

Top 10 trails to try

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ed just a few miles southeast of Traverse City. The 3,500-acre Sand Lakes Quiet Area offers several miles of pristine trails that wind around the many scenic little lakes that dot the preserve. Many of the skier-tracked trails cross over the frozen lakes, which are also popular with local ice fishermen.

Wildlife is abundant throughout the natural area. One thing you won't see is snowmobiles. They aren't permitted. Contact the DNR Traverse City Field Office at (231) 922-5280 for the latest conditions. Trail maps are posted at all intersections.

Shingle Mill Pathway

For a good dose of solitude, head for the Shingle Mill Pathway. Slicing through the Pigeon River Country State Forest in elk country, the trail system is located 11 miles due east of Vanderbilt. It offers skier-tracked loops ranging from 3/4-of-a-mile up to 11 miles. The trail snakes along the swift-flowing Pigeon River and then climbs into the highlands overlooking the river valley. You also pass right by the headquarters for the Pigeon River Country State Forest. Information boards and displays detail the history of the land. It finishes along a boardwalk that passes through a cedar swamp.

Along the way you have a good chance of sighting elk that roam the area. The trail is marked but maps along the way are hard to find. Contact the Gaylord DNR office for trail maps and the latest snow conditions by calling (989) 732-3541.

Black Mountain Pathway

One of the newest DNR cross-country ski areas in the state, the Black Mountain Recreation Area's 31-mile trail system opened less than 10-years ago, but it's already one of the best. The groomed trail system offers an excellent double-tracked pathway. A separate six-mile skating lane meanders around the lower portion of the mountain. Located about 15 miles southeast of Cheboygan, Black Mountain looms over the east side of Black Lake. A series of long, wooded ridges, climbing to nearly 1,000 feet above sea level, form the centerpiece of the

9,000-acre recreation area. You can spend a couple of days enjoying the trail system and striking landscape. Three-sided shelters, located on both sides of the road crossing over the top, are perfect for a trailside picnic. Four trailheads scattered around the base of the mountain offers varied access to the pathway. A variety of loops offer something for every skill level. For maps and trail conditions, call the Atlanta DNR office at (989) 785-4252.

Forbush Corner

Located just off I-75 north of Grayling, Forbush Corner is a perennial favorite of local skiers and racers who find the rolling terrain and miles of meticulously groomed trails a delight. There are over 23 miles of wooded trails groomed for both classic and skate. A portion of Forbush's trail connects with nearby Hartwick Pines State Park trails, which offers even more terrain-another eight miles-and lots of scenery to enjoy. There's something here to appeal to every skill level, but those who like distance and challenge will like it best. For the latest snow report call (989) 348-5989 or log onto www.forbushcorner.com.

Cross-Country Ski Headquarters

Cross-Country Ski Headquarters is a popular stop on the way north. Located just off I-75 near Roscommon, it offers a nice mix of fairly easy trails and a well-stocked ski shop operated by friendly owners Bob and Lynne Frye. They maintain nearly 20K's of well-groomed trails for both classic and skate.

They also have a pet-trail where you can take your pooch for a ski before hitting the rest of the system on your own. Fido feels good, and you won't feel guilty while enjoying a long tour. The trails meander through a forest setting and across open meadows. A stop at the Trapper's Cabin log shelter is always a must where you can enjoy a hot cup of cocoa, a warm fire and good conversation before finishing your ski tour. For the latest conditions, call (989) 821-6661, or click on www.cross-country-ski.com.

Valley Spur

Considered one of the finest cross-country systems in the UP, Valley Spur offers an imaginative lay-

out with impeccable grooming. Located west of Munising on M-94, it's part of the Lake Superior snowshoe and they often ski well into April. The Forest Service maintains the 12-mile pathway, tracking it on a regular basis. In addition to the tracked portion of the trail system, there's also a separate seven-mile groomed skating lane. The trails cut through a heavy forest, often follow old logging roads. There's something for everyone, but those who like intermediate and expert trails will find the most to like. The expert loops are a real roller-coaster ride with a few fast, corkscrew-like downhill runs thrown in for good measure.

For the latest conditions, call the Munising Ranger District at (906) 387-2512.

Pictured Rocks

For a fantastic wintry look at the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, try Munising Cross-Country Ski Trails. Located on bluffs above the Visitor Center, 10 miles of picturesque, classic single-track trail meanders along the bluffs. They cross over icy streams and pass frozen waterfalls, and offer wonderful vistas of Munising, Grand Island and the iced over bay. For maps and trail conditions, call the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore Headquarters at (906) 387-3700.

Porcupine Mountains

Porcupine Mountain State Park, located on the western side of the UP, with 60,000 acres is one of the Midwest's last large wilderness tracts left that's still open to the public. Towering virgin timber, craggy peaks, secluded lakes, and miles of wild rivers and Lake Superior shoreline make a trip to the "Porkies" a trip to remember; especially during winter. There are 42K's of double-tracked trails through this pristine wilderness and some trails are also groomed for skating. For a treat take a chairlift ride to the top of the mountain, and cross-country ski down the backside on groomed trails.

Along the way you get some amazing vistas of The Lady, which is what locals call Superior. Snow can last up here until the June thaw. For trail maps and conditions, call the park at (906) 885-5275.