



A Visit to Mille Lacs Moraine Scientific and Natural Area

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It's best to visit one of Minnesota's Scientific and Natural Areas (SNAs) with a spirit of adventure and, in early summer, with some serious insect repellent. That's how I armed myself as I made my way to Mille Lacs Moraine SNA, just a short drive southwest of Garrison.



Established in 2012, Mille Lacs Moraine is the first SNA in Crow Wing County and one of only a handful that includes a lake completely within its boundaries. It is located in a region of rich biodiversity that stretches up the west side of the big lake. This diversity is due in part to the up-and-down topography of the area (thanks, glaciers!) that provides for a number of different habitats in close proximity to one another.

This geography was immediately apparent as I left my car at the designated parking spot and hiked towards the SNA. The gravel road rose, dipped, and curved, at one point revealing a wetland with evidence of beaver activity.

Signage at the SNA entrance offered highlights of the area's natural history plus a map of the various terrains found within its 318 acres. Like other SNAs, once you've arrived at the gate, you're on your own: there are no maintained trails, picnic spots, water sources, or toilets. That's part of the adventure.

After dousing myself (again) with insect repellent, I proceeded into the SNA. Beyond the entry, the road was mostly grown over with plants and shrubs and dotted with fallen trees. I slowed my pace to better absorb my surroundings, hoping to see a red-shouldered hawk; they've been reported at this location.

Before I'd gone far, my attention was drawn to a silvery light penetrating the woods: I was approaching Sunfish Lake, a centerpiece of this SNA. I scrambled down to its boggy shoreline where yellow pond lilies bloomed. I lingered near the water, absorbing the tranquility of the setting.



In addition to Sunfish Lake, Mille Lacs Moraine boasts several other types of wetland. By making my way into the woods and away from the abandoned road, I was able to glimpse alder and ash swamps and a fen with its unique variety of plant life.

Minnesota's 168 SNAs are primarily intended for research, preservation, and quiet visits such as mine rather than for higher-impact recreation. Created 50 years ago by foresighted state legislators and other citizens, Minnesota's SNA program sets aside public lands to preserve unique geological features; protect landscapes important for rare plant and animal life; and to provide living laboratories in which we can learn more about the natural world. The addition of Mille Lacs Moraine to this collection is strong evidence of the area's high-quality natural environment.



My walk to the far boundary of the SNA and back to my car was about 2.5 miles. Along the way I had seen more than a dozen different blooming plant species, six kinds of butterflies, and a robber fly that mimicked a bumblebee. I paused again at Sunfish Lake, this time seeing a white swan glide along the far shore. I resolved to return to explore further. And maybe try harder to spot a red-shouldered hawk.



Everyone is invited to visit these wild places to connect with the rich natural legacy that graces our state. If you go, be sure to first visit the DNR's Mille Lacs Moraine SNA website at <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/snas/detail.html?id=sna02060>. There you'll find downloadable maps and details about permitted activities as well as lists of plants and birds to be found.