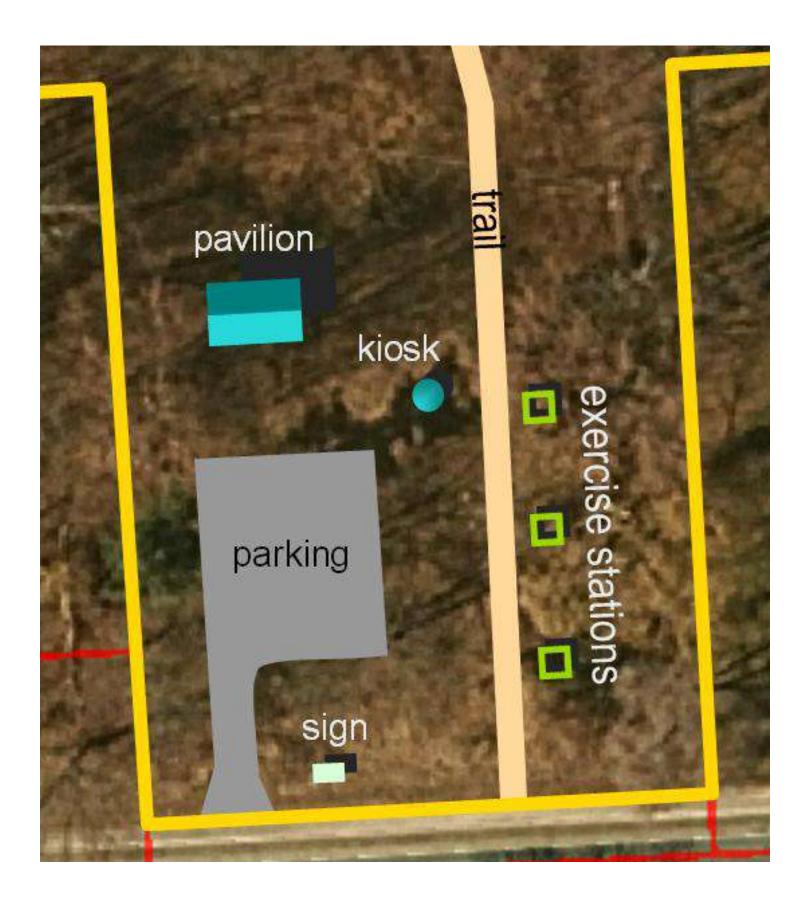
Bay to Bridge Trail Gap 21

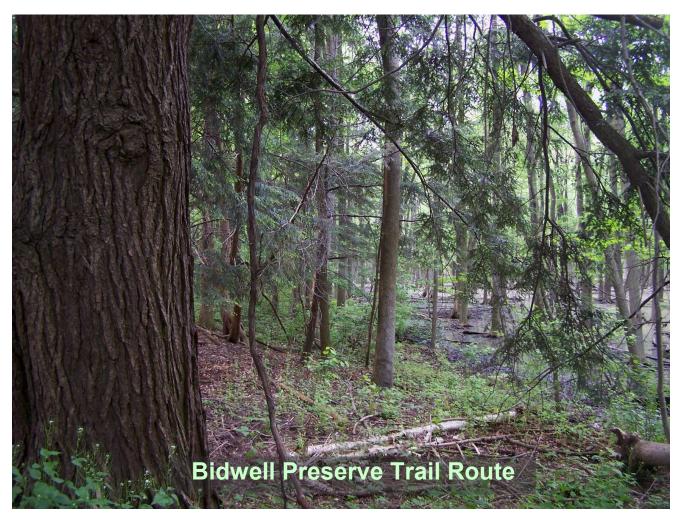






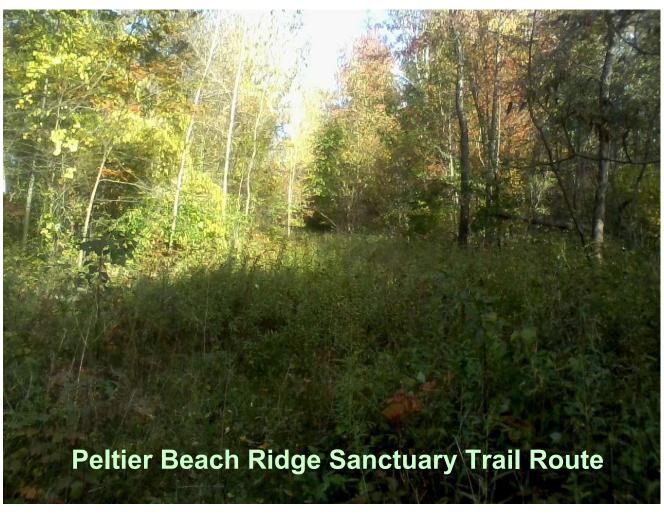
Park Entrance Plan Bidwell Preserve At Metcalf Road



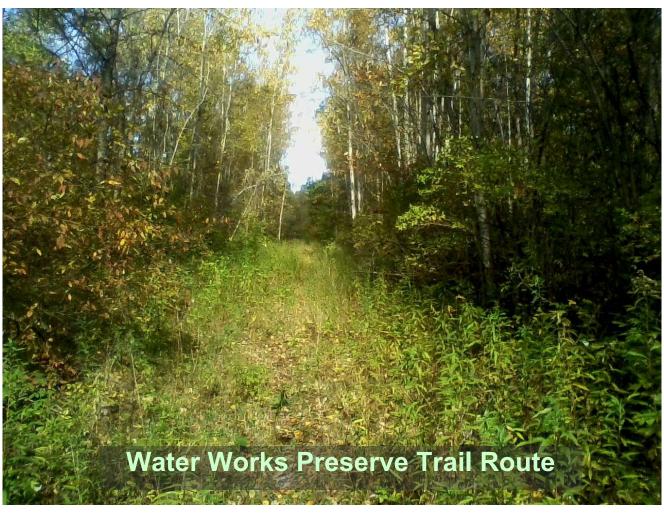












Beach Ridge and Swale Landscape

The beach ridge and swale complex along the eastern shoreline of Michigan's Thumb region is a formation of parallel sand ridges and muck wetlands deposited from about 4,500 years ago as the high post-glacial Lake Nipissing receded due to the rapid down-cutting of the new Saint Clair River. At the same time, the earth's crust rose, having been depressed by the weight of glacial ice during the last stages of the Wisconsinan glacial advance. The earth's crust is still rising slightly from the ancient depression of ice. The continued land rise and lowering of the Great Lakes left a series of dry upland sand ridges and mucky wetland troughs or swales between. This beach ridge and swale landscape provides not only a unique natural community, but a record of Michigan's post-glacial past.



The community is usually referred to as "wooded dune and swale complex". However, "beach ridge and swale complex" is a more descriptive phrase for the landscape of the eastern Thumb of Michigan. The ridges were shaped primarily by water. As with all of the ridges around the Great Lakes, the sand was first deposited as beaches that gradually rose above lake influence. Wind was a secondary influence, the non-forested shoreward ridges becoming dunes. The ridges along the southwestern shore of Lake Huron were probably less dune-like, buffered by adjoining forest from prevailing west winds.

Large pieces of ridge and swale landscape are still intact from Section 4 of Fort Gratiot Township, north to Lakeport State Park, but in other areas quite fragmented by development. In

Sanilac County, the beach ridge and swale landscape is not nearly as extensive as in Saint Clair County because the beach zone is so narrow along most of the shoreline. Lake Huron is just a few hundred feet or less from a tall bluff running along most of the Sanilac County coastline. Perhaps the most extensive occurrence of beach ridge and

swale landscape in Sanilac County is a stretch from Port Sanilac through north of Forester where the low shoreline broadens to about onequarter mile wide in some areas.

In Saint Clair County, the sand ridges average about 3 to 4 feet above the adjoining swales. The largest and oldest beach ridge runs continuously along the western limit of the landscape, furthest inland from Lake Huron. Although much of it has been mined out, this big sand ridge is still intact through Lakeside Cemetery and into Port Huron near the Blue Water Bridges where it is over 500 feet wide and up to 15 feet high. Centuries ago, this big sand ridge also served as a burial ground for Native American inhabitants whose burial mounds were found along this ridge near Port Huron.



Beach Ridge and Swale Landscape

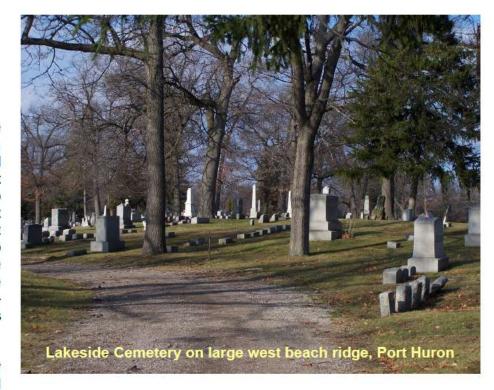
The beach ridge and swale landscape complex is very limited geographically, occurring only along the Great Lakes and originally covering only about 1% of Saint Clair County, and even less of the Thumb region as a whole. The landscape complex in Saint Clair County is the only significant occurrence remaining from Ohio to Saginaw Bay. Very little of this unique shoreline community remains intact, due largely to construction of State Highway M-25 and subsequent development along this corridor.

The Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI) considers Great Lakes wooded dune (or beach ridge) and swale complex

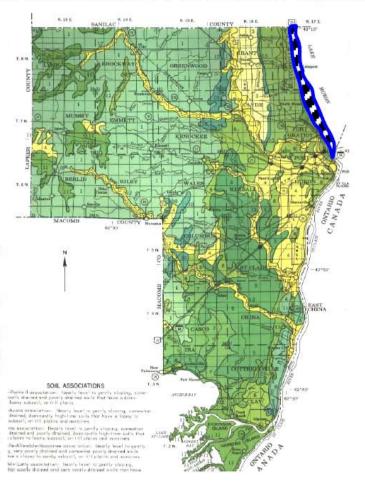


unique, and much of the Great Lakes landscape has been destroyed by development and hydrology alterations.

The primary soil type of the beach ridge and swale landscape in Saint Clair County is Wainola-Tobico complex. About half of this soil complex is somewhat poorly drained Wainola fine sand forming the upland beach ridges. The other half is very poorly drained Tobico mucky fine sand and pure muck in the wetland swales between the ridges. The Tobico mucky fine sand portion of the complex is a hydric soil. This soil complex is restricted in Saint Clair County to a narrow strip along Lake Huron in Fort Gratiot and Burtchville Townships, covering only about 0.7% of the county in 1970 when soil survey data was compiled.



as a distinct natural community in Michigan because of the unique assemblage of physiographic, soil, and vegetative components that provide high quality habitat for numerous shoreline species. The MNFI ranks the Great Lakes complex as a rare to uncommon community both statewide and globally. There are landscapes of similar geologic origin along oceans and seas, but plant and animal communities of the Great Lakes complex are



Plant and Animal Community

The beach ridge and swale complex provides critical shoreline habitat for uncommon and rare plant and animal species found in few other parts of Michigan. Uncommon species include Purple-flowering Raspberry, Yellow Lady-slipper orchid, Pink Lady-slipper orchid, Eastern Hog-nosed Snake, and Blue-spotted Salamander, as well as a great abundance of migratory birds. Based on MNFI records, there are approximately 30 Endangered, Threatened, or Special Concern species that could occur in the beach ridge and swale community of Saint Clair County.







Of all species, Purple-flowering Raspberry - Rubus odoratus is the most emblematic of the beach ridge and swale community in Saint Clair County where it is known only from the ancient beach ridges along Lake Huron and one location along the Saint Clair River. Purple-flowering Raspberry is essentially the Lower Peninsula's equivalent of the Upper Peninsula's well known Thimbleberry -Rubus parviflorus, being so closely related that they appear to hybridize where their ranges overlap in the northern Lower Peninsula. Like Thimbleberry, Purpleflowering Raspberry has no thorns and produces large flowers and big tasty red fruits. But unlike the white flowers of Thimbleberry, as the common name suggests, Purple-flowering Raspberry produces vivid purple to magenta flowers with subtly contrasting pale yellow centers. Also, while the prolific Thimbleberry is thought to have moved into Michigan from western North America as the last glacial ice melted back thousands of years ago, Purple-flowering Raspberry moved into Michigan from the east and is at the western edge of its range here, where native populations are relatively sparse and probably limited to only seven coastal counties, primarily along Lake Huron.

Yellow Lady-slipper - Cypripedium parviflorum and Pink Lady-slipper - Cypripedium acaule have been described as common orchids in Michigan, but both species are actually rare, limited to very specific habitats, and increasingly imperiled. Yellow Lady-slipper orchids are found primarily in the beach ridge and swale complex of Saint Clair County. Pink Lady-slipper orchids are more common in the dune and swale complex along Saginaw Bay. Despite how common or not these orchids may be, it is always a wonder to encounter these unusual plants in full bloom, usually in mid May. Yellow Lady-slipper is typically located in moist mucky sand along beach ridge bases. Pink Lady-slipper occurs on higher and drier sand.

The Eastern Hog-nosed Snake - Heterodon platyrhinos is an uncommon snake in Michigan, found almost exclusively in semi-open sand ridges of the complex in Saint Clair County. While more common in the southeast and southern plains of the United States, the Eastern Hog-nosed Snake is considered to be at moderate risk of extirpation throughout the Great Lakes region, Ontario, and much of New England. The Eastern Hog-nosed Snake is non-venomous, but well known for flattening its upper neck and head like a cobra. When disturbed by a potential predator, they often roll over and play dead with their mouths open.

Plant and Animal Community







The **Blue-spotted Salamander** - Ambystoma laterale ranges across the northeastern United States and adjacent Canada to the James Bay. The salamander is found primarily in moist deciduous forests and swamp woodlands, especially with vernal pools. The Blue-spotted Salamander has been described as fairly common statewide, but seems to be particularly associated with the beach ridge and swale complex in Saint Clair County.

Northern White-cedar or Arbor Vitae – Thuja occidentalis is not rare, but it is characteristic of the beach ridge and swale complex in Saint Clair County, and occurs in few other areas of southeast Michigan, limited primarily to relatively undisturbed muck swamps, lake and stream margins, and deep shaded ravines. The few Arbor Vitae remaining in the beach ridge and swale complex are remnant of the original that covered much of this landscape a few hundred years ago prior to European-American settlement and important to retain for restoration of the plant community and value to wildlife. The regeneration of Arbor Vitae is now severely limited due to over-grazing by Eastern White-tailed Deer.

The coastal forest is vital for migratory birds that move and nest along Lake Huron. Recent species observations provided by the local Blue Water Audubon Society for the beach ridge and swale habitat of Saint Clair County include American Redstart, Bald Eagle (Michigan Special Concern), Barred Owl, Bay-breasted Warbler, Black-andwhite Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Blue-headed Vireo, Blue-winged Warbler, Boreal Owl, Canada Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Cerulean Warbler (Michigan Threatened), Chestnut-sided Warbler, Common Nighthawk (Michigan Special Concern), Common Yellowthroat, Connecticut Warbler, Cooper's Hawk, Eastern Towhee, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Golden-winged Warbler, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Hairy Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush, Hooded Warbler (Michigan Special Concern), Indigo Bunting, Kentucky Warbler, Least Flycatcher, Louisiana Waterthrush (Michigan Threatened), Magnolia Warbler, Merlin (Michigan Mourning Warbler, Nashville Warbler. Threatened). Northern Goshawk (Michigan Special Concern), Northern Parula, Northern Saw-Whet Owl, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Ovenbird, Palm Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo, Pileated Woodpecker, Pine Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, Pine Warbler, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Red-(Michigan Red-shouldered Hawk eyed Vireo. Threatened), Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Scarlet Tanager, Sharp-shinned Hawk. Swainson's Thrush. Tennessee Warbler. Tufted Titmouse, Veery, Whip-poor-will (Michigan Special White-breasted White-winged Concern). Nuthatch. Crossbill, Wilson's Warbler, Wood Thrush, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Yellow-throated Vireo.