

Miners Falls Trail

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Miners Falls Trail winds for 0.6 mile (1.2 round trip) into the cool, moist, shady world of the northern mixed hardwood forest. Numbered posts along the trail refer to the following paragraphs. At trail's end you will be rewarded with a view of one of the Lakeshore's most spectacular sights - Miners Falls. The falls of the Miners River cascade over a precipice some 60 feet high. The falls are caused by a ledge of Munising Formation sandstone, the same formation that creates Tahquamenon Falls to the east and Laughing Whitefalls to the west.

The gravelled trail is rolling with no steep slopes. At trail's end, there are about 80 steps leading down to the lower falls viewing platform. A second or upper viewing platform is reached by a spur trail that does not require you to negotiate steps. Rest benches are located along the way. Dogs are permitted in the picnic area but not on the trail.



ONE - What's in a Name?



Visited by passing English geologists in 1771-1772, the nearby Miners River was named by employees of Alexander Henry during one of his exploratory trips on Lake Superior. At that time, indicators or "leaders" were used to locate mineral deposits. Discolored water oozing from bedrock was one such leader found in the Miners Basin, although no minerals were ever extracted from this area. Still, the name remains with us today.

TWO - Beech and Maple



The northern mixed hardwood forest is the primary upland forest for much of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. This forest type varies in composition depending on soils and disturbance such as fire and extensive blow-down. Historically, three of the most common trees were the grey-barked American Beech; the sugar maple, with rough scaly bark on older trees; and the yellow birch with its stringy yellowish-gray bark. Watch for them as you continue down the trail. Beech bark disease is moving through the Lakeshore, killing a high percentage of this species.

THREE - A Dark Understory



Have you noticed the lack of shrubs growing on the forest floor? Why do many of the sapling trees have large leaves? Even on a sunny day this is a relatively dark forest floor. Light, or rather the lack of it, is one factor which limits growth of small shrubs and other plants. Small trees have adapted to this lack of light with larger leaves. Another common shade tolerant plant is the American yew, also called ground hemlock. Yews have fleshy red berries during the summer.

FOUR - The Lumpy Land



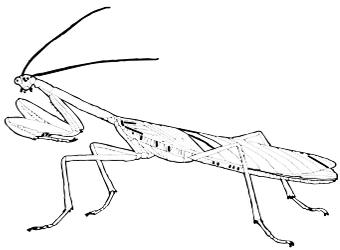
Why is this landscape so bumpy? Lakeshore forests grow in a variety of soils and are subject to three situations which limit the tree's ability to grow deep root systems. Continually wet soils, shallow soils over bedrock, and soils with a "fragipan" or hard layer just below the surface all create conditions which limit deep growth of anchor roots. Occasional wind storms off Lake Superior cause one or more trees to tip over, exposing their root structure. Once trees decompose, only the pile of soil and rock is left, creating the lumpy land common in this region.

FIVE - Window to the Sun



When wind storms topple these tall trees, a space is created in the leaf canopy above. This "light gap" allows beams of sunshine to flood the forest floor. Trees, shrubs, and ground cover quickly respond to this increased source of energy, growing with renewed vigor. Aspen trees often sprout and grow rapidly under these conditions, their roots having laid dormant for many years. After a few seasons of growth, the light gap is closed by vegetation once again.

SIX - Hidden Critters



Where are all the animals? Though you probably don't see or hear many, they are here. You may notice the occasional chatter of a chipmunk or the flute-like call of the hermit thrush, but the majority of the animals remain less obvious. Hidden in the tree tops are numerous insects feeding on leaves. Several species of birds feed on these insects. One of the more common residents is the red-eyed vireo, which builds its nest of birch bark strips.

SEVEN - A Forest Garden



Where have all the flowers gone? If you were to walk this path in early May, the forest floor would be covered with wildflowers and it would be like walking into a perfume factory. Spring beauty, violets, bloodroot, hepatica, trout lily, and dutchman's breeches are at their peak of bloom in mid-spring. They store energy from the sun before trees leaf out, leaving the forest floor much darker. Many forest flowers wither by June and the plants are reduced to their below ground roots and tubers. They live off the quickly stored energy until next spring when the cycle continues.

EIGHT - Walking the Ridge

Have you noticed there is a valley on either side of the trail? Geologists explain that some 9,500 years ago this area was still covered by a glacier. As the ice melted, numerous post-glacial rivers ran from west to east in this area. This ridge, sculpted by post-glacial events, may be a bedrock ridge with glacial debris piled on top of it.

NINE - Miners Basin



Before you lies Miners Lake, its shining surface reminding us of a time when Lake Superior was much larger and higher. About 3,800 years ago, the level of once higher Lake Superior dropped 40 feet, leaving this jewel in a pocket of sandy soil. Around the turn of the century, mature white and red pines were cut for lumber here. Today the pine forest has returned as a stand of jack pine. Blueberries grow beneath them, and local Ojibwa Indians once travelled from Grand Island to harvest them each summer.

TEN - Down to North



Descending these steps is like being far to the north. The cooler, moister environment of the gorge creates conditions where spruce, fir, and cedar live - a much different environment than the northern hardwoods you have been walking through. This community harbors different species of animals and birds. Marten and fisher, large members of the weasel family, catch small mammals and an occasional red squirrel. Here too you may see crossbills flying around the spruce tree spires. They have an unusually adapted beak with the upper bill curving down in the opposite direction from the lower. This enables them to pry open cones for seeds.

ELEVEN - Miners Falls



Miners Falls has the greatest volume of water flow of any waterfall in the park. The water is tea colored because of tannins - compounds released from roots of wetland plants upstream. White foam is sometimes seen in the creek, a natural product of the organic solids in the water. The falls cascade over an inland section of the Pictured Rocks escarpment. An extension of that escarpment also creates Tahquamenon Falls some 60 miles east of here, and Laughing Whitefish Falls in western Alger County. Did you notice the potholes at the base of the falls? They were drilled by the turbulent current of the creek.

TWELVE - As You Return



Walking back to the trailhead, listen to the sounds of the forest. Smell the fragrance of the woods. Feel the dappled warmth of the sun and breeze on your skin. Quietly sense the wonder of this small section of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. Enjoy your visit in the park!

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