

Itasca State Park Management Plan Amendment

Public Water Access Redevelopment





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 redevelopment of two public water accesses, one near Bear Paw Campground and the other at Douglas Lodge.

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. Climate change is likely to result in longer shoulder seasons, which may result in more days conducive to boating activities at the state park. However, the potential changes are not expected to be significant enough to impact the overall demand for boating access to Lake Itasca or impact the redevelopment proposals for the two public water accesses.

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

Description

There are three public water access sites on Lake Itasca – the main Lake Itasca Access, the Bear Paw Campground Access, and the Douglas Lodge Access (see **Figure 1: Lake Itasca Public Water Access Locations**). The department intends to consolidate drive-in boat access at the main Lake Itasca Access and redevelop the Bear Paw Campground Access and Douglas Lodge Access as carry-in access sites.

The main Lake Itasca Access was extensively renovated in 2024. The renovated access site includes a double drive-in concrete access ramp and accessible carry-in access. Parking at the site was expanded, including the addition of accessible parking spaces. Other improvements include stormwater retention features, space for aquatic invasive species (AIS) inspections and boat-trailer cleaning, a fish cleaning house, vault toilets and visitor information kiosks. The renovated access has adequate space to accommodate the demand of visitors seeking drive-in boat access to the lake and provides significant improvements for protecting water quality from erosion and aquatic invasive species.

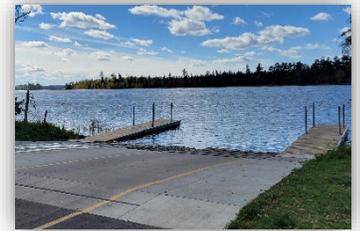
With the additional capacity at the renovated main Lake Itasca Access, the department intends to consolidate drive-in boat access at that location and redevelop the other two water access sites on the lake for carry-in boat access. The redeveloped access sites would be designed to address existing natural resource concerns including runoff, shoreline erosion and lack of AIS prevention tools that impact the lake’s habitat and water quality. Consolidating all drive-in boat access to the main Lake Itasca Access would ensure more thorough and secure AIS education and enforcement at a location with space designed to support those activities.

Douglas Lodge Access

The Douglas Lodge Access has been a public use area for most of the state park’s history. Over the decades, there have been different layouts of boat docks, slips, fishing piers, and boat houses. The site has also been the embarking point for the Lake Itasca guided boat tours. The current configuration of the site is a small gravel parking area and turn-around loop, a gravel boat ramp with a roll-in dock; a large, fixed boat pier; and an accessible fishing pier. The area also serves as a trailhead for the Dr. Roberts Trail. The parking area and boat access slope toward the lake with no stormwater diversion or retention. There is no space for AIS-related boat inspections or cleaning.

Redevelopment proposal

The site will be reduced in size and reconfigured to support carry-in boat access, a picnic area, and boat access from the lake to the Douglas Lodge area (See **Figure 2: Douglas Lodge Access Redevelopment**). The existing pier and dock will be removed. The parking area will be reduced and



New double boat ramp at main Lake Itasca Access



Accessible carry-in access at main Lake Itasca Access

reshaped to decrease runoff to the lake, with a portion of the area being restored to turf grass with several picnic tables added. A portion of the current access will be retained for carry-in use, with the remaining shoreline replanted with native vegetation. The smaller parking area will serve people using the carry-in access, picnic area, and Dr. Roberts Trail. The fishing pier will be replaced with a combined fishing pier/dock with boat slips that allows park visitors to boat into the Douglas Lodge area to visit the historic lodge, the lodge restaurant, Forest Inn and other amenities in the area.

Bear Paw Campground Access

Bear Paw Campground Access provides limited drive-in boat access because of its small size and shallow water depth in that portion of the lake. The site consists of a small gravel parking area and gravel boat ramp, with parking for only one or two vehicles. The parking and ramp slope toward the lake with no stormwater diversion or retention. There is no space for AIS boat inspections or cleaning. The facilities at the site are not currently accessible because of steep slopes.

Redevelopment proposal

The site will be reconfigured as a carry-in boat access incorporating the fishing pier relocated from the Douglas Lodge Access (See **Figure 3: Bear Paw Campground Access Redevelopment**). The existing road will be converted to an accessible trail connecting to the site, with a new accessible trail leading to the pier. The portion of the shoreline not used for the carry-in access will be replanted with native vegetation. The department is considering maintaining the parking area to enhance accessibility, allowing people with a disability to drive or be driven to the site. If that option is pursued, the former road portion of the accessible trail would be maintained to accommodate vehicles for that purpose.

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 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 4: National Register Nomination Contributing Elements**).

Douglas Lodge Access

The area immediately surrounding the access is disturbed and is managed for public use. The site has some shoreline erosion and runoff from the parking area and ramp enter directly into the lake. Redeveloping the site as a carry-in access will improve natural resource conditions at the site. The project will shrink the amount of gravel surface, restoring portions of the existing parking area to turf. Shoreline not utilized for the carry-in access or



Douglas Lodge



Old Timer's Cabin

combination pier will be restored to native vegetation. Reducing the amount of impervious surface, reshaping the parking area, and restoring shoreline vegetation will all contribute to reducing erosion and surface water flow into the lake. Limiting the site to carry-in use will reduce the potential for AIS introduction by relocating drive-in boat access to the main Lake Itasca Access where there are facilities for AIS inspection and cleaning.

No additional natural resource impacts are anticipated from the redevelopment of the boat access area.

There are no known archaeological sites within the immediate area.

The site is within the Douglas Lodge Historic District, as identified in the NRHP nomination. Although it is located in the historic district, the layout of the boat landing has been altered multiple times over the years, and the current configuration is not related to the period of park development referenced in the National Register Nomination. Removal of the roll-in dock and fixed boat pier will remove these recent structures from the historic viewshed of the lake as viewed from the stone steps by Douglas Lodge. Placement and materials used for the combination pier will be determined with the historic viewshed in mind. Historic resources in the Douglas Lodge area, including the lodge, Clubhouse and Forest Inn, will not otherwise be impacted by redeveloping the access site.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance and assessment will be conducted as part the layout, design and reconstruction of the carry-in access, trail and combination pier.

Bear Paw Campground Access

The area immediately surrounding the access is disturbed and is managed for public use. Redeveloping the site as a carry-in access will improve natural resource conditions at the site. Currently, runoff directly enters the lake from the parking area and ramp, and the shoreline surrounding the access is eroding. The project will reduce the amount of gravel surface by removing or reshaping the existing parking area and narrowing the roadway into an accessible trail. Shoreline not utilized for the carry-in access or placement of the fishing pier will be restored to native vegetation. Reducing the amount of impervious surface and restoring shoreline vegetation will reduce erosion and surface water flow into the lake. Limiting the site to carry-in use will reduce the potential for AIS introduction by relocating drive-in boat access to the main Lake Itasca Access where there are facilities for AIS inspection and cleaning.

No additional natural resource impacts are anticipated from the redevelopment of the boat access area.



Fixed boat pier to be removed at Douglas Lodge Access

There is a known archaeological site in the boat access area. Final layout and redevelopment work will be conducted to avoid impacting archaeological resources. The department will coordinate with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) during the final project layout and construction.

The site is within the Bear Paw Campground Historic District, as identified in the NRHP nomination. However, the access site was not originally developed as part of the Bear Paw Campground and its current layout is not related to the period of park development referenced in the National Register Nomination. Historic resources in the Bear Paw Campground area will not be impacted by redeveloping the access site.

Additional natural and cultural resource reconnaissance and assessment will be conducted as part of the layout, design and reconstruction of the carry-in access and placement of the fishing pier

Interpretive Services Impact

The proposed redevelopment of the access site creates 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.*

Douglas Lodge Access

Interpretive opportunities at the access site include developing signage about natural resource and water quality improvements from the site's redevelopment, information on lakeshore habitat, and trailhead orientation and information about the Dr. Roberts Trail. The access site and combination pier will provide space to host "I Can Fish" or similar naturalist-led interpretive programs for park visitors.

The combination pier could support the operation of Lake Itasca guided



Redeveloped sites will support "I Can Fish" and similar interpretive programming.

interpretive boat tours, if the department decides to offer that type of programming in the future.

The access site is within the Douglas Lodge 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.

Bear Paw Campground Access

Interpretive opportunities at the access site include developing signage about natural resource and water quality improvements from the site's redevelopment, information on lakeshore habitat, and fish species in Lake Itasca. The relocated fishing pier will provide a location to host "I Can Fish" and other interpretive programs at a location convenient for campground guests.

Recreational Use and Visitor Services Impact

The redevelopment of the Douglas Lodge and Bear Paw Campground access sites will create more diverse recreational use opportunities for visitors to the state park. Redeveloping the two sites to eliminate drive-in access but maintaining carry-in access will provide park visitors bringing smaller watercraft such as canoes, kayaks or paddleboards places to enter the lake and recreate that are separate from where motorized boats and larger watercraft are launching. This may be especially attractive for family groups or visitors with less experience or confidence on the water when near other larger motorized boats. Visitors with these smaller watercrafts can still choose to put in at the main Lake Itasca Access, including utilizing the accessible carry-in launch located there.

Consolidating drive-in boat access at the main Lake Itasca Access (because of redeveloping the other accesses as carry-in only) will result in displacing some drive-in boat launching use that now uses the two redeveloped accesses. However, the impact will be minor since neither access is heavily used, especially the Bear Paw Campground Access given the limited parking at the location. Consolidating drive-in boat access will have the positive impact of making it easier for boating visitors to comply with AIS inspection and cleaning requirements, as space and tools to do so are provided at that location.

The two access sites have several other recreational use and visitor services impacts specific to that location:

Douglas Lodge Access

The development of a combination pier with boat slips at the Douglas Lodge Access will offer several recreation opportunities. The boat slips will allow visitors boating on the lake to tie up at the pier and utilize amenities like the



AIS inspection and cleaning pull-through space at main Lake Itasca Access

Douglas Lodge restaurant, the gift shop at Forest Inn, and the hiking trails in the area. The pier would also maintain the existing accessible fishing opportunities at the site and enhance the site's ability to host interpretive programs.

Bear Paw Campground Access

Relocation of the existing fishing pier at the Douglas Lodge Access to the Bear Paw Campground Access would create accessible fishing opportunities for campground guests. There are currently no fishing piers in this area of the park easily reached from the campground. Providing more fishing opportunities near the campground is a frequent request from campground guests. The pier will also create new opportunities to host interpretive programs like "I Can Fish".

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 management plan recommends that the existing motorized access (main Lake Itasca Access) be repaired or modified as needed to prevent erosion, resource degradation, and power loading or to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. These recommendations were accomplished as part of the 2024 renovation project.

The Douglas Lodge Access and Bear Paw Campground Access are not directly addressed in the current management plan. The management plan does not identify these sites or include recommendations specific to the development or management of these facilities. The plan amendment text constitutes direction for the redevelopment and management of these locations.

The locations of existing and proposed trails, facilities and other development 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 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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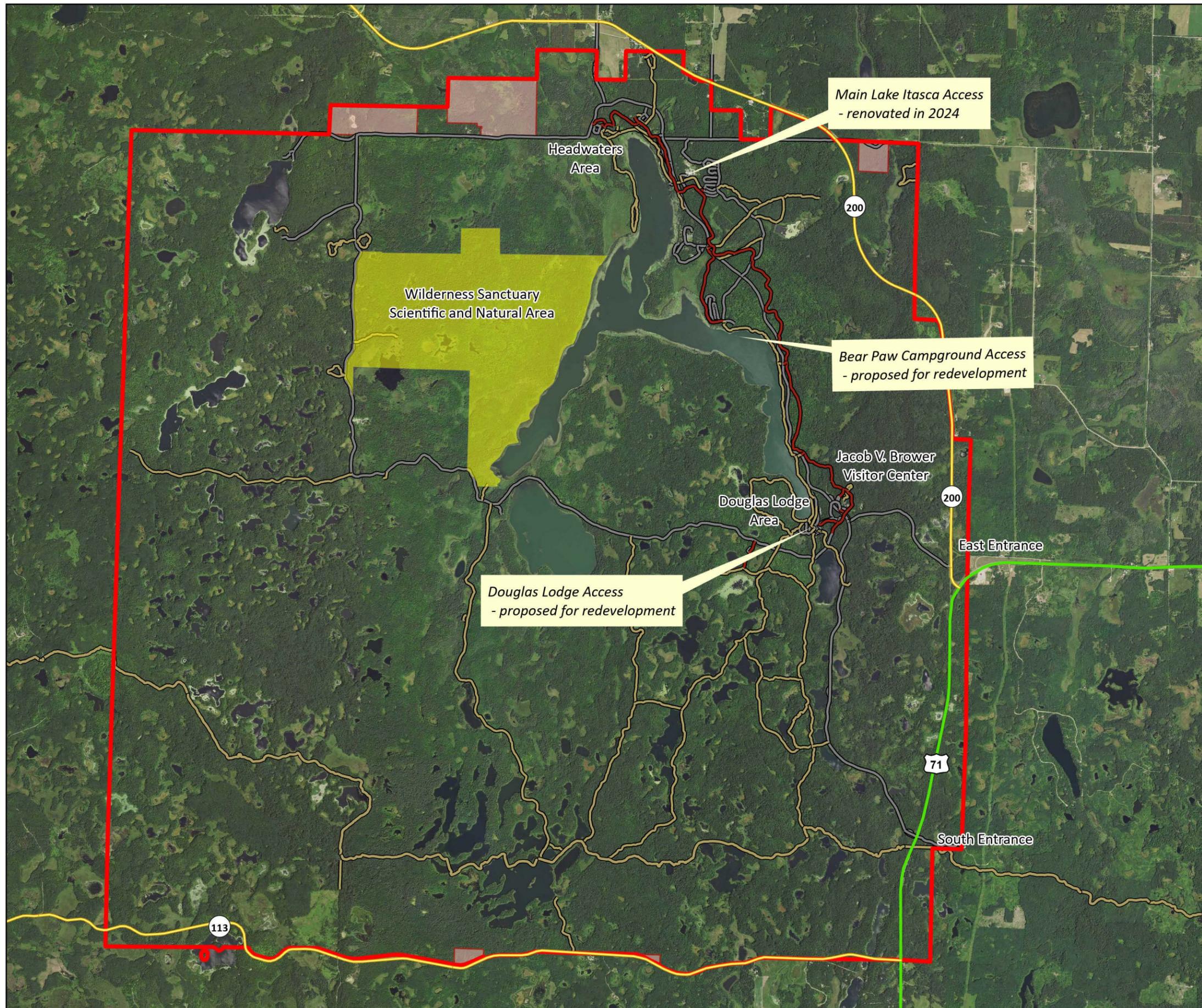
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Itasca State Park

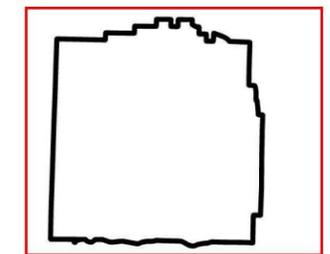
Figure 1: Lake Itasca Public Water Access Locations



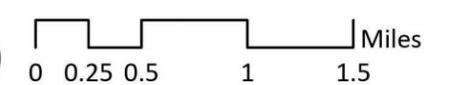
Legend

- Hiking Trails
- Bicycling 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



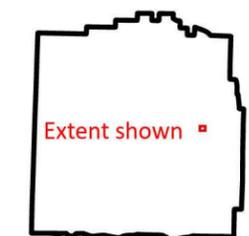


Itasca State Park

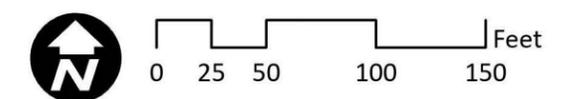
Figure 2: Douglas Lodge Access Redevelopment

Legend

-  Hiking Trails
-  Accessible Trail
-  State Park Roads
-  State Park Statutory Boundary
-  Private Land within Park Boundary



Itasca State Park Boundary

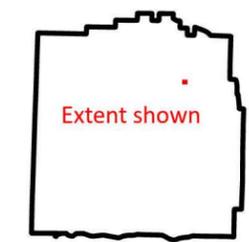


Itasca State Park

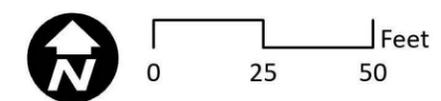
Figure 3 Bear Paw Campground Access Redevelopment

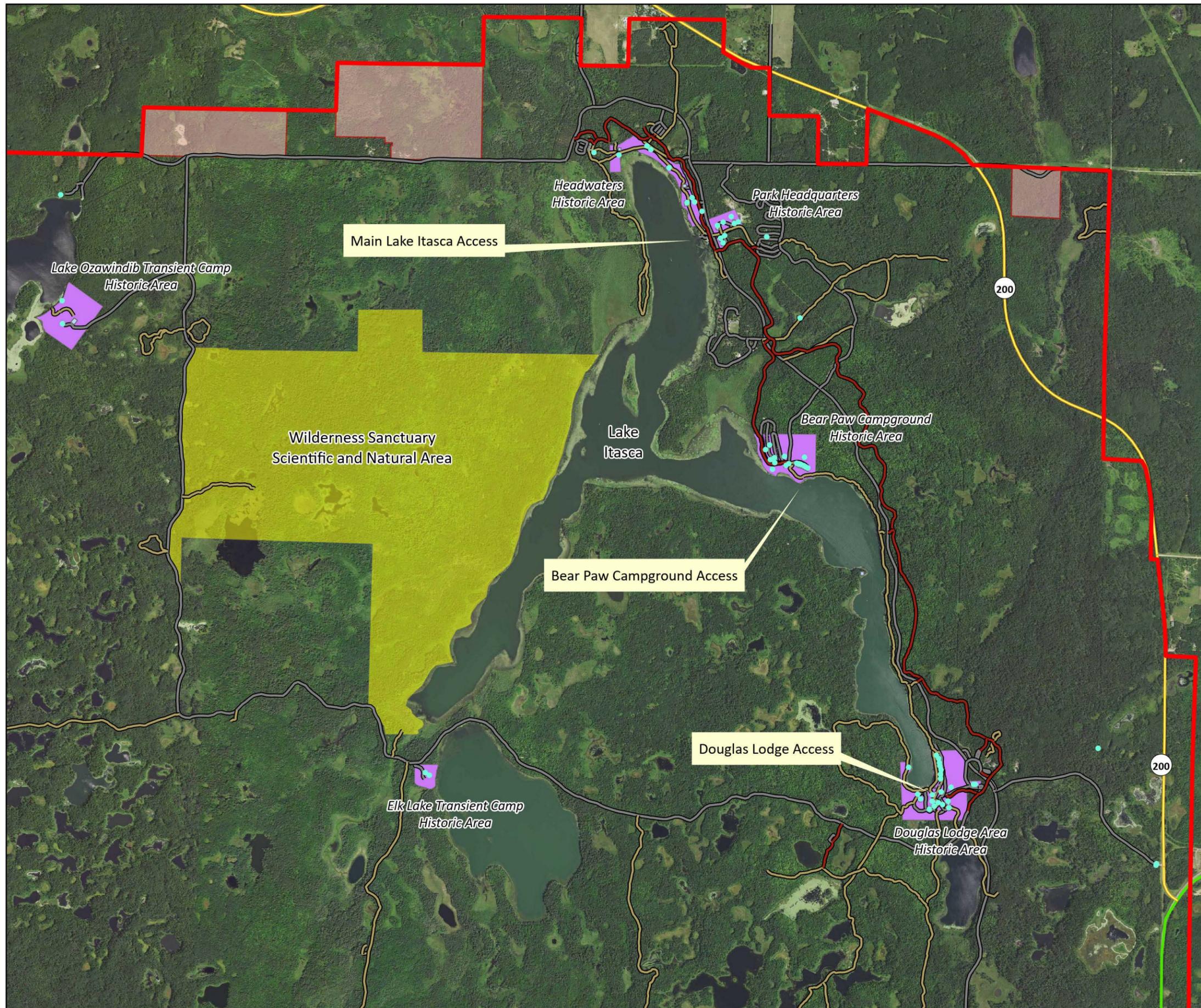
Legend

-  Hiking Trails
-  Accessible Trail
-  State Park Roads
-  State Park Statutory Boundary
-  Private Land within Park Boundary



Itasca State Park Boundary





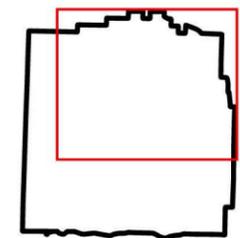
Itasca State Park

Figure 4: National Register Nomination Contributing Elements

Legend

- Contributing Elements to NRHP Nomination
- Historic Areas identified in NRHP Nomination
- Hiking Trails
- Bicycling Trails
- State Park Roads
- State park statutory boundary
- Private land within park boundary

Extent shown



Itasca State Park Boundary



mn DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES