

Michigan Nature Association Dowagiac Woods Nature Sanctuary



Sanctuary at a Glance:

Location: Cass County

Size: 384 acres

History: Four different parcels were acquired from 1983-2009.

About MNA:

The Michigan Nature Association is a nonprofit conservation organization working to protect Michigan's rare, threatened and endangered species by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

Established in 1952, MNA's members, donors, and volunteers have built a remarkable network of more than 180 nature sanctuaries across the state – the largest network of natural areas established and maintained by a nonprofit conservation organization in Michigan.



Michigan Nature Association

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Photo: Sherri Laier

The 384-acre Dowagiac Woods Nature Sanctuary is considered a “crown jewel” of MNA's sanctuaries. In 1983, the first 220 acres of the sanctuary were purchased from the Joseph Jerue family. After a small 15-acre purchase in 1995, the MNA added 151 acres in 2008. These final purchases now make Dowagiac Woods the second largest MNA sanctuary in the Lower Peninsula. The name, pronounced “doe-WAH-jack”, originates from a Pottawatomi Indian word meaning a place where one could obtain all his food, clothing, and shelter. Minimally disturbed since its government patent in 1836, Dowagiac Woods remains true to its name and is regarded as a high quality example of southern mesic forest. Because the majority of the property has never been plowed or clear-cut, the forests serve as a living museum of how Michigan forests looked prior to settlement.

The easily navigable 1.5 mile loop trail allows visitors to observe all the sights and sounds Dowagiac Woods has to offer. The path is complete with boardwalks over seasonally wet areas, as well as benches for visitors to relax and take in the beauty.

The larger size of the property is essential in maintaining the diversity of plant and animal life found here. A mixed matrix of floodplain, southern-mesic forest, and hardwood swamp allows for nearly 50 species of nesting birds and several reptiles, such as the black rat snake. Along with nesting birds like the barred owl and yellow-throated warbler, neo-tropical migrants use the river and forest habitat.

Both first-time guests and regular visitors to Dowagiac Woods will continue to find new discoveries in its impressive diversity.

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The Dowagiac River

The Dowagiac River formed the original eastern border of the first 220 acres acquired in 1983. The river was channelized in 1907 to drain surrounding wetland and adapt the landscape for agricultural production. Prior to channelization, the river had many meanders, which were isolated by the channelization process, causing them to become backwater oxbow ponds. One of these oxbow ponds is now known as Crescent Pond, found at the north end of the trail that runs along the river. Some wildflowers found in the floodplain include jewelweed, skunk cabbage, march marigold, and golden ragwort.



Photo: Phillip Bergquist

The Scarlet Tanager

One of many species of neo-tropical migratory songbirds which nest at Dowagiac Woods is the scarlet tanager (*Piranga olivacea*). Adult males are adorned with bright red plumage with black tails and wings, while females typically have a yellowish-olive underbelly and brown wings. After nesting in May, the tanagers migrate to the northwestern part of South America. Habitat fragmentation threatens the nesting success of these species and other forest interior nesting species. Protecting larger tracts of forest, like Dowagiac Woods, is vital to the continued nesting success of the forest interior nesting birds.



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, by Steve Maslowski

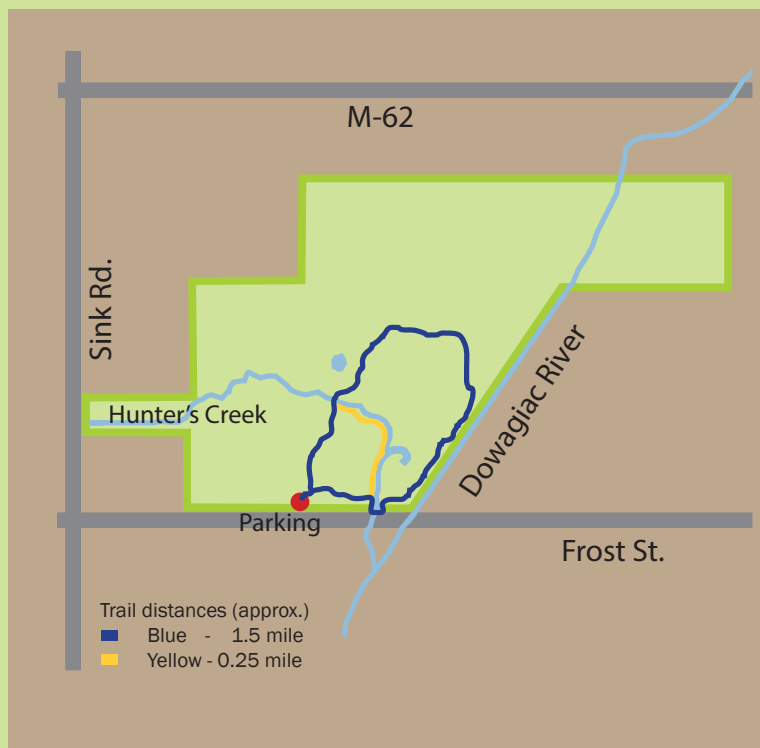
Planning Your Visit:

Spring in Dowagiac Woods offers an incredible wildflower display. More than fifty species of wildflowers carpet the forest floor, including the blue-eyed Mary, trillium, and dutchman's breeches.

Driving Directions

The sanctuary is in Cass County, west of Dowagiac, off M-62. There is a parking area on the north side of Frost Street.

For additional information, contact the MNA office at (866) 223-2231.



Trail Map