

Itasca State Park

Management Plan Amendment

Bicycle Trail Improvements



Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
Division of Parks and Trails

July 2015

For more information on this management plan amendment, please contact the DNR Division of Parks and Trails at (651) 259-5600.



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Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

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Department of Natural Resources Approval of Management Plan Amendment for Itasca State Park

Minnesota Statutes, section 86A.09, subd. 1 requires that a master plan be prepared for units of Minnesota's outdoor recreation system, including state parks. The Laws of Minnesota for 1891 established Itasca State Park as part of Minnesota's Outdoor Recreation System (*Minnesota Statutes*, section 85.012, subd. 29).

The management plan (master plan) amendment received input and comment both within the Department of Natural Resources and from the public.

Erika R. Rivers

Erika Rivers, Director
MNDNR Division of Parks and Trails

7/6/2015

Date



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Introduction

Itasca State Park is located 23 miles north of Park Rapids, spanning parts of Clearwater, Hubbard, and Becker Counties. Established in 1891, Itasca State Park is one of Minnesota's and the nation's oldest state parks. The geology of the landscape was shaped by the repeating advance and retreat of glaciers resulting in over 100 lakes within the state park boundary. The state park's statutory boundary encompasses approximately 30,875 acres. Of that amount 30,350 acres are managed by the Division of Parks and Trails, 40 acres are managed by the Division of Forestry, 120 acres by Clearwater County, 91 acres are under tax forfeit, and 274 acres are privately owned.

Itasca State Park offers significant recreation opportunities and facilities including two campgrounds, two group centers, one group camp site, numerous cabins and lodges, a swimming beach, a picnic area, a visitor center with year-round interpretive programs, and trails for hiking, biking, cross country skiing, and snowmobiling.

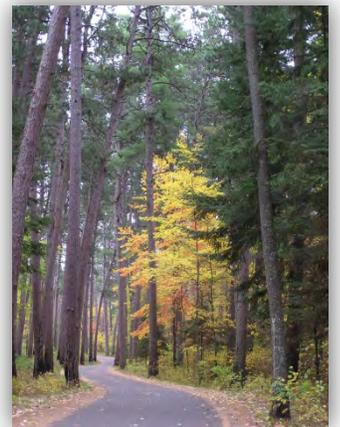
The state park was established to preserve old growth pine forests and to protect the land surrounding the Headwaters of the Mississippi River. These features are still the main attraction for visitors today, as well as the 1,601 acre Wilderness Sanctuary Science and Natural Area (SNA) that is one of Minnesota's seven National Natural Landmarks.

Itasca State Park is one of the most visited state parks in Minnesota with 531,028 visitors recorded at the park in 2014, the third most among all state parks. That same year Itasca overwhelmingly led state parks in overnight visitors with 104,440 visitors staying in the campgrounds, group camps, and other park lodging. Camping, hiking, fishing and bicycling are popular activities among park visitors.

Bicycling at Itasca State Park

Bicycling is a popular activity at Itasca State Park. Visitors wishing to bicycle in Itasca State Park can rent bicycles at the state park, bring their own, or bicycle to the state park along U.S. Route 71 from Park Rapids. Itasca Sports, a private vendor within the state park, offers bicycle rentals, making bicycling available to all visitors as a form of transportation and recreation.

Currently there is a 5.8 mile paved bicycle trail on the eastern side of Lake Itasca extending from Douglas Lodge and the Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center to the Headwaters of the Mississippi River. The bicycle trail passes by many park destinations such as Preacher's Grove and the Pine Ridge Campground along the east arm of Lake Itasca. Along the north arm of the lake, the bicycle trail goes past the Pioneer Cemetery and Theodore Wegmann's Cabin and General Store. There is the opportunity to continue bicycling on Wilderness Drive to complete a 17 mile loop back to the Visitor Center. For the first two miles from



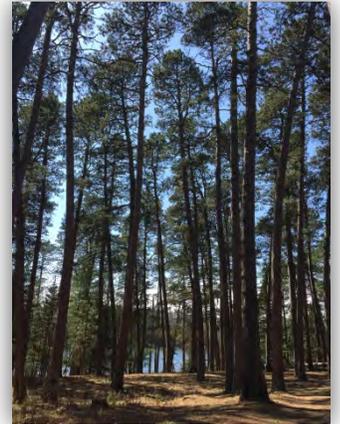
Existing Bicycle Trail

Itasca State Park Management Plan Amendment

the Headwaters area towards Lake Ozawindib, Wilderness Drive is a narrow two-way road. After the Ozawindib Group Camp, Wilderness Drive becomes one-way in the direction towards the Visitor Center. This is a much safer situation for bicyclists as they have more room and are moving in the same direction as the cars.

Other bicycling opportunities nearby the state park include the Heartland State Trail; a 49 mile paved trail running from Park Rapids to Cass Lake. The construction of the Heartland Spur, a planned 20 to 25 mile trail, will provide a connection from Park Rapids and the Heartland State Trail to Itasca State Park. The new trail will pass through scenic aspen-birch forests, stands of virgin pine forests and the village of Emmaville.

The Mississippi River Trail Bikeway also begins at Itasca State Park. The trail starts at the state park's East Entrance and travels along park roads and the bicycle trail past the Headwaters and out of the North Entrance where it continues along county roads.



Preacher's Grove

Purpose

The purpose of this management plan amendment is to amend the current Itasca State Park Management Plan (adopted 1998) in relation to two trail projects:

- *The Wilderness Drive Segment:* Pave a 2.95 mile segment of snowmobile trail running from the Headwaters of the Mississippi River to the entrance of the Ozawindib Group Camp for summer use by bicycle and other non-motorized uses.
- *The Heartland Spur:* Create a connection in the state park as part of the new Heartland Spur State Trail for summer use by bicycle and other non-motorized uses. The paved trail will follow an existing snowmobile trail running in the southeast part of the park, north toward the Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center. Two short sections of new trail will be constructed to make connections with the existing snowmobile trail, as well as a tunnel or bridge for park visitors to safely cross U.S. Route 71.

Management plans are required by state statute for state park units. *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09, subd. 4 requires that construction of facilities and other development conform to the management plan. *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09, subd. 6 directs the managing agency to amend a management plan to address changes proposed for a unit that would vary from the approved plan. This amendment will bring the management plan in accordance with current development proposals for the state park.

Description

The proposed projects will improve the safety and quality of visitors' experience. The trails will be used primarily by bicyclists but will be open to hiking, in-line skating and other non-motorized uses. The projects are intended to meet statewide bicycle standards and ADA accessibility guidelines.

The Wilderness Drive Trail Segment

An existing 2.95 mile segment of snowmobile trail travels from the Headwaters of the Mississippi River to the entrance of the Ozawindib Group Camp where Wilderness Drive transitions to a one-way. Paving this segment of trail will allow bicyclists and other non-motorized users to bypass the two-way section of Wilderness Drive. This would improve safety for park visitors and drivers on Wilderness Drive, as well as offering a more scenic experience for trail users. Paving the trail should not affect its use by snowmobilers in the winter. There is adequate tree cover for much of the trail length that the pavement should not expedite snow melt.

The Heartland Spur

The Heartland Spur is a 20-25 mile authorized extension of the Heartland State Trail that will connect the Heartland State Trail from Park Rapids to Itasca State Park. The trail will enter the park south of the east entrance, cross U.S. Route 71 and link with an existing snowmobile trail that runs west of the highway. The existing snowmobile trail travels north towards the Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center and will connect to the state park's bicycle path that runs on the east side of Lake Itasca. This connection will involve constructing a 0.1 to 0.3 mile piece of new trail from the park boundary to the existing snowmobile trail, paving the snowmobile trail, and constructing another small section of new trail to connect the Heartland Spur segment to the existing bicycle trail. A tunnel or bridge will also be constructed to allow park visitors to safely cross U.S. Route 71. Which alternative for crossing U.S. Route 71 has not yet been determined.

There are three management zones indicated in the *Itasca State Park Management Plan*. These include 'Scientific and Natural' (zone 1), 'Backcountry' (zone 2), and 'Concentrated Use' (zone 3). The zones are intended to reflect existing use, determine future use, and identify resource management expectations within certain areas of the state park. The Backcountry zone is intended to provide a natural setting where visitors can improve and challenge their outdoor skills, as opposed to the Concentrated Use zone which exposes visitors to a natural area with easily accessible facilities and limited reliance on outdoors skills. Both trail segments addressed in the plan amendment lie in the Backcountry zone.

As described in the management plan, the existing bicycling opportunities in the Backcountry zone should continue to be supported, but be limited to existing paved roads and future connections to bicycling opportunities outside the park.



Wilderness Drive Trail Segment



Heartland Spur Segment

Any future connections should be by routes with the least impact on resources and existing visitor experiences. The Heartland Spur segment meets these criteria: as a part of the Heartland Spur and connection to the Heartland State Trail, and by utilizing an existing snowmobile trail corridor. The Wilderness Drive Trail segment, although not connecting to opportunities outside of the park, makes important safety and visitor experience improvements to the existing bicycling opportunity in the zone. The segment utilizes an existing trail to create a safer bicycling route that parallels Wilderness Drive, which already supports bicycle use.

Both trail projects will provide safer, more scenic routes that parallel existing paved roads. The paved trails also serve a transportation function in the same way as the paved park roads, providing visitors access to and routes between park facilities. The benefits of providing safer and more enjoyable bicycle trails outweigh the concern of creating more paved trail within the Backcountry zone. The trail projects identified in the plan amendment do not constitute a significant change to the park management plan zoning concept, rather are consistent with language to continue the existing use and make connections to outside-the-park opportunities.

Natural and Cultural Resources Impact

Itasca State Park contains significant natural and cultural resources. Natural resources within the park include large areas of native plant communities with over 20 known federal or state-listed endangered, threatened or species of state special concern. Itasca State Park lies at an ecological intersection of prairies, hardwoods and conifer forests, and therefore supports a diverse community of plants and wildlife. The park protects some of the oldest and largest stands of old-growth white and red pine forests in Minnesota with some trees dating more than 250 years old. The Wilderness Sanctuary SNA located on the northwest side of Lake Itasca has been designated as National Natural Landmark. The state park also encompasses over 100 fresh water lakes which offer habitat to many aquatic species.

The Division will utilize existing trails to minimize the natural and cultural resource impacts, while evaluating the effects of the change in surface and increased summer traffic. The Division will seek to mitigate impacts on old growth pines and native plant communities by adjusting the exact route and construction limits during the design and development of the trail segments. Land not developed for visitor use within the project area will be restored to native vegetation.

Both the proposed trail corridors contain wetlands including shallow marsh edges, sedge meadows, open bogs, shrub-carrs, alder thickets, and coniferous and hardwood swamps. The Division will seek to mitigate impacts through design and follow state statutes from the Wetland Conservation Act. The



Wilderness Drive Transitions to a one-way road



Division will likely purchase wetland credits for any necessary mitigation as there are limited opportunities for wetland restoration within the state park.

Invasive species present along both corridors include spotted knapweed, birdsfoot trefoil, common tansy, oxeye daisy, hawkweeds and thistles. These are being actively and routinely controlled primarily through careful spot herbicide application, with occasional mechanical means (such as mowing) and hand pulling. Several other invasive species including European buckthorn, leafy spurge, and purple loosestrife are in the area and actively monitored. The Division will follow Department Operational Order 113 and division guidelines for managing invasive species during trail construction.

The state park also has a rich cultural history. The entire state park is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, recognizing the numerous archeological and historical resources within the state park. It was first nominated for the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. This nomination discussed its importance as one of Minnesota's oldest state parks as well as being the site of the Headwaters of the Mississippi River. It mentions seven separate archeological sites within the park which show evidence of prehistoric human activity. These include habitation sites, burial mounds, and the Bison Kill Site. The Theodore Wegmann Cabin (1893), the Pioneer Cemetery (1889), the Douglas Lodge (1905), and the Forestry School (1907) are also included as significant historical contributions to the state park.

The National Register Nomination was amended in 1988 to include the Civilian Conservation Corps/Works Progress Administration/Rustic Style Historic Resources. The nomination describes numerous buildings, structures, objects, and sites built in the Rustic Style. The majority of the elements were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) who worked in the state park between 1933 and 1942. Unlike most state parks, however, there was substantial park development prior to the CCC and WPA era including the Douglas Lodge and the Clubhouse. Notable CCC/WPA contributions include the Old Timer's Cabin, known for its massive log walls, and the Forest Inn, one of the largest new-deal era buildings in Minnesota. Built between 1905 and 1942, these elements make up the largest collection of log constructed buildings in the state park system. The historic district boundary closely follows the statutory boundary of the state park today with some minor discrepancies as the division has acquired additional land since the nomination was written. The contributing elements are split into six historic areas: Douglas Lodge Historic Area, Bear Paw Campground Historic Area, Park Headquarters Historic Area, Headwaters Historic Area, Ozawindib Lake Transient Camp Historic Area, and Elk Lake Transient Camp Historic Area.

The proposed project has no anticipated impact on any cultural resources listed in the nominations. The East Entrance Stone portals and pylon, considered contributing structures to the historic district, are close to the existing snowmobile trail segment to be paved for the Heartland Spur. The trail construction and subsequent summer use of the trail is not anticipated to have



The Forest Inn



East Entrance Portal

any negative effect on these contributing elements. Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance will be conducted along both trails prior to construction.

Interpretive Services Impact

Itasca State Park offers numerous interpretive services centered around four primary themes:

- Itasca’s old-growth forest ecosystem is unique and should be protected.
- The Headwaters of the Mississippi River is a significant place ecologically and historically that continues to provide a unique sense of place to park visitors.
- Diverse peoples have inhabited and used this landscape over time with varying effects.
- Instilling a sense of stewardship and connectivity between the natural environment, the area’s cultural past and the visitors’ daily lives is an important responsibility of the Itasca State Park Interpretive program.

The Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center, the Forest Inn, the Mary Gibbs Mississippi Headwaters Center and the Picnic Area museum all offer interpretive exhibits on these themes. There are also naturalist guided and self-guided tours available.

With new users along existing trails, the division has the opportunity to provide additional interpretative opportunities, particularly new signage and self-guided-interpretation. Both trails travel through old-growth stands and would offer an excellent opportunity for forest ecosystem and environmental stewardship interpretation. Signage could also be placed along trails nearby historical contributing elements to showcase the state park’s history and the people who inhabited and shaped it. Providing additional signage for orientation will be important, especially on the Heartland Spur corridor as visitors will be entering the state park.

Along with the potential for new interpretation, the trails will draw more visitors to the park which will promote more use of all existing interpretive opportunities. The Wilderness Drive Trail segment in particular will connect visitors directly to the Headwaters Area where many interpretive opportunities are already provided, as well as those opportunities along Wilderness Drive.

Recreational Use and Visitor Services Impact

Overall, the projects outlined in this plan will enhance visitor experience and improve visitor safety. The trail projects will promote the use of bicycles for transportation and recreation within the state park.



Headwaters of the Mississippi River



Mary Gibbs Mississippi Headwaters Center

The Wilderness Drive Trail Segment

Paving the Wilderness Drive Trail segment will encourage more visitors to ride the Wilderness Drive and Bike Route, especially families with young children who may have been dissuaded by the two-way road before. Riding on a separated bicycle trail will be safer and more enjoyable than bicycling on a road with cars. The trail will create a link from the Ozawindib Group Camp to the Headwaters Area, providing a safe route for visitors to move between park destinations without driving a vehicle. The Wilderness Drive Trail segment will also provide a connection to Bert’s Cabins, a popular private lodging option which lies within the park boundary north of the trail between Lake Ozawindib and the Headwaters Area.

The Heartland Spur

The construction of the Heartland Spur will improve bicycle access to the state park for state trail and state park users. It will provide a safer and more enjoyable route from Park Rapids which will encourage more bicyclists to visit the park. Bicycling on the Heartland Spur will be a significantly safer and higher quality experience than bicycling along high volume, high speed U.S. Route 71.

The improvement of these two trails is not anticipated to negatively affect other visitor experiences in the state park. Snowmobilers already using these trails should not see any change as the trails will only be used by bicyclists during the summer. Tree cover along both trails is heavy enough and snowfall amounts typically frequent enough, that it is not anticipated that the pavement will expedite snowmelt.

Management Plan Text Revisions

The plan amendment affects the recommendations and actions in **Chapter 6. Recreation Resources Management** of the current *Itasca State Park Management Plan* (December 1998). The plan amendment text supplements the **Discussion** and **Actions to Implement Recommendations** sections related to two recommendations: Adopt a set of trail management guidelines aimed at providing a variety of trail opportunities that also allow for natural and cultural resource protection within the park (p. 121) and Continue to provide visitors with a range of trail opportunities (p. 122). This amendment qualifies as a minor plan amendment as described in **Chapter 12. Plan Amendment** (p. 178).

Public Review

In accordance with Minnesota Statutes 86A.09 Subd.3 and Subd.6, the plan amendment was released for a 30 day public review in May, 2015 with an open house meeting held at the Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center at Itasca State Park on May 28, 2015. Comments received were reviewed as part of the development of the final version of the plan amendment.



Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center

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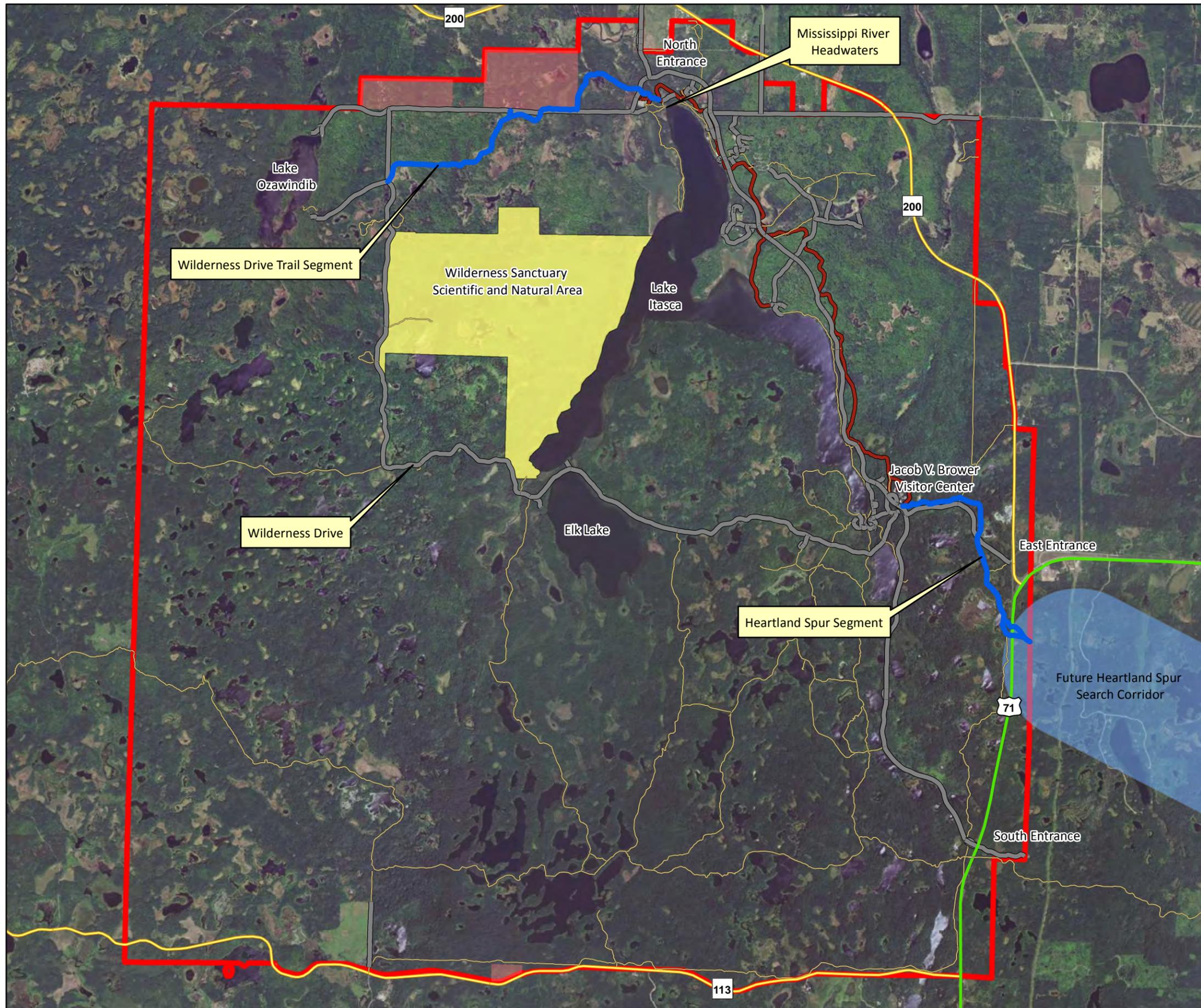
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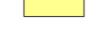
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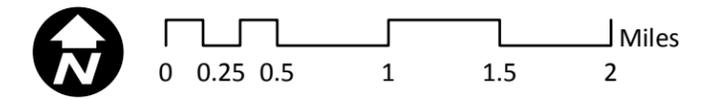


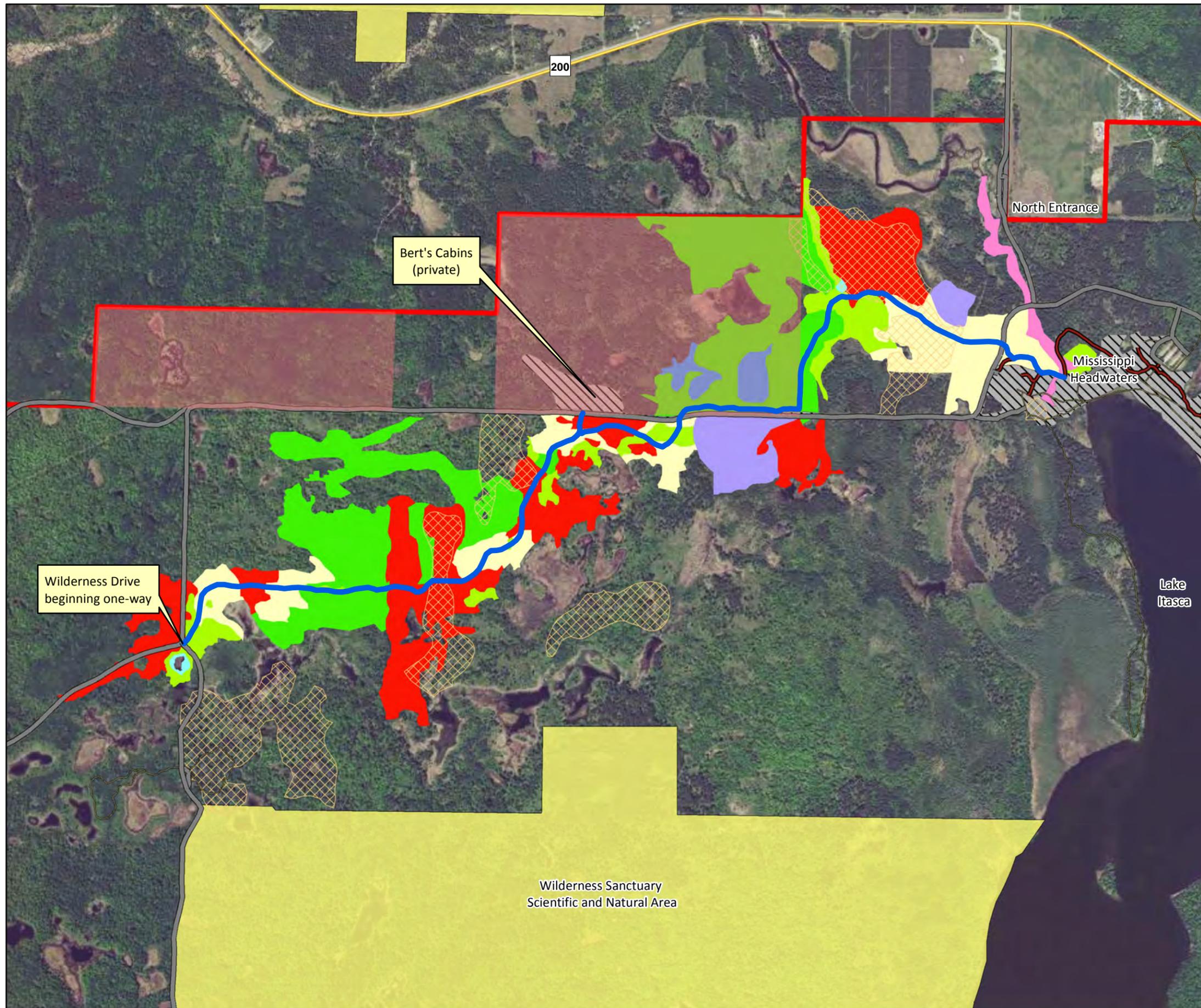
Itasca State Park

Figure 1:
Project Locations

Legend

-  Plan Amendment Trail Projects
-  Hiking Trails
-  Bicycling Trails
-  State Park Roads
-  MN Trunk Highway
-  U.S. Trunk Highway
-  Future Heartland Spur search corridor
-  State park statutory boundary
-  Private land within park boundary
-  Scientific and Natural Area Boundaries



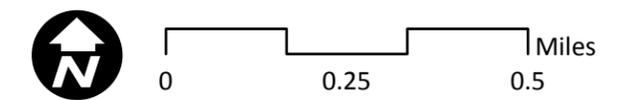


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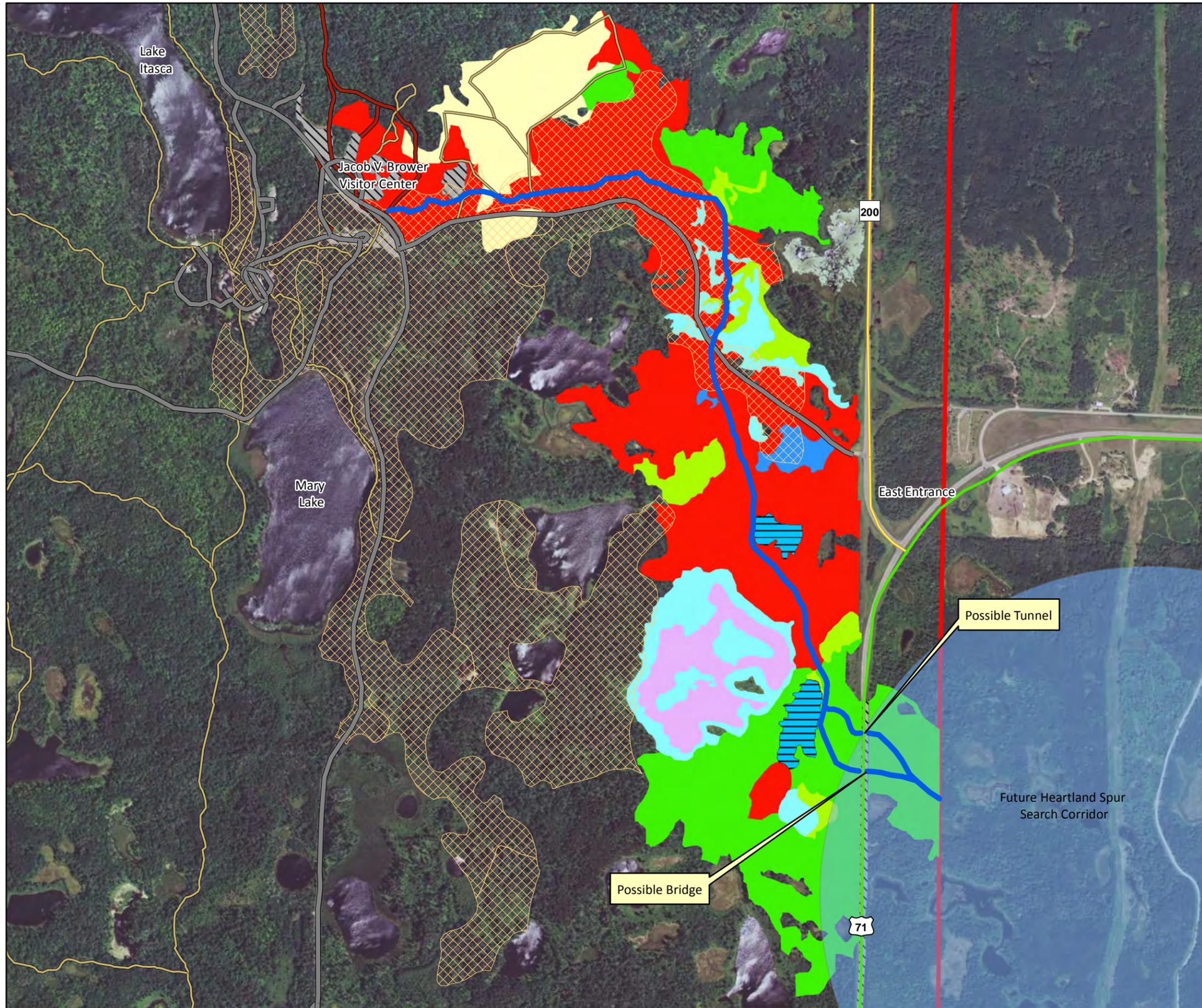
Figure 2:
Wilderness Drive Trail Segment
Land Cover System Level Classifications

Legend

-  Wilderness Drive Trail Segment
-  Hiking Trails
-  Bicycling Trails
-  State Park Roads
-  Designated Old Growth
-  Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland System
-  Forested Rich Peatland System
-  Marsh System
-  Mesic Hardwood Forest System
-  River Shore System
-  Wet Forest System
-  Wet Meadow/Carr System
-  Non-Natural System
-  Facilities System
-  State park statutory boundary
-  Private land within park boundary
-  Scientific and Natural Area Boundaries



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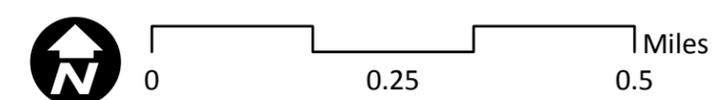
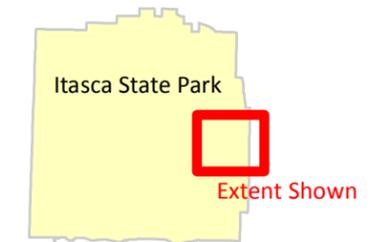


Itasca State Park

Figure 3:
Heartland Spur
Land Cover System Classifications

Legend

- Heartland Spur Segment
- Hiking Trails
- Bicycling Trails
- State Park Roads
- Future Heartland Spur search corridor
- Designated Old Growth
- Acid Peatland System
- Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland System
- Marsh System
- Mesic Hardwood Forest System
- Wet Forest System
- Wet Meadow/Carr System
- Open Water
- Non-Natural System
- Facilities System
- State park statutory boundary

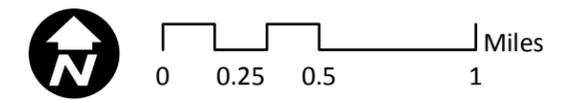
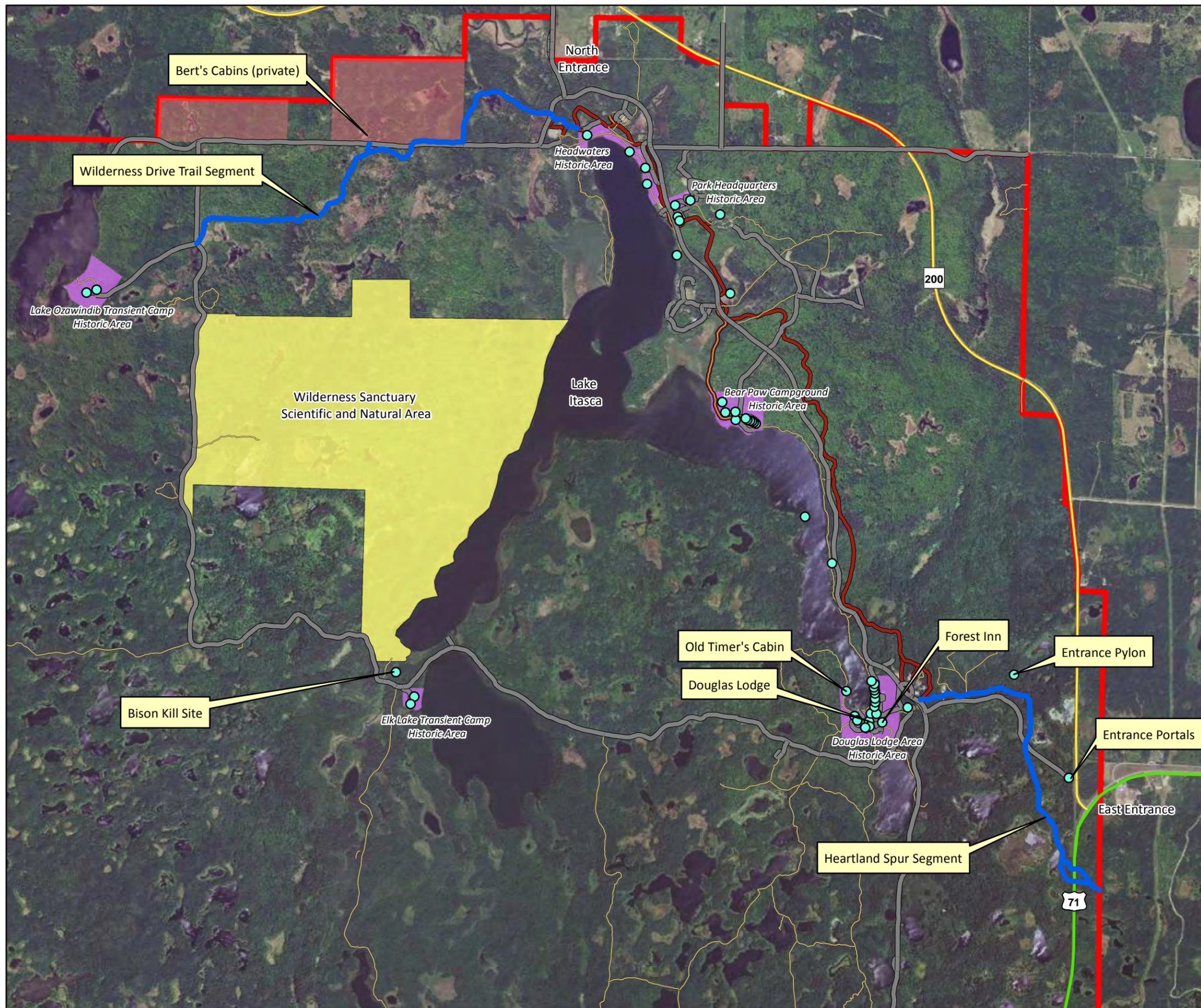


Itasca State Park

Figure 4:
Cultural Resources

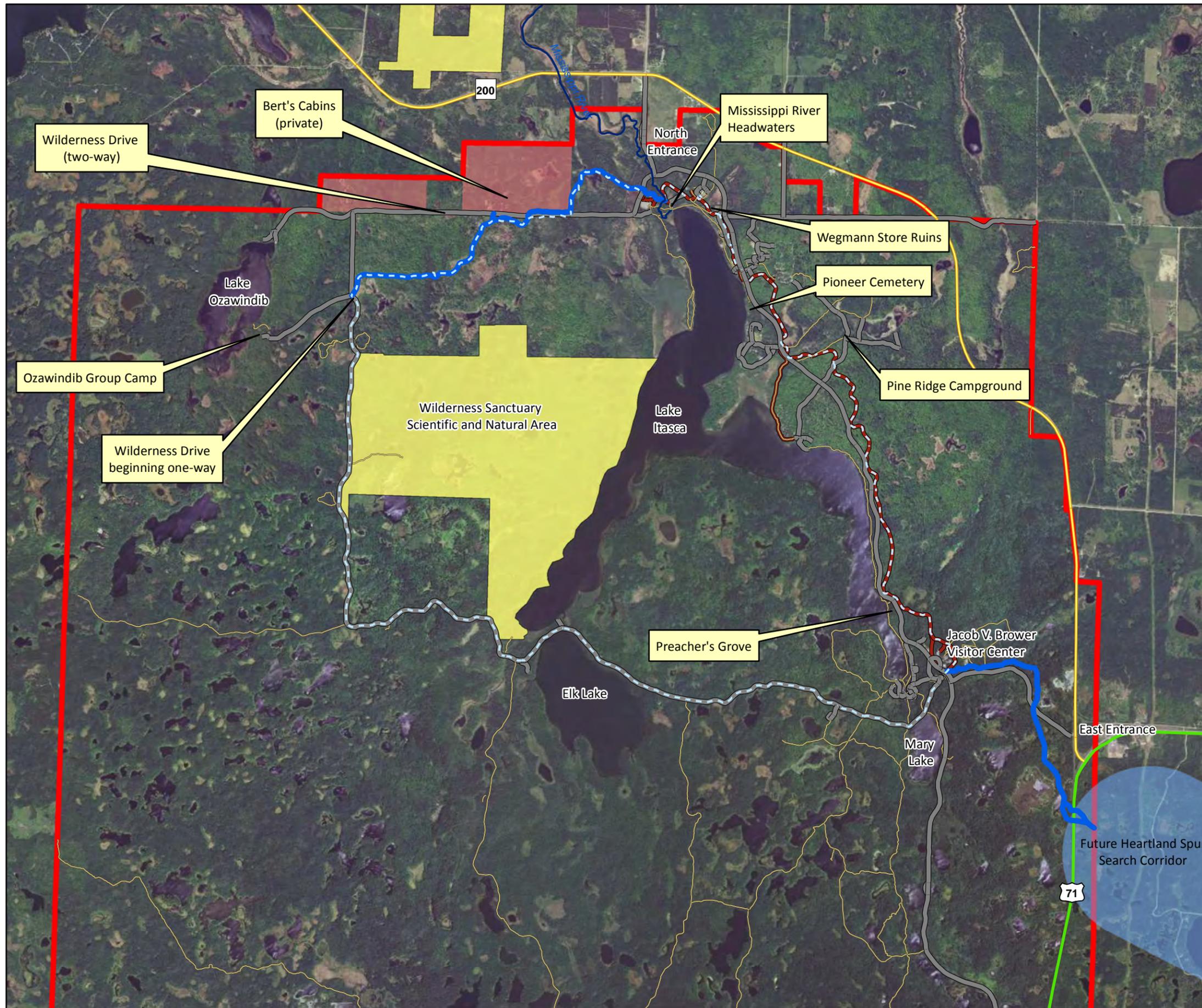
Legend

-  Contributing Elements to Historic District
-  Historic Areas
-  Plan amendment trail projects
-  Hiking Trails
-  Bicycling Trails
-  State Park Roads
-  State park statutory boundary
-  Private land within park boundary
-  Scientific and Natural Area Boundaries



Itasca State Park

Figure 5:
Recreational Use and Visitor Services

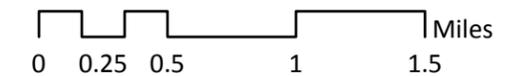


Legend

-  Plan Amendment Trail Projects
-  Hiking Trails
-  Bicycling Trails
-  Wilderness Drive & Bike Route
-  State Park Roads
-  Future Heartland Spur search corridor
-  State park statutory boundary
-  Private land within park boundary
-  Scientific and Natural Area Boundaries



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