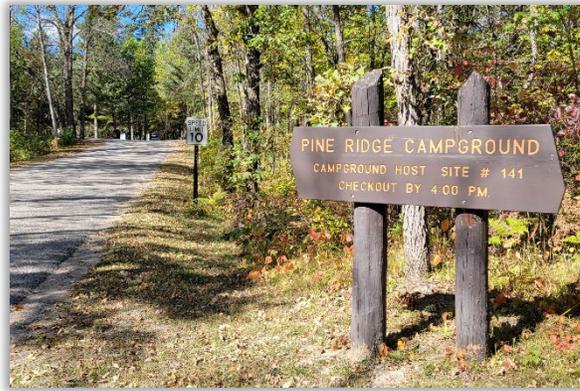


Itasca State Park Management Plan Amendment

Overnight Facilities and Winter Trail Opportunities





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

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(Insert Division Director Approval letter)

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Purpose

The purpose of this plan amendment is to amend the *Itasca State Park Management Plan* (December 1998) to address the proposed addition of wall tents as new overnight use facilities in the state park, the conversion of two buildings into overnight lodging and the proposed development of additional winter trail opportunities. The plan amendment also addresses revisions to the planned redevelopment of the Nicollet Court. These proposals are part of a broader effort by the department to enhance recreational and interpretive opportunities at Itasca State Park primarily for visitors in the spring, fall, and winter seasons.

The management plan was previously amended in 2015 to address two bicycle trail projects – paving a section of snowmobile trail to also support summer bicycle use and creating a new trail segment to connect the Heartland State Trail to the park’s bicycle trail network and the Jacob V Brower Visitor Center.

Master plans (commonly referred to as management plans) are required for units of Minnesota's outdoor recreation system, including state parks and state recreation areas, under *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09, subd. 1. The plan amendment will update the management plan to address the department’s development proposals and how they impact resource management activities, interpretive services, and recreational opportunities at the state park.

Introduction

State Park Overview

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 30,369 acres are managed by the Division of Parks and Trails.

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. The state park is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places with over 80 historic buildings and structures, as well as 22 known archaeological sites.

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, two visitor centers, and trails for hiking, biking, cross country skiing, and snowmobiling. The park offers year-round interpretive programs.

Itasca State Park is one of the most visited state parks in Minnesota with 527,061 visitors recorded at the park in 2024, the second most among all state parks. That same year Itasca hosted 109,374 overnight visitors staying in the park’s campgrounds, group camps, and other park lodging – twice the number of any other state park. Camping, hiking, bicycling, and fishing are popular activities among park visitors.

Statutory Direction

Minnesota state statute provides direction for the purpose of state parks and how they should be developed and managed. As described in *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.05:

Subd. 2. State park; purpose; resource and site qualifications; administration. (a) A state park shall be established to protect and perpetuate extensive areas of the state possessing those resources which illustrate and exemplify Minnesota's natural phenomena and to provide for the use, enjoyment, and understanding of such resources without impairment for the enjoyment and recreation of future generations.

Minnesota has 73 state parks, which are managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Parks and Trails Division.

DNR Parks and Trails Division also manages state recreation areas, state waysides, forest recreation areas, state trails, water trails and other water recreation programs.

DNR utilized this framework as it developed resource management goals and considered interpretive and recreational opportunities for the property.

Minnesota State Parks and Trails System Plan and Itasca State Park

The Division of Parks and Trails adopted the *Minnesota State Parks and Trails System Plan* in 2015. The system plan advances new approaches for managing state parks, state recreation areas, state trails, forest recreation areas and water recreation. The plan recommended a differentiated approach to managing these recreation systems – to focus on providing different types of recreational experiences and a range of facilities and levels of services at units across the system. The intended outcome is that visitors will have a wider range of high-quality opportunities from which to choose those that best match their interests and expectations.

The system plan created three investment groups – *Rustic*, *Core*, and *Destination* – to differentiate the types of experiences state parks and state recreation areas offer and to prioritize the kinds of investments to make across the system in the future. Under the investment group framework, Itasca State Park is designated as a *Destination State Park*. As described in the system plan:

Destination state parks and state recreation areas offer a destination-quality experience, with an array of outdoor recreation and lodging opportunities, park facilities, and naturalist-led interpretive offerings. They may have year-round camping (or other lodging) and staffing. Parks in this group have high use and attract visitors from across the state.

During the management plan amendment process, DNR considered how the park’s current recreational offerings and proposed new opportunities fit with the *Destination* designation.

Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation at Itasca State Park

Climate change alters the character of the state’s lands, waters, plants, fish and wildlife. It affects the DNR’s ability to manage these resources for the long-term benefit of the public. The DNR’s responsibility is to use the best available science to implement adaptation strategies that will minimize the negative impacts of climate change on the state’s natural resources, outdoor recreation opportunities, and commercial uses of natural resources.

Itasca State Park is designated a “Destination State Park” in the [Minnesota State Parks and Trails System Plan](#).

For more information about the system plan, see the DNR website.

The DNR will develop and implement land management practices that sustain Minnesota's natural resources while helping to reduce future climate change by mitigating the environmental impacts of increased carbon emissions. These efforts will be guided by *Operational Order 131 Climate Adaptation and Mitigation in Natural Resource Management*. The DNR is committed to enhancing ecosystem resilience and reducing the negative impacts of climate change on the state's resources and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Climate change is impacting resource management and recreation in state parks. Several potential impacts and associated actions were identified during the planning process and are reflected in the text and recommendations of the management plan. As part of assessing restoration efforts and plant community resilience, the department will monitor the health of native plant communities with an eye toward effects of climate change-related warming temperatures and varying precipitation. Natural and cultural resource management actions may need to adjust to changing conditions over time – timing and frequency for use of prescribed fire, invasive species management techniques, etc.

As part of the management plan amendment process, the department considered how climate change may affect resource management, interpretive services and recreational offerings at Itasca State Park. Longer shoulder seasons and less reliable winter snows will cause changes in visitor patterns throughout the state park system, likely resulting in more visitors in the spring and fall while potentially affecting seasons for winter activities such as cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. The department is considering how to enhance services such as camping, lodging and interpretive opportunities for increasing shoulder season visitors at Itasca State Park and other units. Itasca State Park's northern location and heavily forested landscape is expected to retain more frequent and consistent snow cover than other units in the system, meaning it will continue to support winter recreation activities and attract visitors interested in these pursuits.

For additional information about the division's considerations, see the appendix for data about annual average temperatures and projections of climate change impacts to snow cover and snow depth at Itasca State Park.

For more information about climate change impacts and the DNR's response, see the DNR website.

Description

The department is engaged in an analysis of the operations at Itasca State Park. It is proposing additional investments in shoulder season (spring and fall) and winter season operations as a strategy to increase visitation to the state park, enhance visitor experiences, better utilize existing state park infrastructure, and address hiring issues for seasonal positions. The department's goal is to enhance Itasca State Park as a regional destination for winter recreation, and support four season tourism in northwest Minnesota.

Several of the proposed investments involve adding new facilities or physical changes to existing facilities, topics which are typically addressed as part of a state park management plan. The plan amendment identifies those proposed investments and the anticipated impacts to natural and cultural resources, interpretive services, and recreational use and visitor services.

There are four areas of proposed investment addressed in the plan amendment: adding and enhancing winter trails and trail activities, adding wall tents as an overnight use facility, converting two buildings into lodging units, and replacing Nicollet Court with a day-use shelter building (see **Figure 1: Proposed Investment Locations**). The department may consider other appropriate winter recreational activities as part of the winter season operations enhancement.

Winter Trails and Trail Activities

Cross country skiing

The park has approximately 20 kilometers of cross-country ski trails. The existing ski trails consist of a series of loops east of the south park entrance road using summer hiking trails and a single trail from the Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center to the Mississippi Headwaters area using the paved bike trail. All of the trails are groomed for classic skiing, with 2.5 kilometers groomed for both classic and skate ski.

Improvements for cross country skiing are the first priority for winter recreational use improvements at the state park. The division proposes to develop an additional 20 kilometers of cross-country ski trails, for a total of approximately 40 kilometers of ski trail in the park. The total trail distance will be determined with the final layout of the new trails and possible changes to existing trail segments.

Ski trail improvements will focus on two areas – enhancing the existing trail network west of Douglas Lodge and south of Wilderness Drive; and adding new trails north and east of Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center (see **Figure 1: Proposed Investment Locations**). Enhancements to the existing trail network may include:

- developing “shortcut” trails between current trail segments to create additional loops,



Most existing ski trails also serve as hiking or bike trails in the summer

- grooming some existing trail segments for skiing that are not currently designated for skiing, and
- adjusting how some trail segments are groomed – for classic ski, for skate ski, or for combined use – to increase the trail and loop options for skiers and to enhance their experience skiing in the state park.

New trails for cross-country skiing will be considered in the area extending north from the visitor center and east of the bicycle trail and Main Park Drive and west of State Highway 200 (see **Figure 1: Proposed Investment Locations**).

Across both areas, the ski trail network will be developed and managed to cater to beginner to intermediate skiers and family groups. The trail network will support classic and skate skiing, with roughly a 50/50 split for overall distance groomed. Segments will be groomed to provide a range of experiences - options include classic ski side-by-side tracks, classic ski-skate ski side-by-side tracks, classic ski single track, and skate ski single track. The trail network will include loop trails of different lengths and difficulty, including a short warmup loop. The division will consider lighting some trail segments to provide more time to ski on shorter daylight winter days. Lighting options will take dark sky initiatives into account.

Forest Inn is the interim trailhead for skiing activities in the park. The building is located between the two ski trail areas, with convenient access for visitors to both sets of trails. Forest Inn will provide parking, a warming area for skiers, restrooms, and ski and snowshoe rental equipment operations. In the long term, the new shelter building replacing Nicollet Court will become the winter use hub in this portion of the state park. Nearby to the Forest Inn, the new Nicollet Court shelter will have the same convenient access to the ski trail network.

A seven-days per week grooming operation is necessary to become a destination ski facility. To meet this need, an investment in state-of-the-art ski grooming equipment will be needed to provide high quality skiing experiences. Funding for additional grooming hours and training is also needed for this enhanced effort.

Winter fat biking

The park currently does not have opportunities for winter fat biking.

Providing winter fat biking opportunities is a secondary priority for winter recreational use improvements at the state park. The division will focus on cross country skiing changes first, with winter fat biking as a possible future development.



Forest Inn is the interim skiing and snowshoeing trailhead

Winter fat biking trails layouts are more similar to summer mountain biking trails - narrower corridors with more elevation change and sharper turns - than the more flat and open trails preferred for skiing. Winter fat biking also requires different grooming equipment from cross country skiing, especially for single track trails, which represents an additional investment.

The winter fat bike trails would likely be developed in the same area as the additional cross country ski trails, with the Forest Inn (and later Nicollet Court shelter) as the trailhead. The division is not proposing shared use of cross-country skiing trails with winter fat bike trails to avoid conflicts between user types and the potential for collisions or other accidents.

Wall Tents

Wall tents are canvas tents installed on a wooden platform raised off the ground. Itasca State Park currently does not provide wall tents as an overnight use option, although wall tents are available in several other state parks in the system. At these state parks, individual wall tents are located within a campground or as a stand-alone facility. The wall tents will have windows to improve ventilation and insect screens at all openings or at minimum over the bunks as improvements to the current wall tents elsewhere in state park system.

The department may consider constructing camper cabins or another type of lodging structure in place of wall tents in some of the locations described below if necessary to address specific site conditions or the expected operating life of the wall tents. Placing camper cabins at some locations may require additional consultation with Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

Pine Ridge Campground

The division will add approximately 8-10 wall tents in the Pine Ridge campground. The tents will be located together in a new camping loop separate from the existing camping loops. This grouped layout would provide a new type of experience for visitors. In addition, Itasca State Park offers a unique opportunity with its existing full-service lodging housekeeping to consider providing a similar full-service experience for wall tent visitors.

Visitors staying in the wall tent would be able to use the toilets and showers at the existing shower buildings in the campground. Vault toilets may also be added to the new loop to provide a secondary option for visitors.

The default operating season for the wall tents will be the same as the camping season for the rest of the Pine Ridge Campground, although



Wall tent at Afton State Park



Shower building in Pine Ridge Campground

the division may extend the season for the wall tent loop if there is adequate demand. The department will consider operating several wall tents in the loop year-round as a ski-in or snowshoe-in experience. Visitors using the wall tents in the winter could access the new cross country ski trails via the bike trail which is groomed in the winter. Wall tents operated in the winter would need a heat source and be accessible by division employees for maintenance tasks and emergency response.

Ozawindib Group Center

Currently, the group center has one cabin for lodging with the rest of the site open for camping. The group center has a dining hall and a shower building. The cabin accommodates five people, while the group center capacity is 75 people. Therefore, most visitors in a party using the group center need to bring their own tents. The department will add several wall tents in the group center to enhance the experience provided at the group center. The department does not intend to offer housekeeping service for wall tents in this location, which is more consistent with the current “bring your own camping gear” level of service at the group center.

The department will evaluate visitor demand and operational considerations to determine the number of tents to be provided. The department may also consider altering the group center capacity as part of the evaluation.

Remote hike-in or ski-in sites

The department will also consider locating a few wall tents along the state park’s trail system, offering a more remote lodging experience that visitors would hike or ski to access. The department will evaluate visitor demand and operational considerations to determine the number, location, and length of season for these tents.

Building Conversions to Lodging Units

The department intends to convert two existing buildings into lodging units – Nicollet Cabin and the Lake Ozawindib Pump House (see **Figure 1: Proposed Investment Locations**).

Nicollet Cabin

Currently, the cabin is open for day use visitors hiking the Nicollet Trail. Visitors can explore the cabin, picnic at the table and fire ring, or use the cabin as a trail shelter during inclement weather. The cabin is not designated for overnight use, although some unauthorized overnight use may be occurring.

Nicollet Cabin is located on the Nicollet Trail one mile south of Wilderness Drive and the Elk Lake Group Camp. Overnight guests would



Nicollet Cabin

hike in along the Nicollet Trail to access the cabin. If the cabin is operated in the winter, guests would hike, snowshoe or ski to the cabin. The cabin was renovated previously and would require minor repairs as part of its conversion into a lodging unit. The cabin, originally built to house a six-person forestry crew, would accommodate a similar number of overnight guests.

Lake Ozawindib Pump House

Lake Ozawindib pump house is currently not open to the public.

Lake Ozawindib Pump House is located on the southeast shore of Lake Ozawindib near the Ozawindib Group Center. The pump house would be converted into a seasonal rustic hike-in cabin. The lodging unit would not be part of the nearby group center, but available to reserve separately similar to other cabins throughout the state park. The building is in poor condition and will require extensive rehabilitation as part of its conversion into a lodging unit. The pump house would accommodate two to four overnight guests.



Lake Ozawindib Pump House

Nicollet Court Replacement

The existing Nicollet Court building is not open to the public. The facility has been closed to public use since the early 2000s. The facility was closed because it needed extensive repairs to outdated mechanical systems and fixtures, including replacement of doors, windows, insulation and roof. Restoration to its past use is cost prohibitive.

The division will replace the former visitor lodging structure with an enclosed shelter building. The shelter will include indoor and outdoor seating areas, restrooms and possibly a catering kitchen. The Douglas Lodge restaurant may provide food service and catering services for the new shelter building. The lodge kitchen has the capacity to serve more visitors than the seating available in the lodge's existing dining space and could provide food service at the shelter building as well. The new facility may also host programs and special events and will be available to rent by the public. Designing the space to function as a conference meeting center is also under consideration. The shelter building will serve as a winter use hub, providing trailhead amenities such as restrooms, warming space, and ski and snowshoe rentals.



Nicollet Court

The facility will be designed in keeping with its location in the Itasca State Park Historic District and Douglas Lodge Historic Area and in consultation with Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) (see **Natural and Cultural Resource Impacts**).

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, hardwood 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 Scientific and Natural Area (SNA) located on the northwest side of Lake Itasca has been designated as National Natural Landmark. The state park also encompasses over 100 freshwater lakes which offer habitat to many aquatic species.

Invasive species present in the park include spotted knapweed, birdsfoot trefoil, common tansy, oxeye daisy, hawkweeds and thistles. These are being actively and routinely controlled primarily through 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 department will follow its Operational Order 113 and Parks and Trails Division guidelines for managing invasive species during construction of the trails and other facilities described in the plan amendment.

The state park also has a rich cultural history. The entire state park is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), 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 Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) who worked in the state park between 1933 and 1942. Unlike most state parks, however, there was substantial park development prior to the WPA and CCC era including Douglas Lodge and the Clubhouse. Notable WPA and 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



Douglas Lodge



Old Timer's Cabin

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 nomination identifies six historic areas: Douglas Lodge Historic Area, Bear Paw Campground Historic Area, Park Headquarters Historic Area, Headwaters Historic Area, Lake Ozawindib Transient Camp Historic Area, and Elk Lake Transient Camp Historic Area (see **Figure 2: National Register Nomination Contributing Elements**).

Winter Trails and Trail Activities

The area identified for enhancing winter trails and trail activities includes approximately 3,032.12 acres west of Douglas Lodge and south of Wilderness drive (see **Figure 3: Winter Trails Enhancement Land Cover – System Level Descriptions**). The area is mostly forested with a mix of native plant communities, lakes and wetlands. The area includes existing trails, some of which are currently designated for cross-country skiing. The majority of the area is classified as mesic hardwood forest and fire-dependent forest/woodland (see **Table 1: Winter Trails Enhancement Land Cover - System Level Acreage**). There are several designated old growth forest stands within the winter trail enhancement area, primarily in the southern half of the area.

Table 1: Winter Trails Enhancement Land Cover – System Level Acreage

Cover type	Acres
Acid Peatland	12.11
Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland	777.59
Forested Rich Peatlands	13.73
Marsh	73.96
Mesic Hardwood Forest	1379.21
Non-Natural System (clearcut, blowdowns, planted forest)	2.23
Open Rich Peatlands	15.61
Other Natural System (open water, wetland)	399.55
Wet Forest	46.95
Wet Meadow/Carr	304.03
Facilities (roads, trails, buildings, use areas)	7.16

The area identified for expanding winter trails and trail activities includes approximately 1,622 acres north of the east entrance road, west of State Highway 200, and east of the bike trail along the Main Park Drive (see **Figure 4: Winter Trails Expansion Land Cover – System Level Descriptions**). The area is mostly forested with a mix of native plant communities, wetlands, and some previously disturbed lands – clearcuts, blowdown areas, and planted forest. The majority of the area is classified as fire-dependent forest and mesic hardwood forest (see **Table 2: Winter Trails Expansion Land Cover - System Level Acreage**). There are several designated old growth forest stands within the winter trail expansion area.

Table 2: Winter Trails Expansion Land Cover - System Level Acreage

Cover type	Acres
Acid Peatland	0.13
Complex Community (beaver wetland)	1.61
Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland	570.09
Forested Rich Peatlands	0.53
Marsh	19.28
Mesic Hardwood Forest	744.91
Non-Natural System (clearcut, blowdowns, planted forest)	160.19
Open Rich Peatlands	4.97
Other Natural System (beaver disturbed community)	2.22
Wet Forest	23.09
Wet Meadow/Carr	94.08
Facilities (roads, trails, buildings, use areas)	1.16

Natural resource impacts from enhancing and adding winter use trails are expected to be minimal. Trail development will largely consist of clearing trail corridors of understory vegetation while avoiding disturbing the soil or ground surface. Maintenance activities will involve brushing and mowing the corridors to keep them clear for winter use. Limiting the new trails to winter use only will minimize the disturbances to the resource base during initial trail development and from ongoing maintenance activities. The department will seek to avoid impacts on old growth forest stands and native plant communities by adjusting trail routes during the design of the trail system, avoiding taking large trees or disturbing high-quality native plant communities. Further disturbance can be minimized by designing trails which avoid steep slopes and fall lines to minimize the potential for erosion. Land not cleared and maintained as trail corridors will be restored to native vegetation. The department will also seek to mitigate impacts to wetlands through trail layout and will follow the requirements in the Wetland Conservation Act and other relevant state statutes.

There is one known archaeological site within the winter trail enhancement area. There are no known archaeological sites within the area identified for expanding winter trail opportunities. There is one National Register-contributing element within the winter trail expansion area – an Entrance Pylon (c1934) constructed by the CCC along the original east entrance road. The road was abandoned when the new entrance road was built to the south. Historic resources around the Alton Heights Fire Tower, including the fire tower and former site of the caretaker cabin, will not be impacted by the proposed trail enhancements.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance and assessment will be conducted as part of the layout, design and construction of new trails.

Wall Tents

Pine Ridge Campground

The area surrounding the Pine Ridge campground is largely Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland and Mesic Hardwood Forest communities. These native plant communities are common throughout the state park and the stands' quality are ranked as medium quality. Much of northern half of the existing campground as well as portions of the Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland and Mesic Hardwood Forest communities to the east of the campground are designated as old growth forest (see **Figure 5: Pine Ridge Campground Land Cover – System Level Descriptions**). The department will site and design the wall tent loop to avoid impacts in these native plant communities and to the old growth stands.

There are no known archaeological sites within the immediate area of the existing campground.

Pine Ridge Campground was the location of CCC camp SP-19. The camp consisted of Veterans of World War I and was the last CCC state park camp in operation in the United States. The camp closed on July 15, 1942. The only remaining structure from SP-19 is the Pump House, constructed in 1937. A plaque dedicated to Robert C. Fechner, first director of the CCC, is located at the western edge of the campground. The plaque was erected in 1940 and consists of a bronze tablet anchored to a rock. The Pump House and plaque are contributing elements to the NRHP nomination. The wall tent loop will be located to avoid impacts to these historic features. The department will consult with Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office about the location of the wall tent loop to avoid impacts to the remaining historic features from the CCC camp.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance and assessment will be conducted as part of the wall tent loop project final design and construction process.

Ozawindib Group Center

The group center is an area where the landscape is developed and managed for public use. No additional natural resource impacts are anticipated from the addition of wall tents to the site.

There are no known archaeological sites within the immediate area of the group center.

The group center is the location of one of five historic districts identified in the NRHP nomination – Lake Ozawindib Transient Camp Historic District. The group center was the location of the Headwaters WPA transient camp WC-9. The camp was converted to a group camp facility

after it was vacated by the WPA. Only two of the original buildings remain while six footings and foundations define several other building locations in the former camp. The Pump house (c1939) and Foremans' Quarters (c1936) - now used as a cabin - are the only remaining structures from the WPA camp. The group center dining hall and shower building are non-contributing elements to the NRHP nomination.

The department will consult with Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office on the placement of the wall tents at the group center with the intent to place them in a way that is sensitive to the cultural landscape of the site and avoids impacts to the remaining historic buildings, footings and foundations.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance and assessment will be conducted as part of the final design and construction process.

Remote hike-in or ski-in sites

As exact locations for remote hike-in and ski-in wall tent sites have not been identified, natural or cultural resource impacts are not defined. The department will choose locations that minimize impacts to significant natural resources and avoid known archaeological or historic resources. Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance will be conducted as part of the final design and construction process.

Building Conversions to Lodging Units

Nicollet Cabin

The area immediately surrounding the cabin has been disturbed during the cabin's recent reconstruction and is managed for public use. No additional natural resource impacts are anticipated from the conversion of the cabin to a lodging unit.

There are no known archaeological sites within the immediate area of the cabin.

The historic structure, built in 1917, was originally used as a forestry cabin. The cabin was utilized by forestry timber crews, fire crews, hunters, and others until 1965, when it was severely damaged by vandalism. The cabin was reconstructed by department staff and volunteers in 1995. Modest repairs to the exterior of the cabin are needed – repairing rotted log ends, replacing oakum chinking of some logs, replacing the roof, installing new entrance steps and window screens. These repairs are not anticipated to affect the appearance of the structure or impact the surrounding area at the site.

The cabin is located within the Itasca State Park historic district, and its construction dates to the period of the historic district. However, it is



Foremans' Quarters – used as a cabin at the group center



Nicollet Cabin interior

considered a non-contributing element to the district because it was originally developed for forestry purposes not as part of the state park. If the structure was reevaluated, it would likely be identified as a contributing element. The department will consult with Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office during the conversion project design and construction to maintain the historic appearance of the structure.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance will be conducted prior to the conversion project.

Lake Ozawindib Pump House

The pump house is an area where the landscape was disturbed during the original construction and has since been managed for public use. No additional natural resource impacts are anticipated from the conversion project.

There are no known archaeological sites within the immediate area of the pump house or group center.

The Pump House was originally constructed by the WPA in 1939 as part of the development of the Lake Ozawindib Transient Camp. The building is a contributing element to the NRHP nomination. The building is in poor condition and will require extensive rehabilitation as part of the conversion project. The department will consult with Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office during the conversion project design and construction to preserve the historic character of the structure and surrounding cultural landscape of the Lake Ozawindib Transient Camp Historic Area.

There is also a former railroad grade, known as the Mallard Railroad, located adjacent to the pump house. The railroad was used during early logging operations to remove timber from the area.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance and assessment will be conducted prior to the conversion project.

Nicollet Court Replacement

Nicollet Court is in an area where the landscape is developed and managed for public use. No additional natural resource impacts are anticipated with the building's replacement.

There are no known archaeological sites within the immediate area of Nicollet Court.

Nicollet Court is part of the Douglas Lodge Historic District which includes the oldest development within the state park with 17 contributing buildings, 3 contributing structures, and 2 contributing objects. Nicollet Court, built in

1925, is a two-story frame structure covered by a gable roof. A major structural renovation was conducted in 1956 to create a more motel style building sheathed with log cabin or simulated log siding containing 18 guest rooms and a lounge located along the east facade. Initially identified as a contributing element to the National Register nomination, the building was reevaluated by Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in 2024 and found to not meet the listing criteria for the nomination. SHPO recommended to the National Park Service that the structure be considered non-contributing to the Itasca State Park historic district. The department intends to remove the existing building and replace it with a new shelter building that includes day-use gathering space, conference space, a catering kitchen, and restrooms. The department will consult with SHPO on scale, style and materials to be used on the new building to be consistent with the other contributing elements and sensitive to the cultural landscape of the historic district.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance and assessment will be conducted as part of the final design and construction process.

Interpretive Services Impact

The proposed investments in winter trail uses, wall tents, and the replacement of Nicollet Court create new opportunities for offering interpretive experiences to state park visitors. The development of a new unit interpretive plan for the state park is underway. Until then, the interpretive themes described in the current park management plan (December 1998) will be used to develop interpretive programming and other resources such as signs, brochures, and website content:

Primary themes:

- *Itasca's old-growth 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 in an important responsibility of the Itasca State Park interpretive program.*

Winter Trail and Trail Activities

The increased investments in winter trail and trail activities provide opportunities for additional interpretive programs and resources. Improved cross country ski trails and the addition of winter biking will attract more visitors and a wider diversity of visitors during the winter season. The

department will consider offering naturalist led programs such as learning to ski or learning to winter bike, and naturalist-guided programs with visitors on skis or bikes. Candlelight ski programs and other special events will take advantage of the new trails. The development of new trails will also provide opportunities for additional non-personal interpretive resources such as signs and kiosks. Signage may be developed at the Entrance Pylon if a segment of trail is located to pass by the structure. The signage that could describe the work of the CCC in the state park's development and the later relocation of the park entrance road.

Wall Tents

As a new type of overnight use, wall tents are an opportunity to highlight the history of this type of structure being used in the state park, including by early park visitors and by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers during their time at the state park. Programs and non-personal resources can share stories about the experiences of early park visitors and WPA and CCC workers in comparison to state park visitors today. Communicating these stories about WPA workers will be especially valuable at Ozawindib Group Center, which was originally built as one of the WPA transient camps in the state park. Among the projects workers living at this camp were assigned was the construction of Wilderness Drive.

Building Conversions to Lodging Units

Nicollet Cabin

There is an existing interpretive sign on Nicollet Trail near the cabin that describes the original use of the cabin and its restoration. Interpretive materials may be developed to share the history of Nicollet Cabin with overnight guests and other visitors. Additional signs or brochures may be developed for use at the cabin describing its initial construction, use as a fire watch location, and renovation as a lodging unit.

Lake Ozawindib Pump House

Interpretive materials may be developed to describe the construction of the pump house as part of the WPA transient camp. The pump house is also located along a former railroad grade, known as the Mallard railroad, used to remove timber from the area. Interpretive materials such as signs or brochures about these resources could be developed in conjunction with those for the wall tents project at Ozawindib Group Center.

Nicollet Court Replacement

The replacement of the closed Nicollet Court with a shelter building and winter use hub will provide an additional space in the Douglas Lodge area to host interpretive programs, especially as an alternative location in case of adverse weather conditions. The building is within the Douglas Lodge



Existing interpretive sign at Nicollet Cabin

Historic District, as identified in the NRHP nomination. Its location near Douglas Lodge and other historic buildings is an opportunity to develop non-personal interpretive resources such as signs and kiosks to educate visitors about the historic buildings in the area, how the state park was developed over time, and similar topics.

Recreational Use and Visitor Services Impact

The winter trail uses improvement, addition of wall tents, and the replacement of Nicollet Court will enhance recreational use opportunities for state park visitors. The department's goal is to enhance Itasca State Park as a regional destination for winter recreation, and support four season tourism in northwest Minnesota.

Winter Trail and Trail Activities

Cross-Country Skiing

The changes proposed will raise the state park's profile as a winter destination for cross country skiing. The proposed investments will significantly increase the miles of trail and improve the experience for cross country skiers visiting the state park. The intent is to offer a multi-day skiing experience that serves as a regional and statewide tourism attraction. The trails will be designed and constructed for skiing, unlike current ski trails in the park which were primarily created as summer hiking trails. The trails will have loops of varying length and a wider range of difficulties that will attract skiers of different abilities.

Forest Inn will serve as the interim trailhead for skiing and snowshoeing, offering a warming space, restrooms and rental equipment in a single convenient location for visitors. The warming space and restrooms will be available 24 hours a day. Offering rental equipment will help draw a wider audience, including skiers that may not have their own equipment and families or groups with varied experience skiing. In the past, Forest Inn was open seasonally, from May to October. Starting in 2024, Forest Inn is open in winter as the state park added winter ski and snowshoe rentals. The Nature Store gift shop in Forest Inn remains open May to October. Nicollet Court shelter will become the permanent winter use trailhead for this area of the park once the new structure is built.

Winter Biking

Winter biking would add a new recreational use to the state park for the winter season, attracting new visitors who participate in this activity. When developed as the second phase of winter trail investment, winter biking would enhance Itasca State Park's position as a winter recreation destination. As with cross country skiing, Forest Inn will serve as the trailhead for winter biking offering a warming space, restrooms, and access to rentals.

Snowmobiling

The section of snowmobile trail running along the east side of the park may be impacted by cross country ski and winter bike trail development. The trail may be moved further east within the park to accommodate the proposed ski and winter bike trails in the area between the main park road and the state park's east boundary. However, the relocated trail would maintain the network of snowmobile trails with the state park and connections for snowmobilers to state park facilities.

As part of its broader efforts at the state park, the department plans to enhance the services offered at the Mary Gibbs Mississippi Headwaters Center. The Mary Gibbs Mississippi Headwaters Center serves as a trailhead for snowmobile riders. Proposals include reconfiguring the parking area to better accommodate vehicles with snowmobile trailers and extending visitor center hours for access to restrooms and food service.

Wall Tents

In general, adding wall tents will increase opportunities for visitors to stay overnight in the state park as well as offer a new experience for camping not currently available at this park. Wall tents, like camper cabins, will be an especially attractive option for visitors with less experience camping or who may not own camping gear of their own, and for those visitors who no longer are comfortable camping in their own tent. Like other lodging opportunities, wall tents may help attract more people of color and groups that are otherwise underrepresented among state park visitors.

Pine Ridge Campground

At Itasca State Park, the loop of wall tents would provide additional camping capacity and a new camping experience for visitors. The shower buildings in the Pine Ridge Campground have adequate shower and toilet capacity to serve the wall tent users, although vault toilets may be added to the wall tent loop as a secondary option to reduce the distance to sanitation for visitors staying in the wall tent loop. Making a number of the wall tents available for ski-in winter use by providing a stove for heat would be a new, more solitary opportunity for visitors. The other winter lodging available in the park are all part of a larger structure such as the Four-season Suites and Headwaters Inn.

Ozawindib Group Center

Providing wall tents in the group center will enhance the level of service offered to visitors. Currently visitors bring their own tents, beyond the five people that can be accommodated in the existing cabin. Providing wall tents may diversify the groups that utilize the group center, attract groups that did not previously reserve the group center because they



Park will maintain its snowmobile trails and snowmobile access to park facilities



Mary Gibbs Mississippi Headwaters Center will be the snowmobiling trailhead

lacked their own camping gear. The department envisions this investment at the group center as a way to attract people that are currently underrepresented among state park visitors, including communities of color.

Remote hike-in or ski-in sites

The state park currently has eleven remote backpack campsites along its trail system, but none offers a shelter. Wall tents for hike-in summer use or ski-in winter use will be a new opportunity for visitors. The department will need to assess what new or existing locations and number of sites are feasible for the park operationally to support.

Building Conversions to Lodging Units

Nicollet Cabin

Nicollet Cabin will offer a rustic, hike-in overnight lodging experience for visitors. Overnight guests would hike 1.1 miles from Wilderness Drive to the cabin, carrying any gear and supplies they need for their stay. There is no water available at the site. Guests would be required to carry in their own water or filter water from a nearby lake. An existing backcountry toilet at the site will provide sanitation for guests. The rustic and solitary nature of the experience at this location will offer visitors a different experience than the drive-up, vehicle-accessible camping and lodging experiences common throughout the rest of the state park.

Lake Ozawindib Pump House

Similar to Nicollet Cabin, the converted pump house would offer a more rustic and solitary overnight lodging experience than is typical for overnight visitors to Itasca State Park. Overnight visitors will hike approximately 0.4 miles from the Lake Ozawindib boat access to the pump house location. Overnight visitors will carry in their own water for drinking and other needs while staying at the site. The department will provide sanitation for overnight visitors with either a vault toilet, backcountry toilet, or composting toilet.

There is a snowmobile trail adjacent to the pump house location, crossing east from Wilderness Drive to the Ozawindib Group Center then north along the east shore of the lake before turning west to the park boundary. Conversion of the pump house to overnight use will not impact the snowmobile trail.

Nicollet Court Replacement

Replacement of Nicollet Court with the shelter building will add a new visitor use facility to the state park, replacing a structure that has been closed to the public. The new facility is being designed to serve multiple functions for day use. It will include restrooms and a space that can be used



Hiking trail to Nicollet Cabin

by visitors for picnicking or gathering during inclement weather, which is limited in the area near Douglas Lodge. The proposed shelter building would also provide an additional food service location served by the Douglas Lodge restaurant. This will increase the number of visitors that can be served by the restaurant, which is currently limited by the size of the lodge's dining room. The shelter building may also be available for visitors to reserve to host weddings, family reunions, or other events. The shelter building will also serve as a winter use hub, including hosting winter ski and snowshoe rentals.

The current management plan recommends that the Nicollet Court building be removed and replaced with new overnight facility, identifying several possible replacement sites within the Douglas Lodge Historic Area. However, since the management plan was adopted, the Four-Season Suites were constructed nearby which accomplished the management plan objective of creating an additional overnight use facility to replace Nicollet Court.

Management Plan Text Revisions

The plan amendment text supplements portions of the current *Itasca State Park Management Plan* (December 1998) including *Chapter 4 Natural Resource Management*, *Chapter 5 Cultural Resource Management*, *Chapter 6 Recreation Resource Management*, and *Chapter 7 Interpretive and Environmental Education Services* of the current management plan.

The plan amendment supersedes the text and recommendations concerning the replacement of Nicollet Court with another overnight facility in *Chapter 8 Resort Operations* and *Chapter 9 Buildings and Facility Management*. The management plan text is superseded with the direction described in the plan amendment for a new day-use shelter building to be built to replace Nicollet Court, in the same location as the original structure.

The locations of existing and proposed trails, facilities and other developments referenced in this amendment supersede those shown in the management plan if there is any discrepancy. Descriptions and maps of the park boundary and ownership in the management plan are superseded by those in amendment which include recent property acquisitions and land administration changes.

Public Review

In accordance with *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09 subdivision 3, the plan amendment was released for a 30-day public review period in February 2026 with an open house held at the Jacob V. Brower Visitor Center on March 24th, 2026. The public comment period closed on April 10th, 2026.

The comments received during the public review period were supportive of the proposals outlined in the plan amendment. Topics commented on by the public included . . . (to be added after public review).

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Appendix

The department considered data about annual average temperatures and projections of climate change impacts to snow cover and snow depth at Itasca State Park as part of developing the proposals described in the management plan amendment.

Annual average temperatures, Itasca State Park

Temperature records exist dating back to 1895 in Minnesota, including for Itasca State Park. The historic data shows an increase in the annual average temperature throughout Minnesota. For Itasca State Park, the annual average temperature has increased by 0.23 degrees Fahrenheit per decade over the length of the records from 1895 to 2024, slightly less than the statewide increase of 0.25 degrees. The increase is more pronounced in winter – for example, the January average temperature at the state park has increased by 0.46 degrees Fahrenheit per decade.

Of the hottest ten years since 1895, six of them have occurred since 2006.

Climate change projections for snow cover depth, Itasca State Park

The University of Minnesota Climate Adaptation Partnership developed Minnesota CliMAT, an interactive online tool that provides highly localized climate projections for Minnesota. Minnesota CliMAT projects changes in temperature, humidity, and precipitation based on several emissions scenarios. Using the tool, the department projected the potential changes to annual snow cover depth and number of days with snow cover depth greater than six inches at Itasca State Park by mid-century – defined as the years 2040-2059.

Current conditions for Itasca State Park

- Annual snow cover depth is 2.8 inches.
- Annual number of days with snow cover depth greater than six inches is 75.3 days.

Mid-Century (2040-2059) projections for Itasca State Park using Minnesota CliMAT tool

- Annual snow depth decreases by 0.5 to 0.8 inches.
- Annual number of days with snow cover depth greater than six inches decreases by 12.4 to 18.5 days.

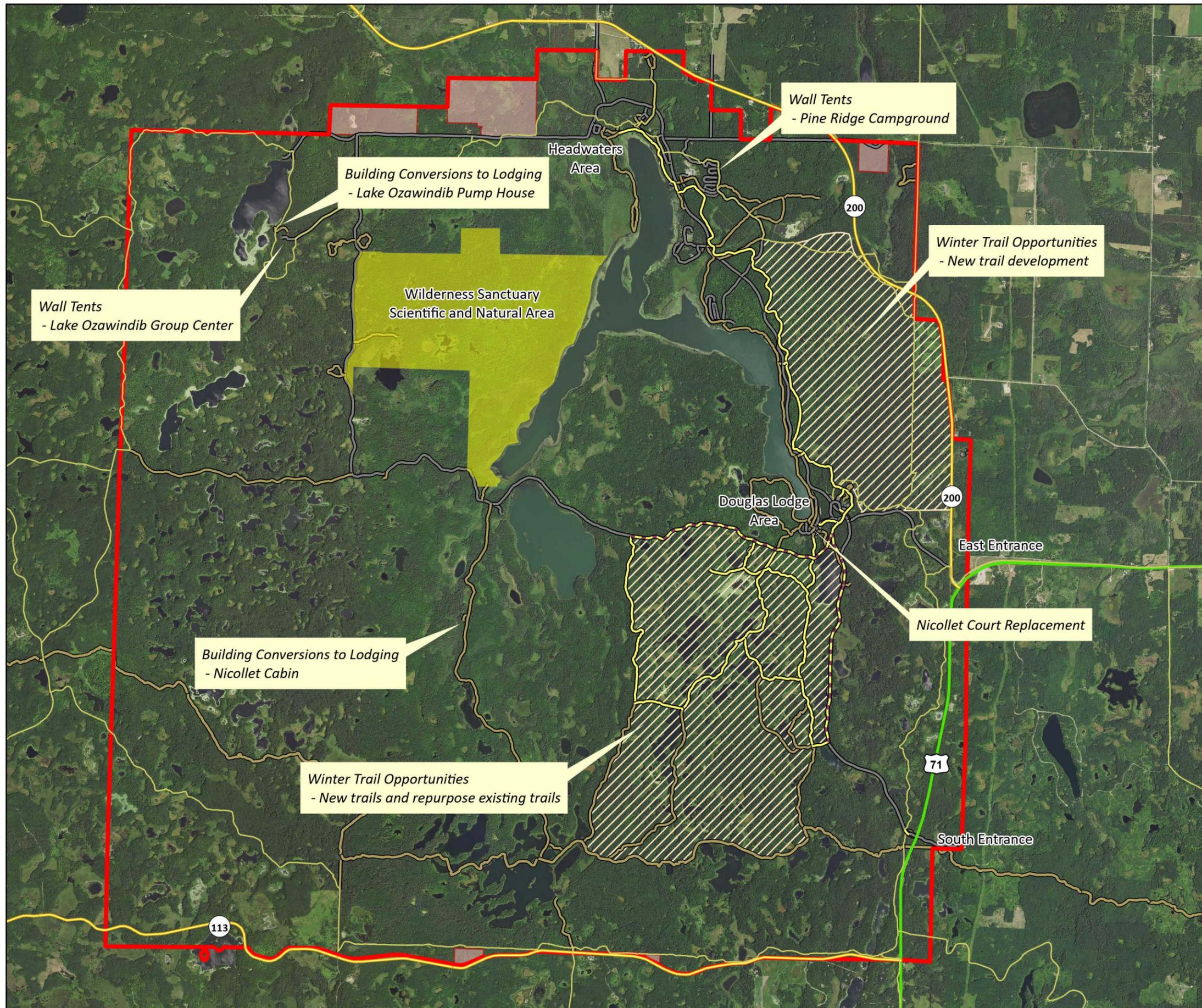
Conclusions

The annual average temperature data and climate projections for snow cover and snow depth validates the department’s direction to invest in supporting more visitation during the longer shoulder seasons. The department also determined that the amount of projected change for annual snow depth and number of days with six inches or snow cover did not preclude further investment in cross-country skiing and other winter recreation at Itasca State Park. The department anticipates given Itasca State Park’s northern location and heavily forested landscape the state park will continue to support winter trail activities, including cross-country skiing, through the mid-century timeframe (2040-2059).

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Itasca State Park

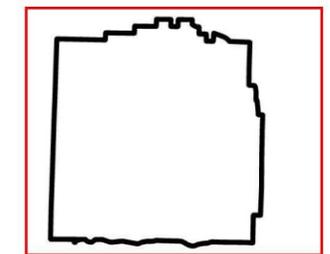
Figure 1: Proposed Investment Locations



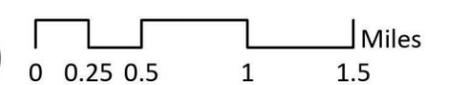
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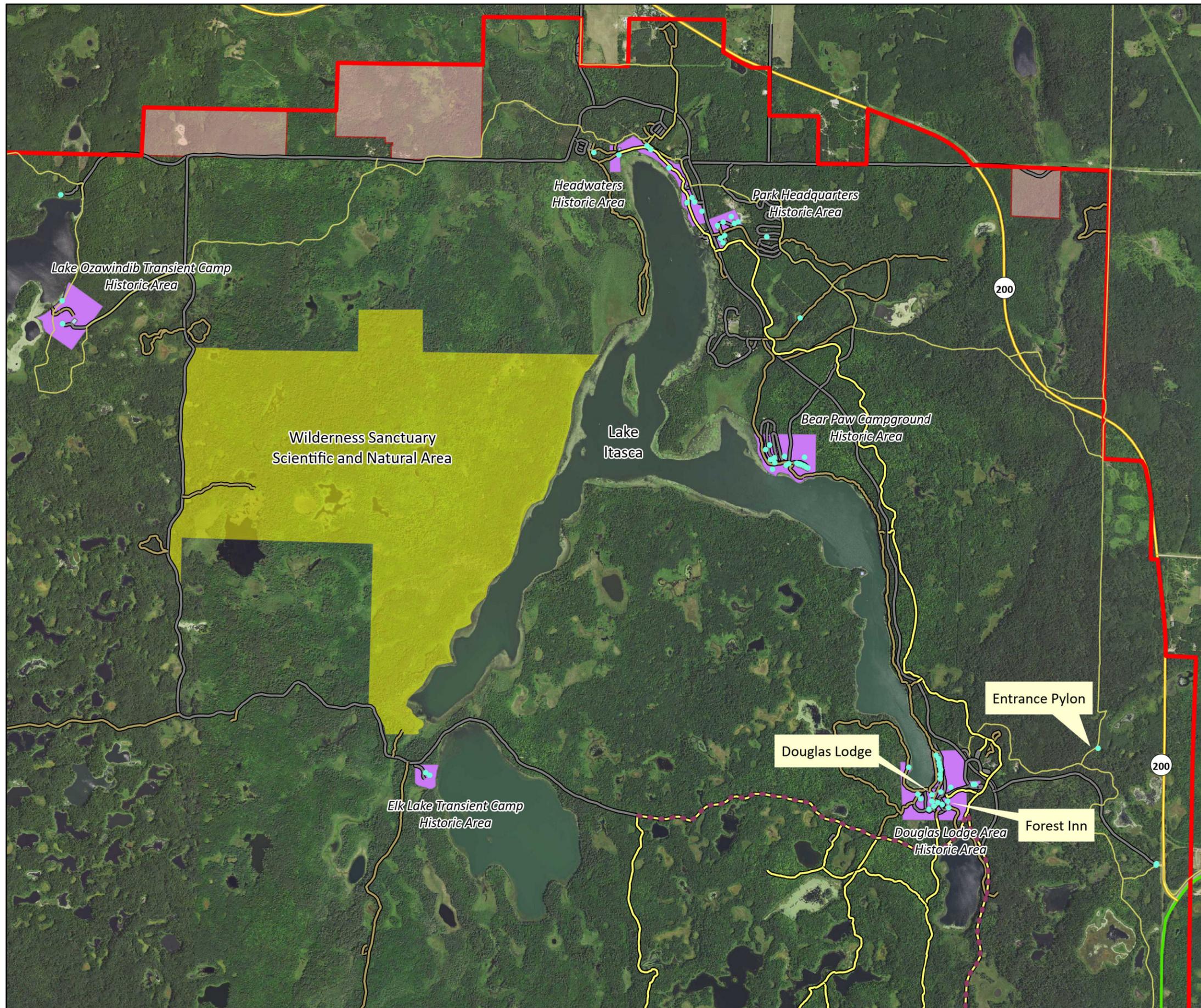
- Cross-Country Ski Trails
- Skate Ski Trails
- Other Park Trails
- Snowmobile Trails
- State Park Roads
- U.S. Trunk Highway
- MN Trunk Highway
- State Park Statutory Boundary
- Private Land within Park Boundary

Extent shown



Itasca State Park Boundary





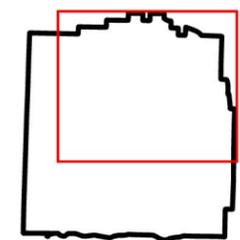
Itasca State Park

Figure 2: National Register Nomination Contributing Elements

Legend

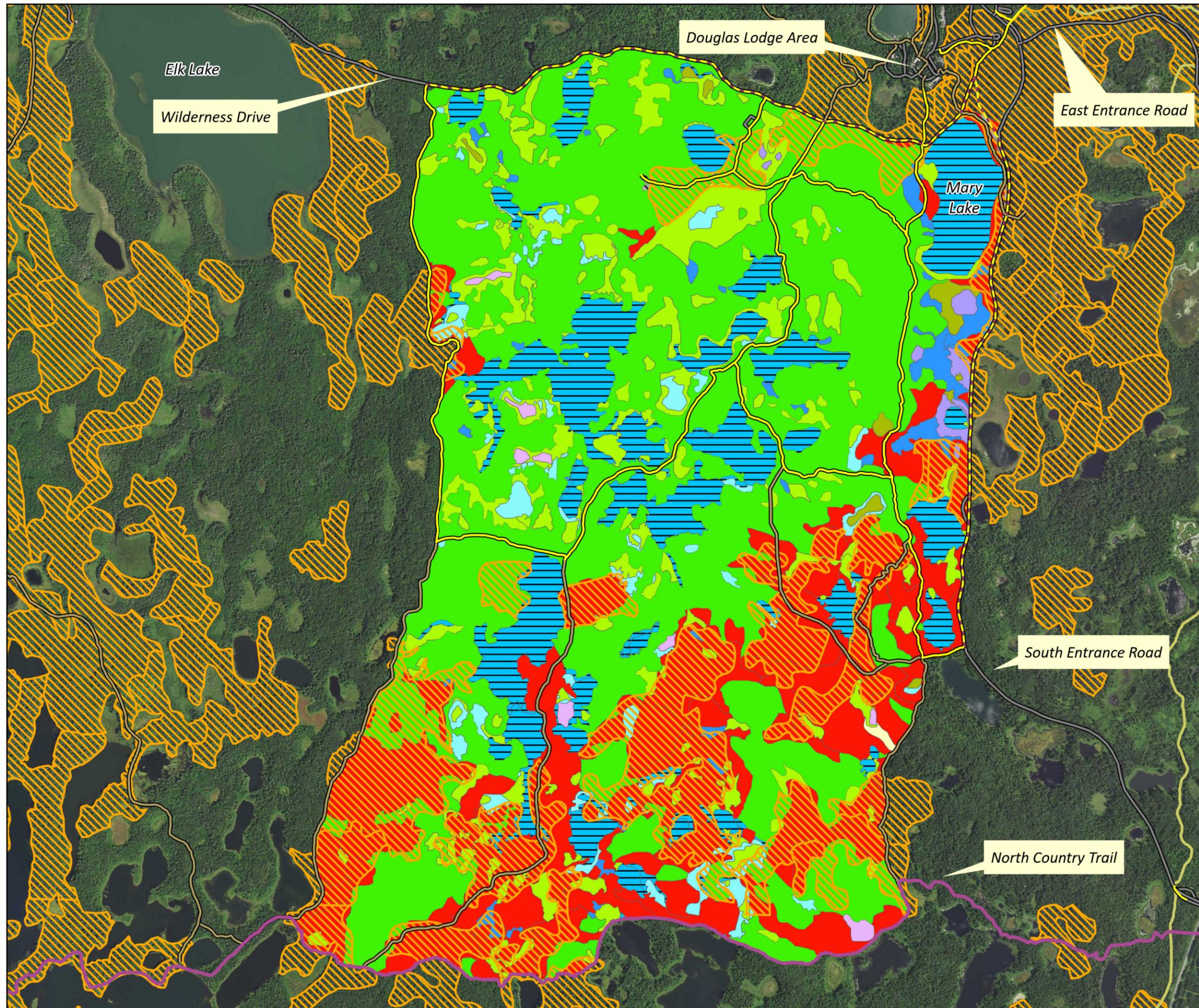
- Contributing Elements to NRHP Nomination
- Historic Areas identified in NRHP Nomination
- Cross-Country Ski Trails
- Skate Ski Trails
- Other Park Trails
- Snowmobile Trails
- State Park Roads
- State park statutory boundary
- Private land within park boundary

Extent shown



Itasca State Park Boundary



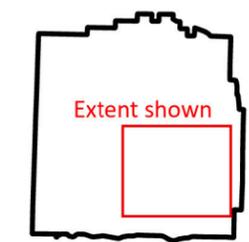


Itasca State Park

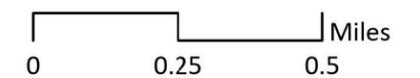
Figure 3: Winter Trails Enhancement
Land Cover - System Level Descriptions

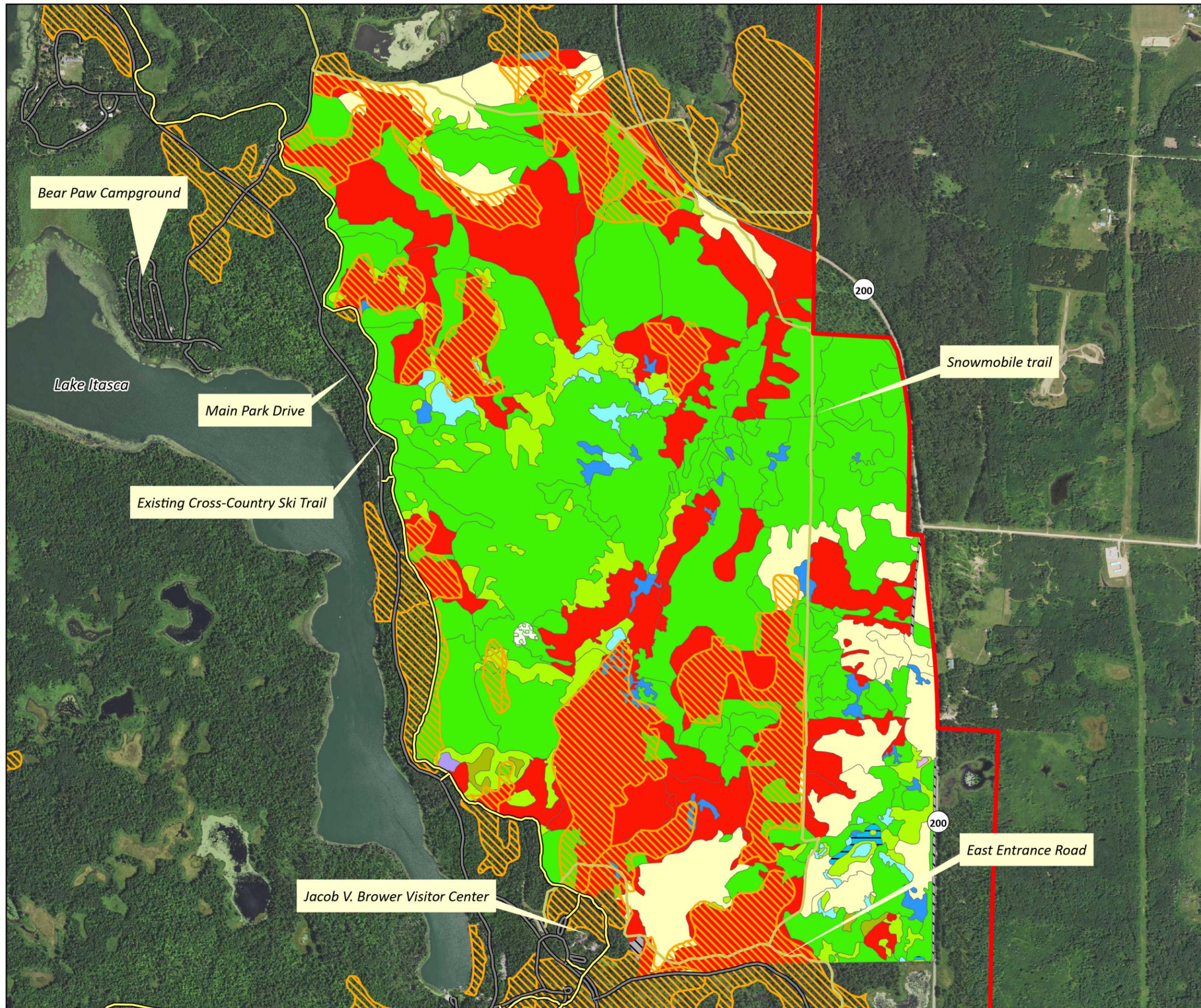
Legend

-  Acid Peatland System
-  Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland System
-  Forested Rich Peatland System
-  Marsh System
-  Mesic Hardwood Forest System
-  Open Rich Peatland System
-  Wet Forest System
-  Wet Meadow/Carr System
-  Other Natural System
-  Non-Natural System
-  Facilities (roads, buildings, use areas)
-  Designated Old Growth
-  State Park Statutory Boundary



Itasca State Park Boundary



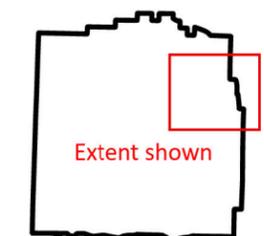


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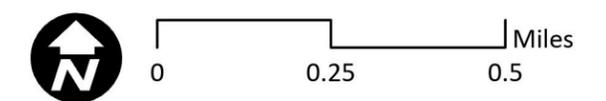
Figure 4: Winter Trails Expansion Land Cover - System Level Descriptions

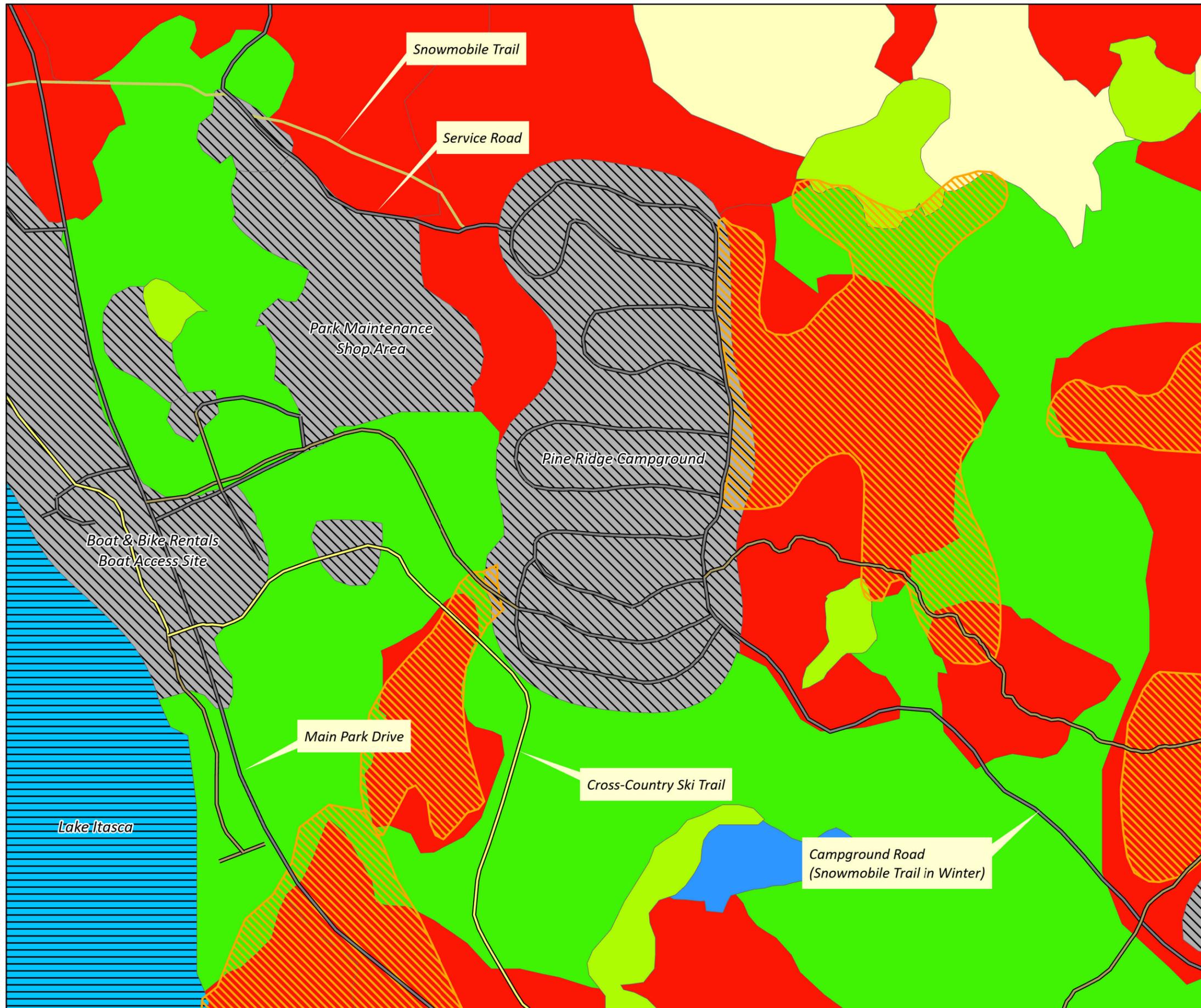
Legend

-  Acid Peatland System
-  Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland System
-  Forested Rich Peatland System
-  Marsh System
-  Mesic Hardwood Forest System
-  Open Rich Peatland System
-  Wet Forest System
-  Wet Meadow/Carr System
-  Complex Community
-  Other Natural System
-  Non-Natural System
-  Facilities (roads, buildings, use areas)
-  Designated Old Growth
-  State Park Statutory Boundary



Itasca State Park Boundary



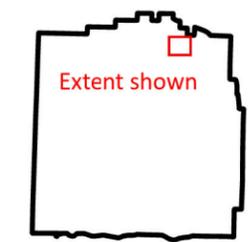


Itasca State Park

Figure 5: Pine Ridge Campground Land Cover - System Level Descriptions

Legend

-  Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland System
-  Mesic Hardwood Forest System
-  Wet Forest System
-  Wet Meadow/Carr System
-  Other Natural System
-  Non-Natural System
-  Facilities (roads, buildings, use areas)
-  Designated Old Growth



Itasca State Park Boundary

