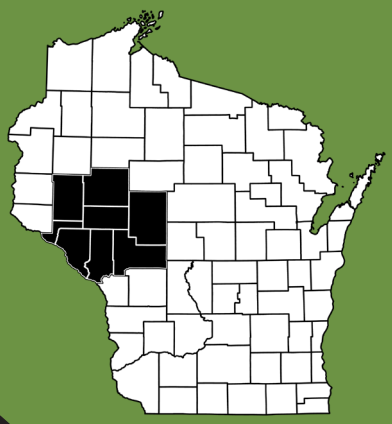
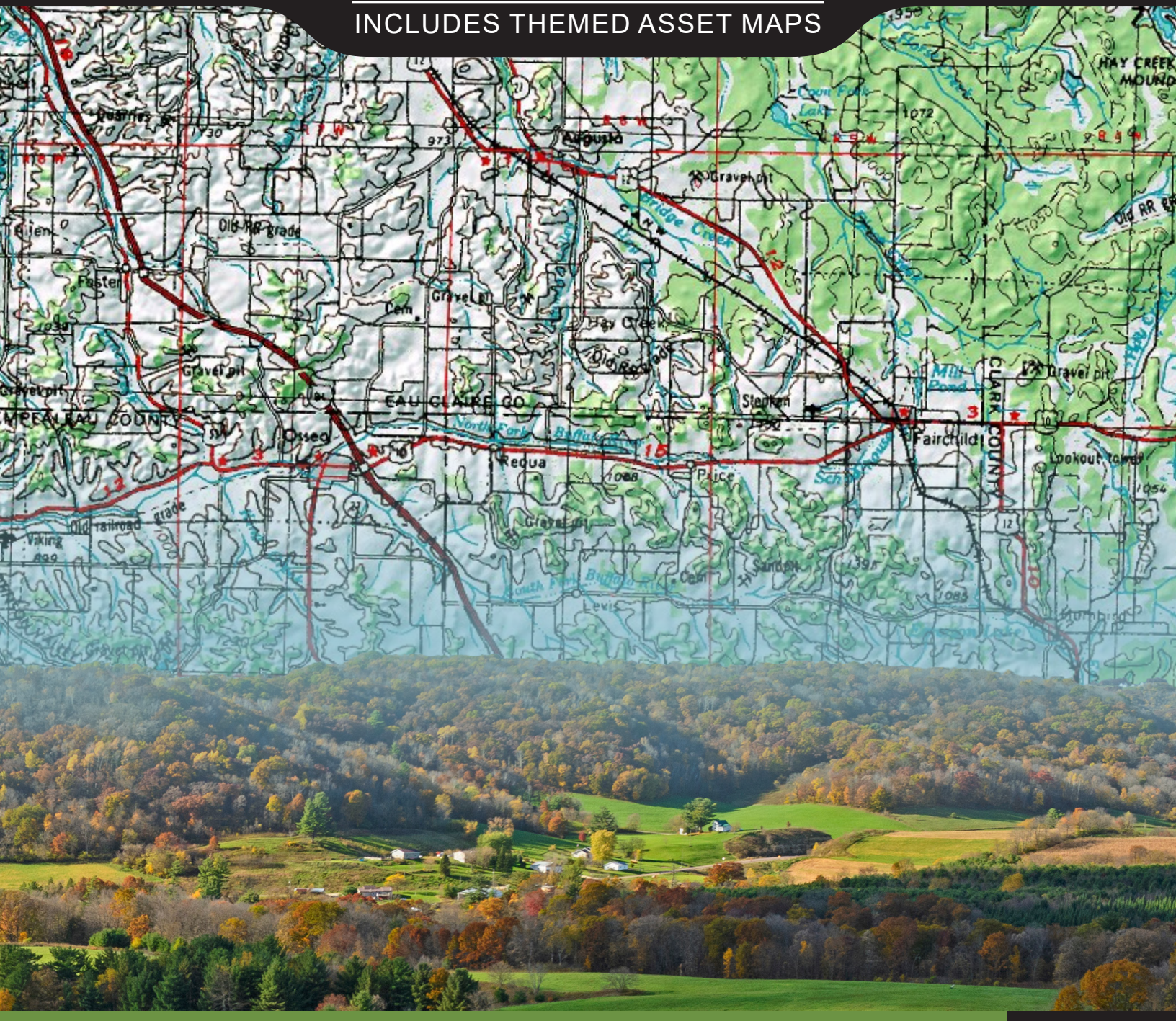
Western Wisconsin Regional Outdoor Recreation Plan



FOR RURAL AREAS - 2025

RECREATION GUIDEBOOK

INCLUDES THEMED ASSET MAPS



YOUR OUTDOOR RECREATION ADVENTURE GUIDE

FREE

WESTERN WISCONSIN

REGIONAL OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN FOR RURAL AREAS - 2025

Prepared by:

West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission

Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission

Bluebird Consulting

Visit Eau Claire

Approved by:

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) - April 30, 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This planning effort was made possible through the financial assistance of the following regional partners:

- ***Beaver Creek Reserve***
- ***City of Altoona***
- ***Eau Claire Area EDC***
- ***Eau Claire County***
- ***Jackson County***
- ***WCWRPC***

The participation and input of almost two hundred individuals over the sixteen-month planning process helped improve the quality and value of this document. Their engagement reflects the interest and investment the community is making towards enhancing outdoor recreation as a focal point for residents, tourists, and the economy.



A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northwestern Wisconsin Community Network has successfully completed its signature project: the creation of the first-ever Regional Outdoor Recreation Plan (RORP or the "Plan"). Made possible through support from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) and the Rural Partners Network (RPN), this effort represents a groundbreaking step for eight counties, including Eau Claire, Clark, Chippewa, Dunn, Pepin, Buffalo, Trempealeau, and Jackson (the Region).

This report documents both the process and outcomes of the project, demonstrating how regional collaboration, data-driven planning, and inclusive engagement can position the Region as a five-star outdoor recreation destination. The plan not only provides a unifying strategy for enhancing recreation assets and supporting rural businesses, but also lays the groundwork for long-term economic growth, improved community health, and strengthened regional identity.

Outdoor recreation is more than leisure—it is an engine for economic development, a driver of tourism, a contributor to public health, and a cornerstone of Wisconsin's cultural identity. In 2023, outdoor recreation contributed $11.2 billion to Wisconsin's gross domestic product (GDP) and supported more than 96,000 jobs. While individual counties in the Region had already developed their own County Outdoor Recreation Plans (CORPs), there was no regional plan to tie these efforts together, coordinate investments, or align recreation with rural business development.

Recognizing this gap, the eight counties came together to create a plan that would:

- Inventory and map existing recreation assets and related businesses.
- Identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for growth.
- Provide strategies to support small businesses tied to recreation.
- Develop a regional brand and marketing framework.
- Ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are integrated into planning and implementation.
- Build capacity for long-term sustainability through conservation and workforce training.

Project Process and Engagement

The planning process began in mid-2024 and unfolded over a year-long period. A steering committee, composed of representatives from all eight counties, guided the work. Professional support came from the West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission, Bluebird Consulting, and Visit Eau Claire.

Public engagement was robust. Surveys collected more than 1,700 responses from residents and businesses, while focus groups and two rounds of regional public meetings provided localized input. These activities ensured that the plan reflects both the priorities of the Region's communities and the opportunities seen by community and business leaders.

The asset inventory documented over 1,100 recreation sites—including trails, parks, rivers, campgrounds, and outfitters—and analyzed the network of businesses connected to outdoor use. Mapping these assets revealed both "gateway communities" (such as Black River Falls, Menomonie, and Pepin) that serve as hubs for recreation, as well as underserved areas that lack sufficient infrastructure. This evidence-based foundation allows for targeted investments where they can have the most impact.

Key Deliverables and Achievements

By the end of the grant period, the project had achieved its core deliverables:

Regional Plan: A written strategy that provides a blueprint for the future of outdoor recreation across all eight counties.

Asset Inventory and GIS Mapping: A regional database and mapping tool that will guide future infrastructure and business investments.

Branding Framework: Research, trends, and highlighted characteristics that can be used to develop a shared identity positioning the Region as a family-friendly, five-star outdoor recreation destination.

Business Development Strategies: Recommendations for incubator programs, technical assistance, and workforce training in recreation-related industries.

Community Engagement: A process that ensured diverse voices shaped the plan and that equity is embedded in future projects.

Implementation Roadmap: A five-year timeline outlining milestones, responsibilities, and funding pathways.

Looking Forward

The completion of this plan is only the beginning. Implementation involves adopting the plan at the county level, launching regional branding and marketing campaigns, investing in infrastructure upgrades, supporting small businesses, and monitoring progress through a structured evaluation framework. The plan positions the Region to compete effectively for state, federal, and philanthropic funding, ensuring that outdoor recreation continues to be a driver of prosperity and quality of life.

B. STEERING COMMITTEE

From the beginning, the RORP was structured as a collaborative process. A steering committee was formed in July 2024, bringing together representatives from all eight counties and both the public and private sectors. Each county appointed leaders from their planning departments, economic development organizations, or parks and recreation agencies.

The steering committee met regularly throughout the year to provide direction, review drafts, and ensure that the plan reflected the diverse needs of the Region. The composition of the committee also created accountability: each member served as a conduit between the project team and their local communities, bringing information back home and returning with feedback.

Membership included:

- County planning and zoning staff;
- Parks and recreation directors;
- State agency representatives;
- Local economic development corporation (EDC) representatives;
- Tourism bureau staff (notably Visit Eau Claire and regional chambers), and;
- Nonprofit leaders active in trails, conservation, and community health.

This cross-sector representation ensured that recreation was not considered in isolation, but as a driver of economic, environmental, and social outcomes.

C. PARTNERS

Role of Partner Organizations

Three key partner organizations provided leadership and technical expertise:

West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (WCWRPC): As the lead grant applicant, WCWRPC managed administration, coordinated communication among partners, and facilitated meetings in the counties overlapping its jurisdiction.

Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission (MRRPC): Brought planning expertise, data analysis, and facilitation support, particularly for counties overlapping its jurisdiction.

Bluebird Consulting: Provided professional consulting services on outdoor recreation trends, best practices in asset development, and frameworks for business incubation.

In addition, **Visit Eau Claire** contributed in-kind consulting services focused on asset mapping, marketing, and tourism development. Their involvement was critical in shaping the branding and visitor engagement strategies that anchor the plan's regional identity. **National Parks Service Rivers Trails and Conservation Assistance Program** staff provided contributions throughout the coordinated development of this Rural Areas plan and their Urban Areas plan.

WCWRPC
WEST CENTRAL WISCONSIN
REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

CRAWFORD JACKSON LA CROSSE MONROE PEPIN PIERCE TREMPEALEAU VERNON BUFFALO
MRRPC

VISIT EAU CLAIRE

BLUEBIRD CONSULTING

NPS-RTCA
Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

Regional Context Map

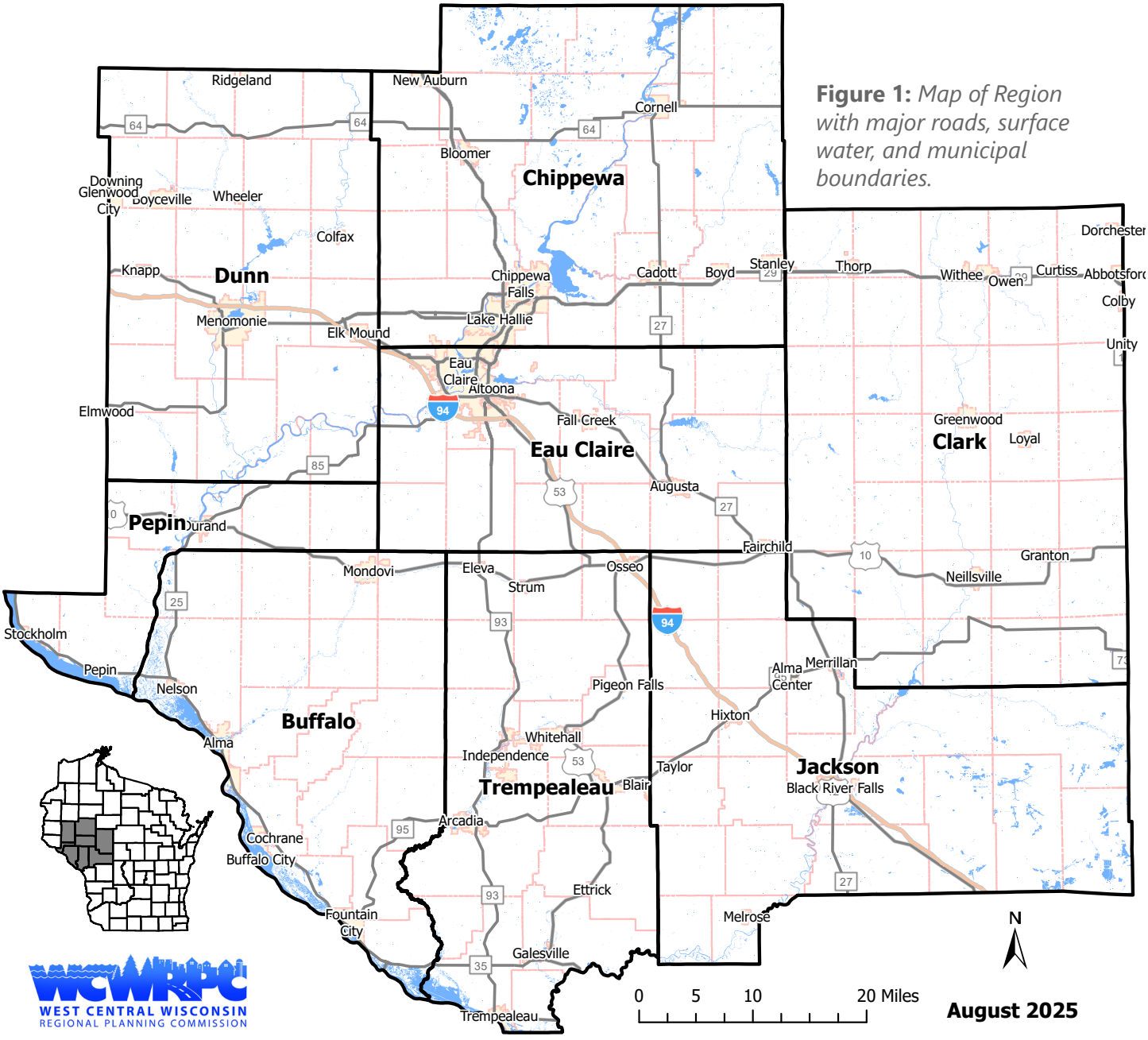


Figure 1: *Map of Region with major roads, surface water, and municipal boundaries.*

A. VISION STATEMENT

The eight-county Region is a top destination offering diverse, quality, year-round outdoor recreation and arts opportunities for residents, visitors and guests of all ages and abilities, while supporting recreation related businesses and job growth, so that the Region benefits from a strong outdoor recreation economy, vibrant communities, a healthy environment and a wide array of outdoor activity options.

B. PROJECT BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Origins of the Project

In 2022, seven of the counties joined the Rural Partners Network (RPN) program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). This program was designed to connect rural communities to federal resources and strengthen local priorities. As part of this effort, the participating counties were tasked with identifying a unifying "signature project" that could demonstrate the value of coordinated, regional action. Jackson County was included in the project and has applied to become a member of the RPN. The eight counties are collectively referred to as "the Region" throughout this plan.

After deliberation, the counties chose to focus on outdoor recreation. Each county already had its own County Outdoor Recreation Plan (CORP), but these plans functioned in isolation. None addressed shared branding, cross-county connectivity, or business development strategies. Leaders recognized that by working together, they could pool resources, coordinate land use decisions, and create a stronger case for investment.

The Gap in Regional Planning

While CORPs are valuable for managing local parks and facilities, they typically stop short of addressing broader economic and community development opportunities. They rarely:

- Consider the role of outfitters, hospitality businesses, or tourism operators.
- Provide strategies for building recreation-based workforces.
- Emphasize equity in access or participation.
- Align priorities across county lines.

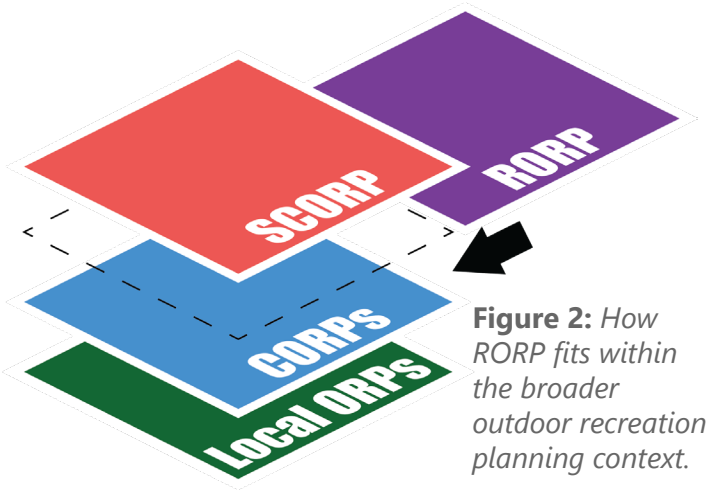


Figure 2: *How RORP fits within the broader outdoor recreation planning context.*

This left a significant gap. Without a regional framework, the counties risked duplicating efforts, competing against themselves for visitors and grants, and leaving rural communities under-resourced.

This plan provides a more defined scope than DNR's State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) while looking more wholistically at themes and projects that can include multiple counties. While a regional plan can help coordinate efforts across jurisdictions, it is important to note that this plan is not intended to replace existing planning efforts or take away from the importance of localized planning.

Why a Regional Approach Matters

By agreeing to pursue a regional plan, the counties signaled a shift in strategy: from isolated, county-level planning to a coordinated regional vision. This approach brings several benefits:

Scale: Large projects (such as multi-county trail systems) become possible only through collective planning.

Visibility: A unified regional identity raises the profile of the Region as a destination.

Efficiency: Shared planning reduces duplication and makes better use of limited resources.

Equity: Regional alignment helps identify and address disparities in recreation opportunities, ensuring smaller or rural counties are not left behind.

Alignment with USDA Priorities

The RORP embodies USDA RPN principles of collaboration, local ownership, and equity. County leaders, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and residents were all engaged to ensure the plan reflected diverse voices. With a comprehensive plan in hand, the Region is now positioned to advance multi-county projects and initiatives towards shared vision.

Building Toward the Future

This project is not just about cataloging trails or facilities. It reframes outdoor recreation as an economic development strategy, one that connects natural assets to workforce training, business support, and tourism promotion. By coordinating across county lines, the Region is pioneering a model for other rural areas in Wisconsin and beyond.

Alignment with Rural Partners Network

The USDA's Rural Partners Network emphasizes three core principles: collaboration, local ownership, and equity. This Plan reflects all three:

Collaboration: For the first time, eight counties worked collectively to produce a shared vision and strategy.

Local Ownership: The plan was shaped by input from over 1,800 residents, local officials, and business owners, ensuring it reflects community priorities.

Equity: Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were integrated from the start, guiding decisions about access, workforce training, and representation.

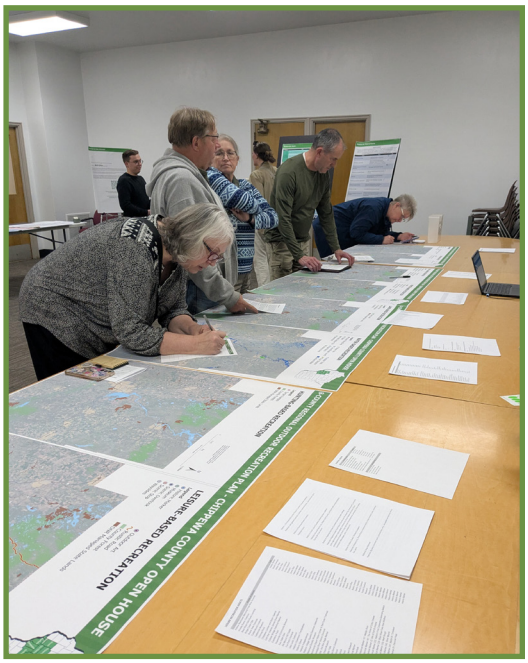
This project also sets the stage for future federal investment. By producing a comprehensive, evidence-based plan, the Region is better positioned to compete for state and federal grants as well as philanthropic funding.

Building on Wisconsin's Legacy

Outdoor recreation is not a new idea for Wisconsin—it has long been central to the state's cultural richness. What makes this project transformative is its regional scope and its integration of economic, social, and environmental goals. By tying outdoor recreation to small business development, branding, and workforce training, the plan expands the traditional scope of recreation planning.

As one community leader summarized during the process: “Our counties already know the value of trails, rivers, and parks. What this plan does is bring those pieces together into a bigger picture—one where recreation is not just an amenity, but a cornerstone of rural prosperity.”

Figure 3: *Dunn County open house.*



C. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT & COLLABORATION

Community Engagement Process

The project placed a strong emphasis on engaging residents, businesses, and community groups across the eight counties. Engagement activities included:

Public Survey: Conducted in September 2024, the survey received over 1,700 responses. Questions focused on current recreation use, barriers to access, desired improvements, and priorities for investment. Responses provided quantitative data to guide decisions and qualitative comments that illuminated community perspectives.

Focus Groups: Smaller sessions were held with targeted audiences, including youth, seniors, tribal members, and local business owners. These discussions added nuance to survey data, highlighting issues such as affordability, cultural relevance, and the role of recreation in attracting young families.

Public Meetings: Two rounds of regional meetings—held in April and December 2025—provided opportunities for residents to review draft findings and comment on strategies. These meetings also functioned as trust-building exercises, demonstrating that public feedback was genuinely shaping the plan.

Ongoing Feedback Loops: Throughout the process, steering committee members hosted local conversations and brought feedback back to the regional table. This ensured continuous alignment between county priorities and regional strategies.

Engagement Outcomes

The engagement process produced several key outcomes:

Validation of Priorities: Survey and meeting data confirmed widespread public support for investing in trails, waterways, and connected recreation infrastructure.

Business Insights: A survey of over 100 business owners revealed opportunities for outdoor gear rental, guiding services, and new lodging options tied to trail and water access.

Equity Perspectives: Input from underrepresented groups highlighted the importance of affordable access, culturally inclusive signage, and ADA-compliant facilities.

Regional Buy-in: By involving representatives from every county and sector, the project built a coalition that is more likely to support and champion implementation.

A Culture of Collaboration

A particularly meaningful outcome of the engagement process is the culture of collaboration it fostered. The project created new relationships across county lines, bridging gaps between communities, organizations, economic developers, and business leaders. It also gave residents a voice in shaping the future of outdoor recreation in their communities.

D. PUBLIC INPUT AND BUSINESS SURVEYS

Two surveys were conducted during the planning process: one, open to the general public, while the other targeted input from business owners in the Region.

Public Input Survey

The public survey was an attempt to gather user trends in outdoor recreation, with an emphasis on finding out where in the Region outdoor recreation was occurring and in what capacities. Survey responses were documented according to the respondent's zip code. This allowed for anonymity while still providing insight into who was participating in the survey.

Figure 4: *Online public survey Facebook flyer.*



In total, 1,743 respondents completed the survey. The majority of responses came from Wisconsin (95.3%), but responses were received from residents of 10 other states as well. Within Wisconsin, over 80% of responses came from zip codes within the Region. The median age of respondents was within the 40-54 age group, and 67.64% of respondents did not have children in their household.

Survey participants were asked to identify which outdoor recreation activities they participated in, as well as where within the Region they engaged in those activities. Additional questions asked respondents to identify the types of activities that should be improved or expanded within the Region, what types of improvements were most needed, why they might look elsewhere for outdoor recreation opportunities, and how respondents gathered information on outdoor recreation opportunities. Finally, respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions to generate ideas for projects related to outdoor recreation.

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR RECREATIONAL PLANNING

- The most popular recreational activities were hiking, biking, kayaking, fishing, agricultural tourism, and driving for pleasure (scenic drives). The popularity of activities varied as the reports were broken out by county, but hiking and biking were consistently within the top 10 preferred activities no matter the geography.
- When asked why respondents leave the Region to engage in outdoor recreation activities available within the Region, 56.11% identified "better opportunities elsewhere" as the reason.
- Respondents prioritized improvements to recreation areas or facilities (51.83%), improved mapping / signage (41.36%), and increased marketing of activities (30.81%) over greater access to guides, tourism offices, or other specialists (7.06%), retail (12.46%), and support services such as restaurants and lodging (12.62%).
- When asked to select their top five recreational activities to be expanded or improved, respondents preferred hiking / walking / running trails (48.75%), bicycle trails (33.06%), County parks or playgrounds (28.99%), public shore access or beaches (27.08%), and skiing / snowshoeing / tubing areas (23.59%).

» Preferred methods for gathering outdoor recreation information were social media (43.48%) and word of mouth (24.27%).

To provide additional insights for county partners, the survey responses were summarized in a series of reports. One report provides the results collected from all respondents, and eight additional reports were provided by county, with the individual county reports highlighting the responses from the zip codes within each of their boundaries.

Business Survey

A request was extended to businesses and property managers to identify their relationship with the outdoor recreation economy and general business practices. Respondents were asked about the activities that support or are supported by their businesses, what their outlook is for their business, and what needs they have.

Owners and managers from 108 businesses participated in the survey, with roughly 85% of the respondents having a location within the Region. The types of businesses varied greatly, including campgrounds, boutique stores, restaurants, and general service providers. Most businesses operate year-round, with those that are seasonal closing during the winter season. Market reach was evenly split between local and regional operations (43.5%) and statewide or national (56.5%). The most common methods for attracting or engaging clients were websites (used by 89% of respondents), social media (87%), and word of mouth (86%).

Just under 60% of respondents felt their business was in some way dependent on outdoor recreation, while roughly 70% felt they had at least some dependence on tourism. Activities supporting or supported by business respondents included non-traditional outdoor recreation activities, such as leisure activities (scenic drives and agricultural tourism) and outdoor cultural events, as well as more traditional activities such as hiking and biking, fishing, and camping.

The majority of respondents (80%) have been in operation for at least 6 years and 47% have been in operation for at least 20 years. The general business outlook over the next three years was very positive (46%) or somewhat positive (41%). The top areas of need within businesses included marketing / advertising support (selected by 46% of respondents), growth in clientele (40%), and networking / partnerships (37%).

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR RECREATIONAL PLANNING

» Businesses appear to be utilizing the same methods of communication as outdoor recreationalists. However, the identified need for marketing and clientele implies a missing piece that gets outdoor enthusiasts in touch with businesses. Improving the association between local businesses and the outdoors could provide additional growth opportunities.

» A favorable short-term outlook for businesses gives them the confidence needed to explore opportunities to expand their reach, rather than focusing on maintaining or looking for ways to cut costs. Leveraging this optimism can help enhance the outdoor recreation economy throughout the Region.

» There is already a substantial realization that outdoor recreation is an important component of the overall economy. Providing businesses with identifiable areas of need may generate economic development opportunities.

E. URBAN VS. RURAL PLAN

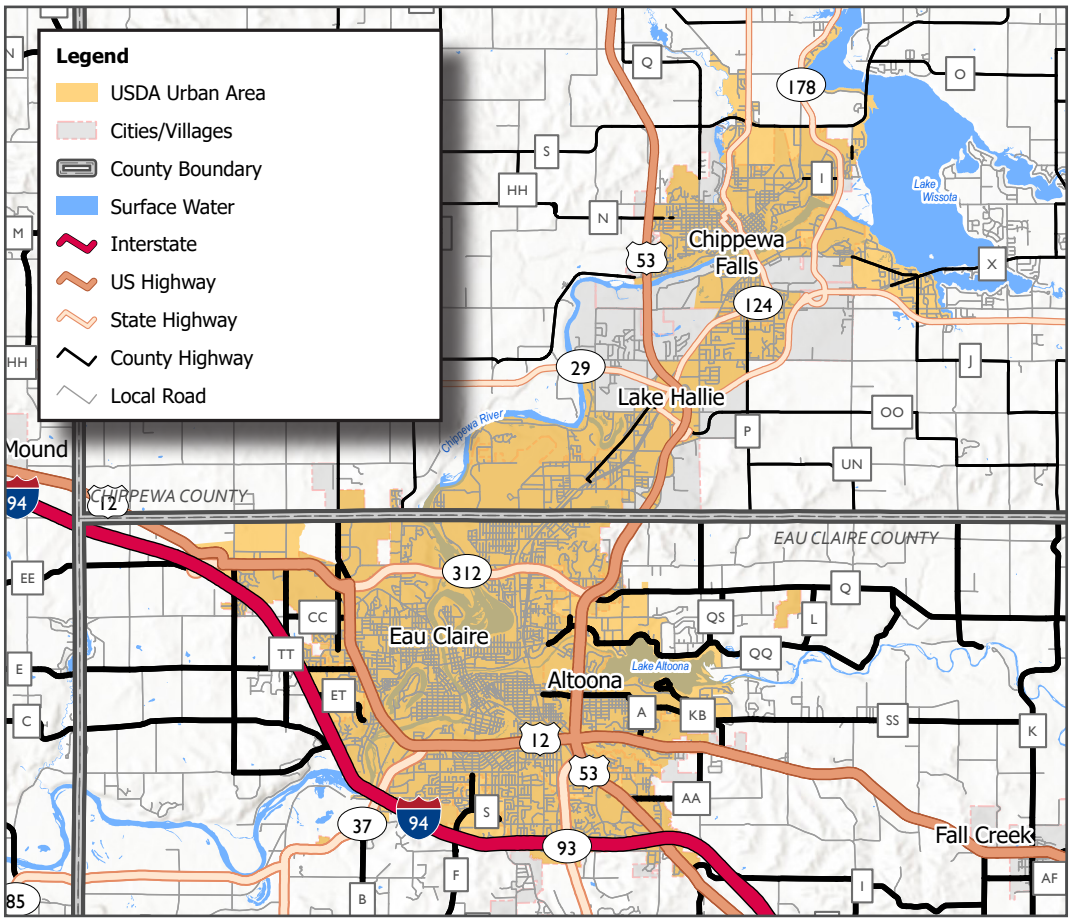
This plan received funding support from the USDA's Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) Program. The RBDG supports projects benefiting rural areas, which are areas that have populations of less than 50,000 and this plan targets those areas which have been verified as eligible rural areas using USDA's eligibility tool. These areas are characterized by low-density settlement, geographic isolation, and a historic reliance on agriculture or natural resource-based economies, aligning with the RPN's mission to foster economic development and quality of life in underserved rural regions.

Simultaneously, several partners are developing a companion plan for the Chippewa Falls-Eau Claire urban area through planning and technical assistance from the National Park Service (NPS) and its Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program. The Urban Area plan focuses on enhancing access to parks, greenways, and recreational facilities in the designated urban area.

To ensure regional cohesion, the Rural Area plan coordinates with the NPS Urban Area effort by identifying outdoor recreation facilities and business opportunities, sharing stakeholder input, or identifying complementary tourism initiatives. This division of focus ensures that rural communities benefit from USDA RPN resources while urban areas leverage NPS expertise, creating a comprehensive regional recreation strategy.

USDA Urban Area

Figure 5: *Map of the USDA Urban Area located in Chippewa and Eau Claire Counties.*



SECTION II: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PLANNING AREA

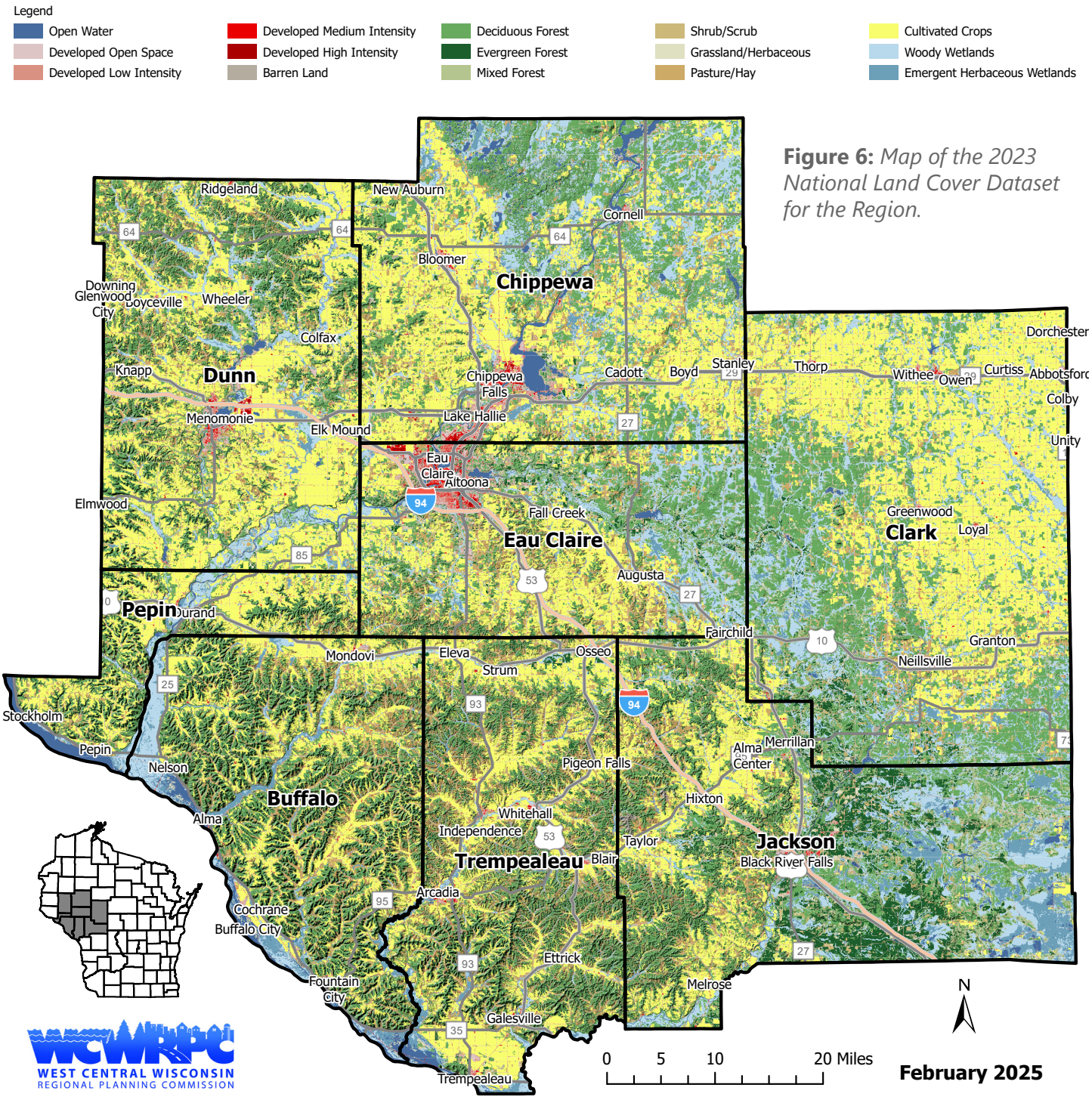


Figure 6: *Map of the 2023 National Land Cover Dataset for the Region.*

A. PHYSICAL SETTING

The eight counties of western Wisconsin—Trempealeau, Pepin, Jackson, Eau Claire, Dunn, Clark, Chippewa, and Buffalo—collectively form a region characterized by diverse topography, abundant natural resources, and a strong agricultural heritage. Spanning west-central Wisconsin, this area encompasses a mix of rural landscapes and small urban centers, with populations ranging from Pepin County's modest 7,372 to Eau Claire County's larger hub (106,328), anchored by the City of Eau Claire. The Region covers a vast expanse of roughly 6,500 square miles, featuring a blend of rolling uplands, steep valleys, and riverine systems, much of it shaped by the unique Driftless Area geography. This unglaciated terrain, prominent in counties like Trempealeau, Pepin, Dunn, and Buffalo, defines the western and southern portions with its dramatic coulees, ridges, and bluffs, while the eastern counties, such as Clark and parts of Chippewa, transition into flatter, glaciated plains or sandy outwash areas.

Agriculture dominates land use across the Region and with Pasture/Hay and Cultivated Crops comprising nearly 42% of land cover, exemplifying the prevalence of farming, particularly dairy, crop, and livestock operations. Forests, often hardwood or pine, cover significant portions of the Region—interspersed on steeper slopes or less arable soils, supporting timber production, wildlife habitat, and scenic beauty. Grassland, Forest (mixed, evergreen, deciduous), and Shrub/Scrub comprise 35.6% of land cover, followed by Wetlands (woody, emergent herbaceuous) at 13.6%. To further illustrate the rural character of the 8-county Region, development combined (low, medium, high intensity) only constitutes roughly 2.6% of land cover.

Figure 7: *Wisconsin farmland in summer.*



The Region's water resources are equally vital, with major rivers like the Mississippi, Chippewa, Black, and Trempealeau carving through the landscape, feeding numerous streams, man-made lakes, and wetlands that enhance biodiversity and recreation. Accessibility is a strength, with highways such as I-94, U.S. 53, and State Highways 35 and 95 linking these counties to urban centers like La Crosse, Eau Claire, and the twin cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota.

Highlights and Themes

Driftless Area Influence: A defining feature of the Region, the Driftless Area—spanning Trempealeau, Pepin, Dunn, Buffalo, and parts of Jackson—creates a rugged, non-glaciated topography of steep valleys, bluffs, and coulees. This contrasts with the flatter, glaciated eastern counties like Clark and Chippewa, highlighting a geological divide within the Region. The Driftless Area's karst features, such as limestone bedrock and sinkholes, add ecological uniqueness.

Scenic Beauty and Recreation: The combination of rolling uplands, deep valleys, and river systems makes the Region a haven for outdoor enthusiasts. Trempealeau's coulee region, Pepin's Lake Pepin bluffs, and Buffalo's tundra swan migration at Rieck's Lake Park exemplify the area's picturesque landscapes and wildlife opportunities. Hunting (deer, turkey, waterfowl), fishing (trout, warm water species), and trapping thrive due to diverse habitats

Agricultural Backbone: Farming is a unifying thread, with significant acreage dedicated to crops, dairy, and livestock. However, challenges like steep slopes and poor soils in areas of Trempealeau, Jackson, and Dunn limit cultivation to valley floors and ridge tops, while forests fill the gaps, blending economic and ecological roles.

Water Resources: Rivers and lakes are a lifeline, from the Mississippi River forming natural borders in Trempealeau, Pepin, and Buffalo, to the Black River bisecting Jackson and Clark, and the Chippewa River shaping Dunn and Pepin. These waterways support ecosystems, recreation, and historical development, with features like Lake Wazee (Jackson's deepest inland lake) and Lake Pepin (Wisconsin's second largest) standing out.

Rural Character with Urban Access: Predominantly rural—most counties have few communities exceeding 2,500 residents—the Region benefits from proximity to urban hubs like Eau Claire and La Crosse, facilitated by a robust highway network. Black River Falls (Jackson), Chippewa Falls (Chippewa), and Eau Claire serve as local anchors.

Ecological Diversity: The Region straddles ecological landscapes like the Western Coulee and Ridges (steep, forested terrain) and Central Sand Plains (sandy, flat expanses in eastern Jackson and Chippewa), fostering varied flora, fauna, and land uses. Conservation efforts, such as the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge and Beaver Creek Reserve, underscore the area's ecological significance.

In summary, the Region weaves together a tapestry of rural charm, natural splendor, and agricultural vitality, shaped by the Driftless Area's rugged imprint and enriched by rivers and forests. Themes of scenic beauty, ecological diversity, and a balance of isolation and connectivity stand out as hallmarks of this Region.

B. POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS

2018-2022 American Community Survey (ACS) Population Summary

The Region has a **total population of 324,204** in 127,767 households, and 140,589 housing units with the following key demographic metrics related to outdoor recreation planning:

Population and Household Characteristics: Approximately 27% of households (34,468) include individuals under 18, indicating a significant youth population that could benefit from family-oriented recreational facilities like playgrounds, trails, and sports fields. The 65+ population (57,169, 17.6% of total) is largely living in households (96.2%), with 63.4% in family households, suggesting a need for accessible, low-impact recreational options such as walking paths and community parks to support active aging. Nonfamily households (38.6%) and single-person households (29.8%) are prevalent, pointing to demand for individual or small-group activities like hiking or biking trails.

Education and Youth Engagement: Of the 313,650 individuals aged 3+, 25.5% (79,853) are enrolled in school, with significant numbers in grades 1-12 (47,275 total). This underscores the potential for outdoor education programs and school-linked recreation activities. College students (22,300 undergraduates) could drive demand for adventure-based recreation, such as rock climbing or kayaking.

Economic and Employment Context: The poverty rate is 10.8% (13,772 households), with higher poverty among nonfamily (7.1%) and female-headed households (1.5%), suggesting that affordable or free recreational opportunities are critical for equitable access. The workforce (163,332 workers aged 16+) primarily drives alone (77.6%) with an average commute of 21.3 minutes, but 9.6% work from home, indicating potential interest in nearby recreational amenities for work-life balance. Veterans (18,377, 7.3% of adults) may benefit from therapeutic outdoor programs.

Health and Accessibility: Health insurance coverage is high (94.9% overall), but 24.2% of households include at least one person with a disability, emphasizing the need for ADA-compliant facilities like

accessible trails and restrooms. The 65+ population, with 74.4% having multiple insurance types, may prioritize safe, low-cost recreational spaces to maintain health.

Technology and Connectivity: Internet access is widespread (86.7% of households with subscriptions), facilitating promotion of recreation opportunities through digital platforms. However, 11.3% of households lack internet, suggesting a need for physical signage and community outreach to ensure inclusivity.

Transportation and Access: Most workers (77.6%) drive alone, but 3.5% walk and 0.7% bike to work, indicating potential for multi-use trails connecting residential and employment areas. Short commute times (59% under 20 minutes) suggest residents may prefer local recreation sites for convenience.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity: The population aged 5+ is predominantly English-speaking (94.9%), with small percentages speaking Spanish (2.2%) and other languages. Recreation planning should include multilingual signage and culturally relevant programming to engage diverse groups, particularly the 5.1% speaking non-English languages.

Income and Assistance: Social Security (34%) and retirement income (25.2%) are common, reflecting an older demographic with potential daytime availability for recreation. Low public assistance (1.8%) and SNAP usage (10.2%) indicate moderate economic stability, but cost-sensitive recreation options remain important for lower-income groups.

Key Implications for Recreation Planning

Youth and Family Focus: Develop family-friendly parks, trails, and outdoor education programs to engage the 27% of households with children.

Senior Accessibility: Prioritize low-impact, accessible facilities for the 17.6% aged 65+, such as paved trails and benches.

Affordability and Equity: Ensure free or low-cost access to address the 10.8% poverty rate, particularly for nonfamily and female-headed households.

Disability Inclusion: Incorporate ADA-compliant features to serve the 24.2% of households with disabilities.

Local Connectivity: Enhance trail networks to support the 3.5% walking and 0.7% biking to work, leveraging short commute times.

Digital and Physical Outreach: Use digital promotion for the 86.7% with internet while ensuring physical signage for the 11.3% without.

Veteran and Therapeutic Amenities: Provide therapeutic outdoor programs for the 7.3% veteran population.

Cultural Sensitivity: Include multilingual and culturally relevant programming to engage the 5.1% non-English-speaking population.

C. RECREATION EXPENDITURES

The 2024 Recreation Expenditures report for the Region, prepared by Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI), provides critical insights into consumer spending patterns relevant to a regional outdoor recreation plan. With a 2024 estimated median household income of $73,866 (projected to rise to $82,756 by 2029), the Region demonstrates a solid economic foundation for recreational investments. The Spending Potential Index (SPI) compares local spending to a national average of 100, highlighting areas of strength and opportunity for outdoor recreation development.

Key Spending Categories for Outdoor Recreation

Recreational Vehicles and Fees ($25.3M, SPI 97): Significant spending on boats, trailers, campers, and RVs ($10.97M, SPI 104) and their rentals ($6.29M, SPI 115) indicates strong interest in camping, boating, and RV-based recreation. Camp fees ($5.76M, SPI 78) and docking/landing fees ($2.25M, SPI 85) further support demand for water-based and campground facilities.

Sports, Recreation, and Exercise Equipment ($33.75M, SPI 84): Notable expenditures on bicycles ($10.07M, SPI 95), hunting and fishing equipment ($8.22M, SPI 101), and exercise equipment ($9.58M, SPI 68) reflect enthusiasm for cycling, hunting, fishing, and fitness activities. Lower spending on camping ($1.49M, SPI 68) and water sports equipment ($1.50M, SPI 90) suggests targeted opportunities for growth in these areas.

Entertainment/Recreation Fees and Admissions ($86.64M, SPI 79): Spending on participant sports fees ($14.40M, SPI 82), recreational lessons ($15.20M, SPI 67), and social/recreation/health club memberships ($33.05M, SPI 83) indicates demand for organized sports, skill-based activities, and fitness facilities. Admission to sporting events ($9.90M, SPI 95) and parks/museums ($3.74M, SPI 76) underscores interest in spectator sports and nature-based attractions.

Toys/Games/Crafts/Hobbies ($23.35M, SPI 97): High spending on playground equipment ($1.63M, SPI 165) highlights a need for family-friendly recreational spaces, particularly for households with children.

Photographic Equipment and Supplies ($6.83M, SPI 85): Spending on photographer fees and equipment ($3.57M, SPI 86) suggests potential for scenic trails, parks, and wildlife areas that attract photography enthusiasts.

Implications for Recreation Planning

Camping and RV Facilities: High spending on RVs and camp fees supports investment in campgrounds, RV parks, and boat launches to cater to camping and boating enthusiasts.

Cycling and Trails: Strong bicycle spending justifies expanding multi-use trails and bike paths, especially to connect residential and recreational areas.

Hunting and Fishing: Above-average spending on hunting and fishing equipment calls for enhanced access to public lands, fishing piers, and wildlife management areas.

Family-Oriented Spaces: Exceptional spending on playground equipment highlights the need for family-friendly parks and play areas to serve the Region's 81,156 families.

Figure 8: *Travel trailer camping in the woods.*



Organized Sports and Fitness: Significant expenditures on sports fees, lessons, and club memberships suggest demand for sports fields, fitness centers, and instructional programs.

Nature and Photography: Spending on park admissions and photographic equipment supports developing scenic trails, wildlife viewing areas, and nature preserves to attract visitors and photographers.

Economic Growth: Rising median household income (from $73,866 to $82,756 by 2029) suggests increasing capacity for recreational spending, supporting long-term investments in high-quality facilities.

Strategic Considerations

- Prioritize infrastructure like campgrounds, trails, and playgrounds to align with high-demand categories (RV, cycling, family recreation).
- Address lower SPI areas (e.g., camping equipment, recreational lessons) through marketing, rentals, or beginner programs to boost participation.
- Leverage family and adult demographics to balance facilities for youth (playgrounds, sports) and adults (fitness, hunting, photography).
- Ensure affordability and accessibility to align with the Region's economic profile and support equitable access to recreation.

This expenditure data underscores the Region's strong potential for outdoor recreation development, particularly in camping, cycling, hunting, fishing, and family-oriented activities, guiding a plan that enhances infrastructure and programming to meet resident and visitor needs.

D. OUTDOOR RECREATION AS AN ECONOMIC DRIVER

Statewide Economic Impact

Outdoor recreation is not just a pastime in Wisconsin—it's a robust economic engine that strengthens the state's GDP, generates significant employment, and attracts billions in tourism spending. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, outdoor recreation contributed $9.8 billion to Wisconsin's GDP in 2022, a substantial increase from $8.7 billion in 2021. This 13% year-over-year growth places Wisconsin among the top states for outdoor recreation output. Key statewide data includes:

Figure 9: *Loopy's, Chippewa County.*



- GDP Contribution: Outdoor recreation represented 2.1% of the state's total GDP.
- Jobs: The sector supported 94,042 jobs, or 3.1% of Wisconsin's private-sector employment, representing a 4.8% increase from the previous year.
- Wages: Employees earned $4.7 billion in wages and salaries in the outdoor recreation economy.
- Tourism Revenue: The industry generated nearly $3 billion in travel spending, an increase of 14.2% over the prior year. Local trips for outdoor activities also rose by 8.7%.

These indicators not only reflect the demand for outdoor activities but also validate the sector's importance in supporting household income and local business vitality across the state.

Eight-County Regional Focus

The Region offers a diverse landscape of rolling hills, rivers, forests, and parklands. This natural abundance fuels a strong outdoor recreation culture and increasingly, a coordinated regional economic development strategy.

Economic Contributions and Potential

Although granular county-level outdoor recreation data is still being developed, available economic estimates and comparable models provide insight. A study of Wisconsin's Mississippi River Corridor—home to several of these counties—reported:

- **1,261 jobs** supported by outdoor recreation.
- **$29 million** in labor income generated.
- **$45 million** in added economic value.
- **$84 million** in total industry output from outdoor recreation activities.

In addition, **Eau Claire County** alone reports more than **$400 million in direct visitor spending** each year, a significant portion of which comes from outdoor-based tourism. This includes river kayaking, cycling trails, cross-country skiing, fishing, snowmobiling, and hiking destinations such as Lowes Creek County Park, Beaver Creek Reserve, and the Chippewa River Trail.

Trail Systems and Waterways

The Region is a prime location for outdoor infrastructure investments due to its strong trail systems and access to navigable rivers. Popular attractions include:

- **The Chippewa River Trail** (Eau Claire, Dunn, Pepin counties)
- **Levis Mound Mountain Bike Trails** (Clark County)
- **Perrot State Park and Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge** (Trempealeau County)
- **Black River State Forest** (Jackson County)

Investments in these areas support outdoor tourism, increase visitation from metro areas such as Minneapolis-St. Paul and Madison, and offer long-term economic returns via job creation and local business stimulation.

Collaborative Regional Strategy

The Region is leveraging its participation in the **Rural Partners Network (RPN)**, a federal initiative coordinated through the USDA, to build unified strategies around economic development and recreation infrastructure. RPN participation has opened the door to technical assistance, federal funding access, and inter-agency collaboration to grow the recreation economy. Local stakeholders are currently building a **regional outdoor recreation plan** focused on workforce development, infrastructure investment, and branding the Region as a recreation destination.

Public engagement is also central to the Region's strategy. Community surveys have asked residents to identify the top activities and infrastructure needs, including trail connectivity, signage, ADA accessibility, and riverfront improvements. This approach ensures the outdoor economy grows in a way that reflects community values while attracting visitors and economic investment.

E. OUTDOOR CULTURAL EVENTS & NON-TRADITIONAL RECREATION CENTERS

Concerts, festivals, rodeos, and other cultural events are a common occurrence throughout the Region. Throughout the planning process, stakeholders and residents highlighted these events in their outdoor activity interests. While not traditionally considered outdoor recreation, these events and activities align with the interests of outdoor enthusiasts.

An excellent example of this alignment is through the concert venues in the Region. Many of these sites incorporate campgrounds to provide lodging for multi-day events. Concert attendees are given a camping experience and may feel encouraged to consider doing so again, but at a county site or state park.

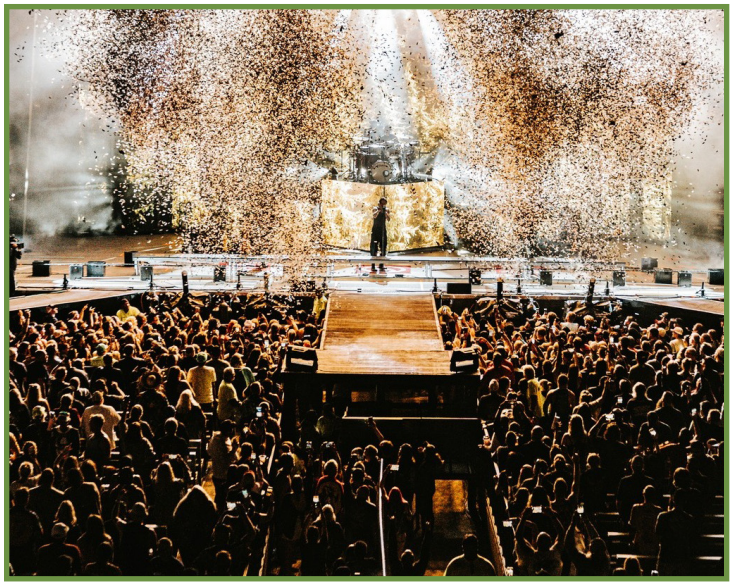
These cultural events and activities broaden opportunities for people to be outdoors and fosters an appreciation for the natural environment. They should be valued as gateways through which people can be introduced to the opportunities and enjoyment provided by being in nature. Identifying and fostering these transitional activities that blend experiences with the outdoors is essential to integrating outdoor recreation as a core element of the regional culture and economy.

This plan identifies some of these non-traditional activities for consideration, assessment, and development. Agricultural Tourism and Outdoor Cultural Spaces are given their own sub-sections in Section IV. As this plan is implemented and reconsidered, additional activities may become apparent and incorporated.

Figure 10: *Jackson County Fair & Rodeo.*



Figure 11: *Rock Fest, Cadott WI.*



SECTION III: RECREATION ASSET & BUSINESS INVENTORY



A. INVENTORY & ASSET MAPPING

Purpose of the Inventory

A central task of the Regional Outdoor Recreation Development Plan was to establish a clear, data-driven picture of the Region's recreation assets and related businesses. While each county maintained its own records, there had never been a comprehensive inventory across the eight counties. Without this baseline, it was impossible to identify regional strengths, gaps, or opportunities for collaboration.

The inventory process sought to:

- Document existing outdoor recreation assets in every county.
- Assess the condition, accessibility, and usage of those assets.
- Map the geographic distribution of assets in relation to communities, businesses, and population centers.
- Integrate business-related data to highlight the economic ecosystem connected to recreation.

Methodology

The inventory combined quantitative data collection with qualitative input:

Data Compilation: County recreation plans (CORPs), state DNR databases, and local parks records were reviewed to compile a starting list of trails, parks, forests, waterways, and access points.

GIS Mapping: Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), each asset was mapped to show its location, connectivity, and proximity to communities. Layers were added to visualize businesses such as outfitters, campgrounds, restaurants, and lodging.

Community Feedback: Survey respondents provided valuable insights into which assets were most used, where gaps existed, and what improvements were needed.

Business Integration: County EDCs and chambers contributed information on businesses tied to recreation, helping to reveal the broader economic landscape.

Outdoor Recreation Assets Identified

The planning team attempted to compile and identify as many outdoor recreation assets as the project timeline would allow. While there is still a lot of work to do in order to identify all recreation assets across the Region, this mapping exercise was an important first step to:

- Identify and map known recreation assets and businesses in the Region.
- Assess and determine which assets are of regional significance.
- Evaluate the proximity of outdoor recreation related businesses and opportunities that support regionally significant assets and the outdoor recreation economy.

In total, over 1,100 recreational assets and 2,000 businesses were mapped. This was accomplished through a combination of data acquisition from project partners, data development by the project team, and via public input from the round of open houses held in each county throughout the Region.

For business assets specifically, North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes were used to identify and map them across the Region. This was accomplished using the Community Analyst web app developed by Envrionmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI).

The following list of outdoor recreation businesses assets were mapped using a combination of acquired spatial data, information gathered from project partners and the public via project open houses, and using relevant North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes.

BUSINESS ASSETS

- Agricultural Tourism (Cranberry Farm, Creamery, Dinner Farm, Retail Farm, Farmer's Market, Greenhouse, Maple Syrup, Orchard/U-Pick, Winery)
- Campgrounds
- Food & Grocery Stores
- Gas Stations
- Hospitality
- Restaurant, Bars & Clubs
- Sporting Goods

RECREATION ASSETS/SITES

- Archery
- ATV Trail
- Birding
- Boat Ramp
- Canoe or Kayak Launch
- Climbing
- Cross-County Ski Trail
- Disc Golf
- Downhill Skiing
- Equestrian Trail
- Federal Public Hunting Units
- Fishing Access
- Fishing Shore or Pier
- Golf Course
- Hiking or Walking Trail
- Historic Downtown
- Historic Marker
- Motorcycle Trail
- Mountain Bike Trail
- Museum
- Outdoor Art Installation
- Outdoor Ice Rink
- Outdoor Sports
- Public Lands (Federal, State, County, Local)
- Rustic Road
- Scenic Overlook
- Scenic Stop
- Scuba
- Shore Fishing Site
- Skydiving
- Snowmobile Trail
- Snowshoe Trail
- State Park
- State Trail
- Surface Water (Lakes, Rivers, Trout Streams)
- Swimming (Beach, Park, Resort)
- Swimming Pool
- Target Range
- Visitor Center
- Water Trail
- Wayside

Business Assets

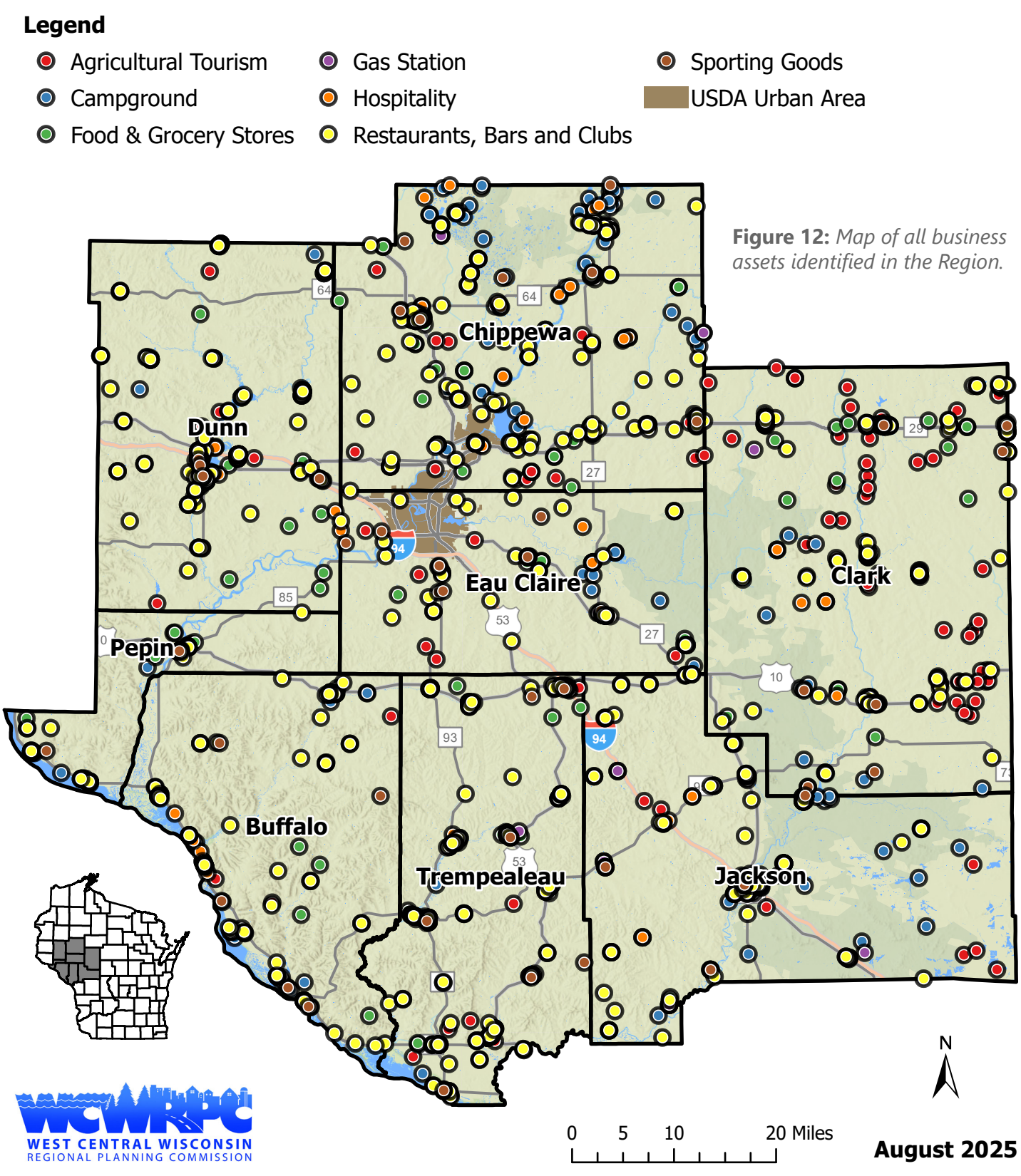


Figure 12: *Map of all business assets identified in the Region.*

Heat Map of Business Assets

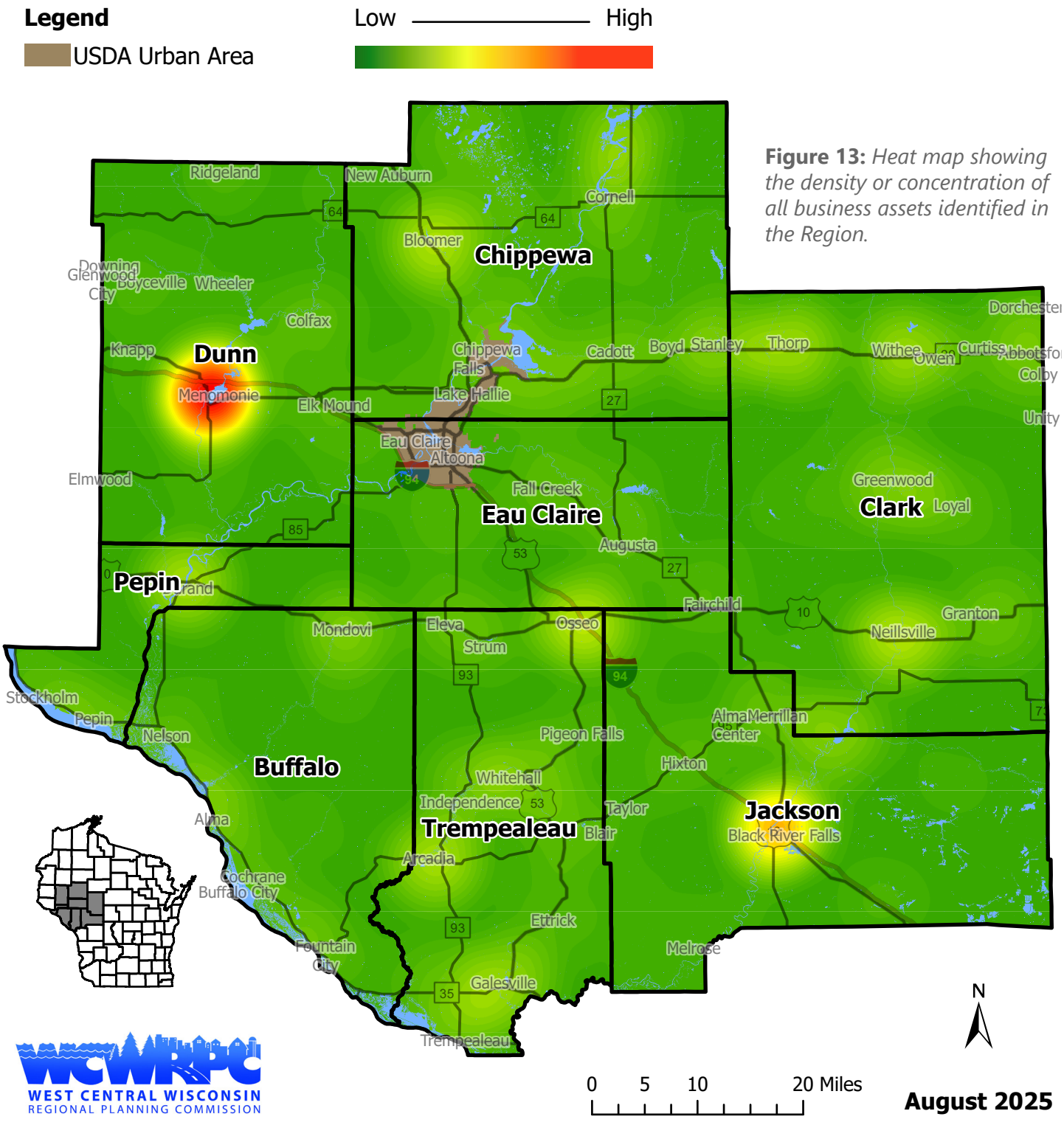


Figure 13: *Heat map showing the density or concentration of all business assets identified in the Region.*

Outdoor Recreation Assets

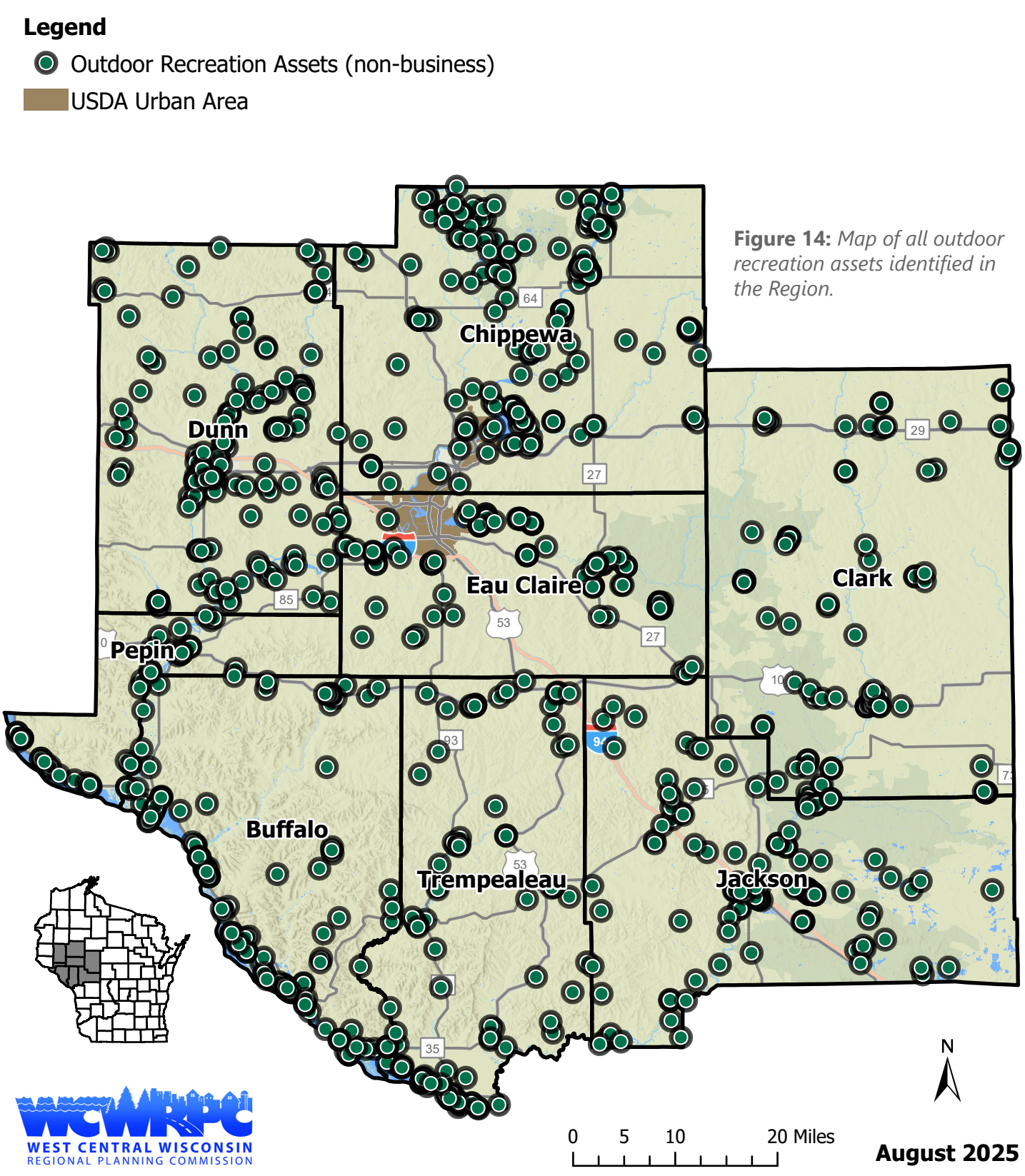


Figure 14: *Map of all outdoor recreation assets identified in the Region.*

Heat Map of Outdoor Recreation Assets

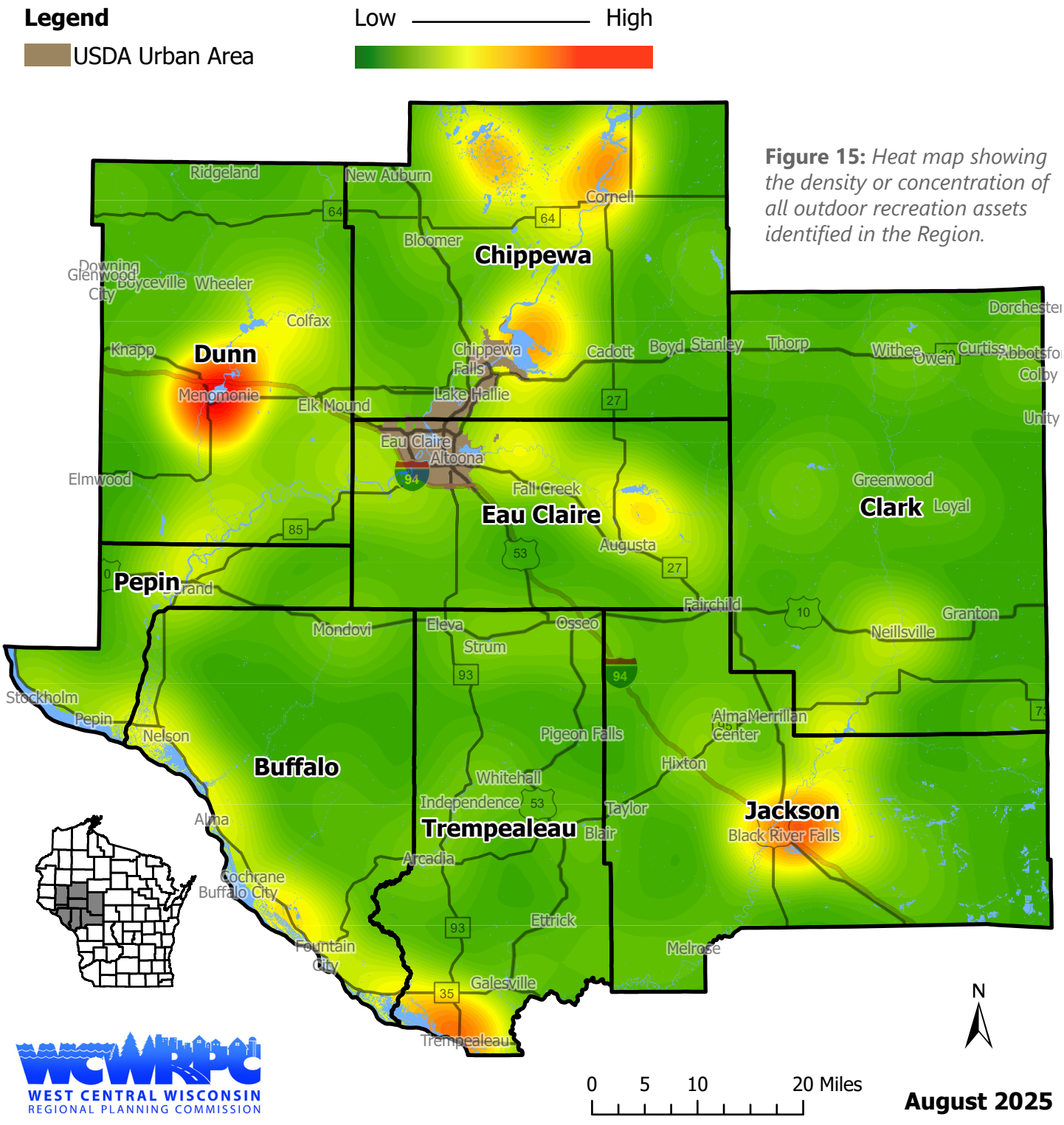


Figure 15: *Heat map showing the density or concentration of all outdoor recreation assets identified in the Region.*

Findings: Regional Strengths

The inventory confirmed that Western Wisconsin is richly endowed with recreation opportunities, ranging from state parks and rivers to local trails and community parks. Key strengths include:

Extensive Trail Systems: Over 800 miles of trails were cataloged across the eight counties, including portions of state trails such as the Chippewa River State Trail and Buffalo River State Trail. Trails support biking, hiking, snowmobiling, and multi-use access.

Water Resources: The Mississippi River, Chippewa River, Black River, and numerous inland lakes provide abundant opportunities for fishing, boating, paddling, and swimming.

Public Lands: Large tracts of state and county forests offer hunting, camping, and wildlife viewing.

Gateway Communities: Cities and towns such as Black River Falls, Menomonie, Pepin, and Durand already function as entry points to regional recreation. Their existing tourism infrastructure makes them natural hubs for future investment.

Findings: Gaps and Challenges

Equally important, the mapping revealed significant gaps and challenges:

Connectivity Issues: Many trail systems stop short of connecting across county lines. Missing links prevent the Region from marketing itself as an interconnected network.

Underserved Communities: Smaller rural communities, particularly in Clark and Pepin counties, lack developed recreation infrastructure, leaving residents with fewer options.

Condition Variability: While some trails and facilities are in excellent condition, others are aging, poorly signed, or not ADA accessible. This inconsistency limits the Region's ability to present a unified visitor experience.

Business Clusters & Voids: Businesses supporting recreation (lodging, outfitters, restaurants) cluster around certain hubs but are sparse in other areas, limiting visitor options and economic impact.

Implications for Future Planning

The inventory provides a roadmap for action:

Invest in Connectivity: Completing missing trail links and aligning signage will create a seamless regional trail experience.

Target Underserved Areas: Counties with fewer assets should be prioritized for new investments to promote equity and balance.

Upgrade Facilities: Bringing all assets to a baseline standard of safety, maintenance, and accessibility will improve user satisfaction and marketability.

Support Business Growth: Identifying "voids" in business services helps direct support for new outfitters, lodging, and dining establishments.

Visualization & Mapping

A set of GIS-based maps was produced as part of the project. These maps illustrate:

Regional Trail Network: Showing gaps, overlaps, and opportunities for linkage.

Water Access Points: Boat landings, fishing sites, and paddling routes.

Community Gateways: Towns positioned as entry points into recreation corridors.

Business Clusters: Concentrations of recreation-related businesses around trailheads, rivers, and parks.

These maps serve not only as planning tools but also as marketing assets, allowing visitors to plan trips with ease. In the future, the maps will be integrated into an interactive online platform with filters for activity type, difficulty level, and nearby amenities.

A Foundation for Growth

The inventory and mapping process created the first shared database of outdoor recreation resources for the Region. This achievement provides the baseline for every other recommendation in the plan, from infrastructure priorities to business development and branding.

Stakeholders described the inventory as “a turning point” for the Region. For county planners, it offered the ability to compare assets across jurisdictions for the first time. For local business owners, it demonstrated where opportunities exist to expand services near popular recreation corridors. For community advocates, it revealed underserved areas that can now be prioritized for equitable investment.

By making these assets visible—literally on the map—the Region now has the evidence it needs to advocate for funding, attract private investment, and coordinate across county lines.

Wisconsin’s Outdoor Recreation Industry: Statewide Strength and Regional Opportunity

Wisconsin’s outdoor recreation industry is a powerful economic driver and an essential part of the state’s identity. In 2023, the outdoor recreation economy contributed a record **$11.2 billion** to Wisconsin’s GDP and supported **96,867 jobs**, representing 3.2% of the state’s total private-sector employment. This growth reflects Wisconsin’s strong integration of manufacturing, recreation access, and natural assets.

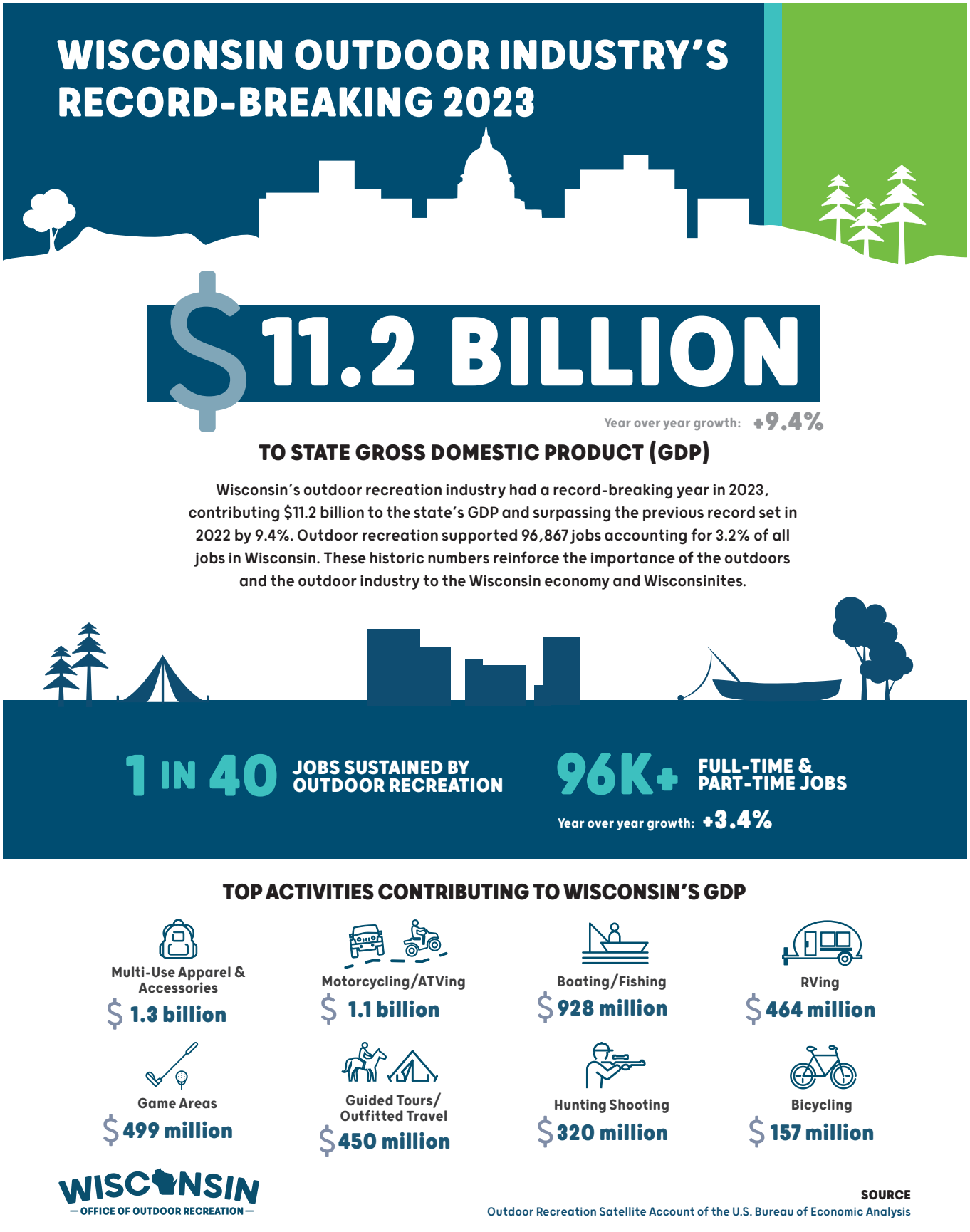
The state is home to several iconic outdoor-focused manufacturers, including **Trek Bicycles**, headquartered in Waterloo, WI, which is a global leader in cycling innovation. J**ohn Deere’s Horicon Works**, located in Dodge County, produces lawn and utility vehicles, many designed for outdoor property management and recreation. Additionally, **Sturm, Ruger & Co.**, one of the nation’s leading firearms manufacturers, operates a production facility in Prescott, WI, supplying outdoor sporting goods to national markets.

In western Wisconsin, the Region boasts significant natural recreation infrastructure. Trail networks like Levis Mound in Clark County support mountain biking and Nordic skiing, while Eau Claire County has invested in urban trail connectivity and bike culture, positioning the Region as a recreation and livability hub.

The Region also supports a variety of outdoor recreation businesses and manufacturers. For instance, **Trempy Outdoors** in Trempealeau County offers camping and ATV services, catering to outdoor enthusiasts. In Chippewa County, **Chippewa View Hunting Central** provides guided hunting experiences, contributing to the local economy and promoting sustainable wildlife practices. Additionally, **Xtra Recreation Storage** in Pepin County offers storage solutions for recreational vehicles and equipment, supporting the needs of outdoor adventurers.

With access to the Mississippi and Chippewa Rivers, Black River State Forest, and tourism-friendly towns like Pepin and Trempealeau, the Region is poised for economic development through outdoor recreation. Combined with state-leading manufacturers, this eight-county area offers a compelling blend of natural beauty, recreation infrastructure, and outdoor industry potential.

Figure 16: *State of Wisconsin 2023 Tourism Figures, Source: Wisconsin Department of Toursim.*

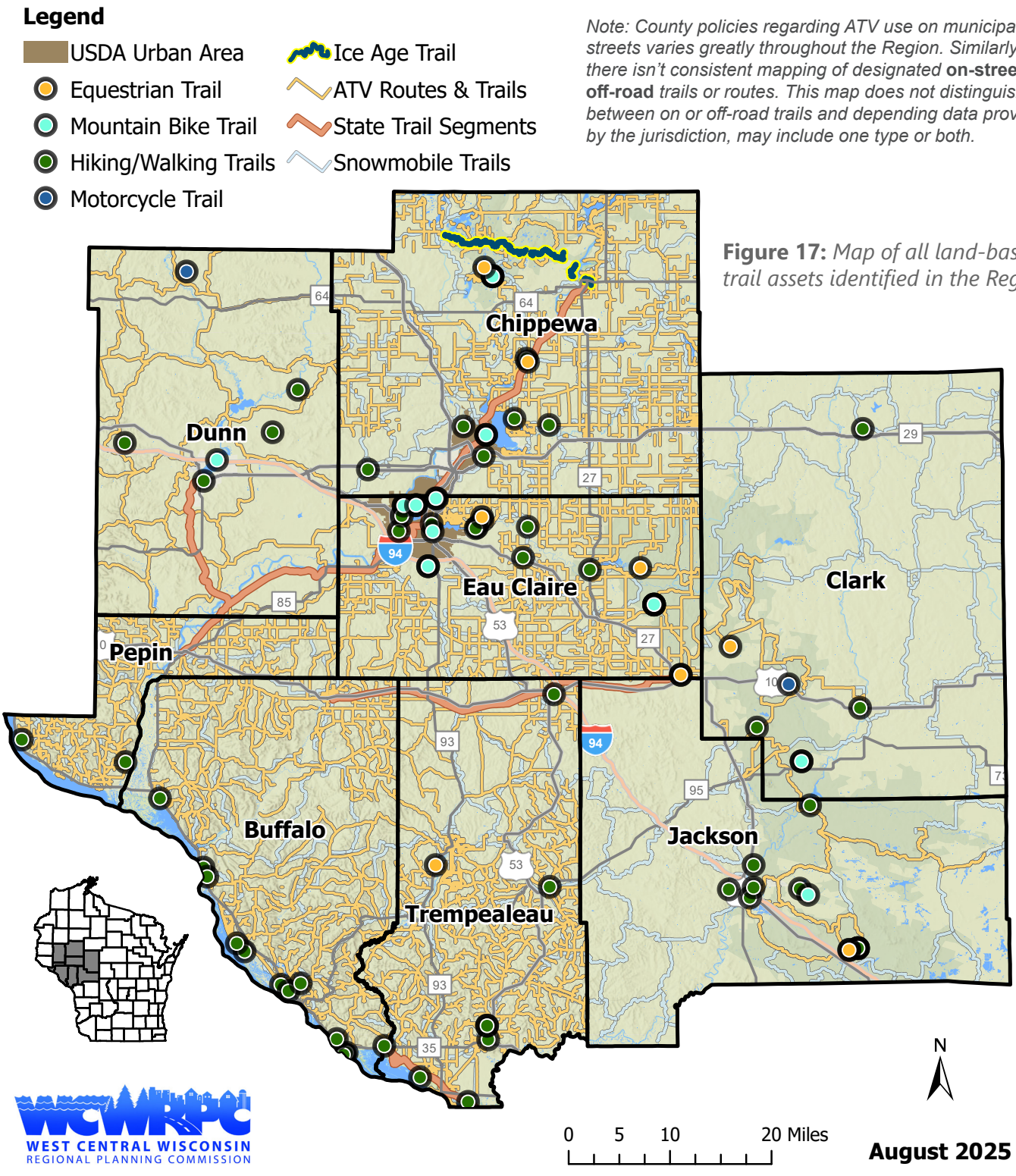


SECTION IV: RECREATIONAL THEMES & NEEDS ASSESSMENT



A. LAND-BASED TRAIL SYSTEMS

The public input process identified trails as the most essential asset for outdoor recreation. When considering all the possible activities that can occur on trails (biking, hiking, horseback riding, running, riding ATVs/UTVs, walking,) they become the most popular and sought after amenity for outdoor recreation in the Region.



Note: County policies regarding ATV use on municipal streets varies greatly throughout the Region. Similarly, there isn't consistent mapping of designated **on-street** *vs.* **off-road** *trails or routes. This map does not distinguish between on or off-road trails and depending data provided by the jurisdiction, may include one type or both.*

Figure 17: *Map of all land-based trail assets identified in the Region.*

REGIONAL TRAIL CORRIDORS (RAIL & OTHER STATE TRAILS)

Trail corridors are the highway system for alternative transportation. They provide a transportation aspect not found in other recreational trails assessed in this plan (except for river trails). These corridors are significant in their ability to link multiple communities with dedicated off-street infrastructure that is attractive to hikers and cyclists. They also provide economic opportunities for the various communities along the path, as evidenced by case studies across the country.

Wisconsin DNR's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) identifies sixty-nine state trail corridors totaling 5,562.43 miles of potential trails. These corridors primarily follow abandoned or existing railroad lines. As a result, they are in various states of development, with some fully developed and others requiring alternative route planning as the underlying rail lines are actively utilized.

Existing trail corridors are maintained by DNR, County Parks Department, and City or Village staff, with some trails involving all three levels of government. Coordination between and support among these various groups is essential to the ongoing success of trail corridors.

Regionally Significant Assets

There are twelve state trail corridors within the Region. Corridors data included the total mileage identified in the SCORP; the mileage within the Region; and the number of cities, villages, and towns the corridor runs through, separating those within the Region from those outside the Region. Figure 23 shows the mapped location of each corridor within the Region. These corridors, including their portions outside the Region, account for 1,527.6 miles of proposed state trails (roughly 27.5% of the entire state's mileage), with 618.49 miles falling within the Region (40.5% of the corridor mileage). Two of the corridors, 48 and 51, fall entirely within the Region.

The regionally significant corridors are those that are already active with developed mileage and are listed in Figure 18 and mapped in Figure 19.

Figure 18: *List of regionally significant trail corridors.*

Corridor Number	Trail Name	Miles Developed	Miles In Region	Total State Miles Proposed
12	Great River State Trail	11.47 (1.72 extra loop, 13.19 total)	65.76	382.38
46	Chippewa River State Trail / Old Abe State Trail	44.90	81.09	194.12
48	Buffalo River State Trail	35.69	52.55	52.55
62	Red Cedar State Trail	14.75	40.95	93.48
63	Old Abe State Trail	18.32	32.19	63.50
NA	Ice Age Trail	24.05	88.94	1,240.98

Buffalo River State Trail

An unimproved trail open to multiple user types. The developed corridor connects Fairchild to Mondovi. It follows the Buffalo River and passes through the communities of Osseo, Strum, and Eleva. A proposed extension would run from Mondovi to Durand along U.S. Highway 10. Through discussion, we learned the trail is supported by ATV/UTV groups, but that a dedicated “Friends” group does not exist. The intermingling of user types on the trail can create issues as different groups encounter one another.

Trailheads: City of Mondovi, Village of Fairchild

Notable locations along trail: City of Osseo, Village of Eleva, Village of Strum

Chippewa River State Trail

A paved trail that ties into two other established state trails (Red Cedar, Old Abe). The Chippewa River State Trail connects the cities of Durand and Eau Claire via a scenic riverfront trail with several improved rest areas along the way. The undeveloped portion of the trail would extend the full length of the Chippewa River south to the confluence of the Mississippi, in between the villages of Nelson and Pepin. There was an established “Friends” group for the trail, but it has since gone inactive.

Trailheads: City of Durand, City of Eau Claire

Notable locations along trail: Lower Chippewa River State Natural Area

Great River State Trail

This limestone trail, located along the Mississippi River, is a portion of the longest trail corridor identified in the DNR’s SCORP. The existing trail begins outside the Region in the City of Onalaska and continues through the Village of Trempealeau to the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge. There is an active group working to continue progress on the trail, tying into the Flyway Trail out of Winona, MN and up Buffalo County towards Wabasha, MN. The Tank Creek Bridge, an important crossing between Trempealeau and Onalaska, was destroyed by a fire and in need of replacement.

(Regional) Trailhead: Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge. Village of Trempealeau

Notable (Regional) locations along trail: Upper Mississippi River Fish & Wildlife Refuge, Perrot State Park

Old Abe State Trail

The Old Abe State Trail is the longest developed trail in the Region. It is a fully paved trail corridor that connects the cities of Cornell and Eau Claire, passing through several populated areas and over Lake Wissota. In Eau Claire, it ties seamlessly into the Chippewa River State Trail. The proposed corridor continues further north, out of the Region and into Sawyer County. There is not an established “Friends” group for the Old Abe Trail.

Trailheads: City of Cornell, City of Eau Claire

Notable locations along trail: City of Chippewa Falls, Village of Lake Hallie, Jim Falls, Lake Wissota

Regionally Significant Trail Corridors



Figure 19: *Map of regionally significant trail corridors.*

Red Cedar State Trail

This trail, made of crushed stone, starts at a dedicated trailhead facility on the west side of the City of Menomonie and connects to the Chippewa River State Trail outside of the City of Durand. The trail closely follows the Red Cedar River and passes through several natural areas, allowing users to be immersed in nature. The trail corridor continues north through Menomonie as the Stokke Trail, which is paved. The Red Cedar Trail has an established "Friends" group, which helps fundraise, manage the trail, and staff the Visitor's Center.

Trailhead: City of Menomonie

Notable locations along trail: Downsville, Dunnville State Wildlife Area / Dunnville State Recreation Area & Sandbar

Ice Age Trail

The Ice Age Trail is a one thousand mile long footpath that follows the glacial ridge across the State. Some segments of the trail are incomplete, with identified "connecting routes" between segments. The trail cuts through the northeast corner of the Region, with completed and connecting segments crossing Chippewa County. Promotion, development, and maintenance of the trail is conducted by the Ice Age Trail Alliance based in Cross Plains, Wisconsin. The Alliance recognizes Ice Age Trail Communities, with the City of Cornell being the only community in the Region with that designation. The David R. Obey Ice Age Interpretive Center, located in the Chippewa Moraine, is a regional destination providing services and exhibits for visitors and hikers alike.

Trailhead: David R. Obey Ice Age Interpretive Center

Notable locations along trail: East Otter Lake Preserve, Cornell, Brunet Island State Park, Chippewa Moraine Lakes State Natural Area, Round Lake County Park

Trail Assessments

When assessing a trail corridor system, certain amenities were deemed essential:

- Restrooms
- Access to drinking water
- Shelters (natural or built)
- Garbage and/or recycling
- Benches
- Dedicated parking facilities

These amenities offer greater accessibility to the trail, while providing trail-users with opportunities to take a break and dispose of any waste. These amenities should be provided at regular intervals throughout the corridor and at both ends of the trail.

Public access to a trail map is also a necessity. Varied formats and locations provide the greatest access, whether it be available via informational kiosks on the trail, within nearby communities, printed, or online. Providing a physical format of the map is important, as cellular service can be limited in remote locations along some trails.

Additionally, signage identifying permitted users, rules, etiquette, regulations, warnings, wayfinding, and mile markers should be placed well throughout the trail. These signs both inform users of what is allowed on the trail and direct users to attractions that may lie outside of the trail.

Community Assessments

In many cases, trail services are provided by the communities along the trails, which can also provide supporting services that increase interest and comfort for trail users. Programs recognizing trail friendly communities have been established across the country. The planning team feels the Region, and the State of Wisconsin, would benefit from the establishment of a formal Trail Towns program. In conjunction with a trail assessment, the team developed a community assessment following guides such as the Northern Michigan Trail Town Guide and the Progress Fund's Trail Town Assessment.

Based upon perceived levels of user need, the planning team identified two types of communities: Hubs and Stops. Communities with two or more trail systems running through or nearby were classified as Hubs, while those with only one running through or nearby were classified as stops. Hubs serve as the basecamp for a visitor who can enjoy a few different excursions over a longer stay, while Stops would provide the daily, and occasional overnight, needs of a user who will continue along the same trail. The levels of service required in a Hub would need to be higher than those of a Stop, because the Hub would need to provide a visitor with multiple nights of entertainment when they are not traversing trails.

Within the rural area, there were a total of 9 Trail Hub communities and 36 Trail Stop Communities. Trail Stop communities were assessed based on five amenity types for trail users. Trail Hub communities were assessed based on the same five amenities as well as thirteen additional amenities. In all, eighteen amenities were assessed, and communities were given a score based on how many of the corresponding amenities they possessed.

The amenities assessed for Hub and Stop communities were:

- Grocery Store (excluding a gas station or convenience store)
- Hotel/Other Lodging
- Restaurant
- Gas Station
- ATM

The additional amenities assessed for Hub communities were:

- Specialty Food (Ice Cream Parlor, Pizza, etc.)
- Bar/Tavern/Brewery
- Emergency Medical Services
- Pharmacy/Drug Store
- Hardware Store
- Bike Repair
- Gift Shop
- Laundromat
- Bank
- Bookstore
- Public Restrooms
- Public Wi-Fi
- Outdoor Seating/Benches

The following two figures include the Trail Stop and Trail Hub assessments and their respective scores for each community based on the amenities above.

Figure 20: *Trail Stop Community Assessment.*

Community	County	Grocery Store	Hotel/ Lodging	Restaurant	Gas Station	ATM	Score
Alma	Buffalo	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Alma Center	Jackson	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Arcadia	Trempealeau	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Augusta	Eau Claire	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Blair	Trempealeau	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Boyceville	Dunn	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Boyd	Chippewa	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Buffalo City	Buffalo	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Cadott	Chippewa	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Cochrane	Buffalo	N	N	Y	N	Y	**2/5**
Colby	Clark	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Colfax	Dunn	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Dorchester	Clark	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Downing	Dunn	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Eleva	Trempealeau	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Elk Mound	Dunn	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Fall Creek	Eau Claire	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Fountain City	Buffalo	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Granton	Clark	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
Hixton	Jackson	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Independence	Trempealeau	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Knapp	Dunn	N	N	Y	Y	N	**2/5**
Mondovi	Buffalo	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Neillsville	Clark	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Nelson	Buffalo	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**3/5**
New Auburn	Chippewa	N	N	Y	Y	N	**2/5**
Osseo	Trempealeau	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Pepin	Pepin	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Ridgeland	Dunn	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Stanley	Chippewa / Clark	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Stockholm	Pepin	Y	N	Y	N	N	**2/5**
Strum	Trempealeau	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Taylor	Jackson	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Thorp	Clark	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Trempealeau	Trempealeau	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	**4/5**
Whitehall	Trempealeau	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**5/5**
Percentage of Communities with Amenity:		**50%**	**41.6%**	**100%**	**94.4%**	**91.6%**	

Figure 21: *Trail Hub Community Assessment.*

Community	County	Grocery Store	Hotel/Other Lodging	Restaurant	Gas Station	ATM	Specialty Food	Bar/Taveryn/Brewery	Emergency Services	Pharmacy/Drug Store	Hardware Store	Bike Repair	Gift Shop	Laundromat	Bank	Bookstore	Public Restrooms	Public Wi-Fi	Outdoor Seating	Score
Abbotsford	Clark	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	**10/18**
Bloomer	Chippewa	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	**14/18**
Cornell	Chippewa	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	**9/18**
Durand	Pepin	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	**17/18**
Fairchild	Eau Claire	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	**7/18**
Menomonie	Dunn	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	**17/18**
Merrillan	Jackson	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	**10/18**
Owen	Clark	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	**7/18**
Wheeler	Dunn	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	**6/18**
Percentage of Communities with Amenity:		**88.89%**	**77.78%**	**88.89%**	**100%**	**88.89%**	**55.56%**	**100%**	**33.33%**	**55.56%**	**44.44%**	**11.11%**	**33.33%**	**55.56%**	**77.78%**	**22.22%**	**55.56%**	**11.11%**	**55.56%**	

Thematic Recommendations

Corridor Development

- Improve services along corridors to encourage mutual benefits between the trails and communities they serve.
  - Buffalo River State Trail
    - Improve / Develop the Fairchild Trailhead to increase parking and provide restrooms.
    - Improve / Develop the Mondovi Trailhead to increase parking and provide restrooms.
    - Explore locations for a waypoint station in Eleva.
      - Utilizing property adjacent to the Buffalo River could serve a dual purpose for water users.
  - Chippewa River State Trail
    - Expand the Tarrant Park campgrounds in Durand.
    - Develop a trailhead in Durand for various trails (Chippewa River State Trail, Chippewa River Water Trail, Buffalo River State Trail).
  - Great River State Trail
    - Explore development of a bike repair / concession area at the Trempealeau Municipal Pool / Bike Park to accommodate trail users.
    - Rebuild or replace the Tank Creek Bridge.
  - Old Abe State Trail
    - Develop a trailhead location in Cornell for various trails (Old Abe, Chippewa River Water Trail (north of dam and/or south of dam).
    - Connect the trail to the Wildflower Walking Trail .
  - Red Cedar State Trail
    - Develop a pedestrian connection between the Downsville waypoint and the commercial areas along County Road C.
    - Connect the trail to the Dunnville Boat Landing and Dunnville Wildlife Area along County Highway Y.
    - Explore opportunities to develop restroom facilities near Dunnville.
  - Ice Age Trail
    - Convert identified connecting routes (or viable alternatives) into designated segments.
    - Develop trailhead amenities and services at a designated location within the City of Cornell to further integrate the trail as a community asset.
- Incorporate ADA improvements and designs that increase accessibility into trail facilities and infrastructure.
- Install bicycle racks and storage lockers along the trails in communities and at sites where users may not need their bicycles on hand.
- Update trail signage and kiosks.
  - Implement consistent designs across trails to create regional cohesion.
  - Incorporate additional information on navigating user conflicts (passing, hierarchies, etc.).
  - Incorporate local wayfinding to direct users to nearby points of interest.
  - Incorporate gateway signage along trails within the trail communities.

» Explore options for property acquisition such as grants, life estate deeds, hazard mitigation programs for floodplain properties, amongst others.

» Continue to expand the trail network within the Region.

  o Utilize the table below for potential next steps.

  o Prioritize expansion efforts to provide the greatest impact:

    ■ Expansion of, or extensions from, existing trails.

    ■ Connecting two or more communities.

    ■ Connecting trails to places of interest (parks, recreational and cultural sites, etc.).

Figure 22: *List of all state trail corridors in the Region.*

Corridor	Hosted Trails	Next Steps
4	Saunders, Gandy Dancer, & Great River State Trails, North Country & Ice Age National Scenic Trails, U.S. Bike Route 30, and Local Trails in Douglas & La Crosse Counties	» Coordinate with Canadian National to see if an adjacent trail would be permissible » Coordinate with DNR, Clark County, and Jackson County to develop trail segments through managed lands » Coordinate with WisDOT to consider trail development between Merrillan and Arcadia State Road 95
12	Newton Blackmour & Tomorrow River State Trails and Local Trails in Brown & Outagamie Counties	» Continue development through the (MRRPC Comittee) » Explore development of a bike repair / concession area at the Trempealeau Municipal Pool / Bike Park to accommodate trail users
17	Red Cedar State Trail	» Track discussions around reactivation of rail line. If reactivation is not pursued, discuss corridor development with rail owner
46	Old Abe State Trail	» Coordinate with DNR to complete remaining segment between Durand and Mississippi River » Coordinate with WisDOT to complete segments between Chippewa Falls, Bloomer, and New Auburn on US Hwy 53
47	Wild Rivers, Old Abe, & Chippewa River State Trails, Ice Age National Scenic Trail, and Local Trails in Pepin County	» Coordinate with Xcel Energy to complete segments between Chili, Granton, and Neillsville » Coordinate with WisDOT to complete segments between Neillsville and County Forest land on US Hwy 10 » Coordinate with Jackson and Clark Counties to complete segments between US Hwy 10 and Merrillan
48	Old Abe State Trail and Local Trails in Chippewa County	» Coordinate with WisDOT to complete remaining segment between Mondovi & Durand on US Hwy 10
49	Local Trails in Jackson County	» Coordinate with Canadian National to see if an adjacent trail would be permissible » Coordinate with WisDOT to consider trail development along US 12 Right of Way » Coordinate with Clark, Eau Claire, and Jackson counties to consider trail development within county forests (with connections to communities along the proposed corridor)

State Trail Corridors in the Region



Figure 23: *Map of all WDNR state trail corridors in the Region.*

Corridor	Hosted Trails	Next Steps
50	Buffalo River State Trail	» Coordinate with DNR to modify trail corridor to incorporate Town of Lafayette trails on County Highway X » Coordinate with Chippewa County to develop segment between Town of Lafayette and State Highway 23 on County Highway X » Coordinate with WisDOT to complete remaining segment between County Highway X and Abbotsford on State Highway 29
51	Local Trails in Marathon County	» Coordinate with WisDOT to develop the corridor on State Road 40 and 64
62	Ice Age National Scenic Trail	» Coordinate with WisDOT to complete remaining segment between Menomonie and Ridgeland on State Road 25
63	Pine Line Trail and Local Trails in Price & Taylor Counties	» Coordinate with Chippewa County Forests and Towns of Estella, Lake Holcombe and Ruby to complete segments to county line.
64	Local Trails in Clark & Marathon Counties	» Coordinate with Canadian National to see if an adjacent trail would be permissible.

Regional Organization

- For proposed trails, host consensus-building workshops with affiliated communities to gauge interest and support regarding trail development.
  - Consider desired user groups (walking, biking, equestrian, ATV, etc.), maintenance requirements, and opportunities for collaboration.
- Develop partnerships between the communities along shared corridors to help facilitate development of trail segments.
- Facilitate the creation of “Friends” groups as needed to assist the DNR and trail managers with maintenance, clean up, advocacy, events, and fundraising. (Friends of Wisconsin State Parks can support groups).
  - Avoid division amongst clubs/groups to work for the greater good.
  - Recognize and reward groups who maintain the trails.
- Hold a meeting with each corridor’s trail managers to identify areas of need and potential resource sharing.
- Develop a comprehensive list of partners including individuals and organizations that can assist with fundraising, programming, marketing, maintenance, outreach / recruitment, construction, and acquisition.

Economic Development

- Create an initiative encouraging trail users to submit expenses incurred due to trail use.
- Conduct user counts on trails. These would need to be done on a consistent basis and during similar times of the year.
- Utilize trail data to promote the value of trails and potential economic opportunities to communities and businesses (both existing and prospective).

- Promote efforts to better integrate trails into the communities that they pass through.
  - Treat the trail as a frontage when considering development on trail-adjacent properties.
  - Encourage businesses to connect entrances with the trails and engage users.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Develop a branding program that is consistent across the Region but can be differentiated within each trail corridor.
  - Utilize existing branding whenever possible to avoid duplicative work and confusion with established marketing.
- Develop a Trail Towns program in coordination with the State of Wisconsin to encourage growth and development of trails.
  - Consider different categories of communities (e.g. Hub and Stop) to create opportunities for all communities to participate with reasonable service expectations.
- Develop regional maps and field guides to assist trail users in navigating the Region and seeing what is possible from Hub communities for week-long excursions.
  - Utilize existing mapping whenever possible to avoid duplicative work.
- Update trail maps on a regular basis to ensure they remain accurate.
- Host trail events between supporting businesses on established trails to encourage utilization and support local businesses.
- Host races on trails (see Badger Trail Races).
- Develop seasonal trail materials to highlight experiences and opportunities on the trails throughout the year.
- Install signage within communities directing individuals to trails.

Key Performance Indicators

- Increases in the number of “Friends” groups for trails
- Increases in the number of improved trail miles
- Increases in the number of events held on trails
- Increased user counts
- Hosting meetings with trail communities
- Implementation of a formal “Trail Towns” program

Additional tracking activities could include:

- Fundraising efforts for trail projects (measured in dollars raised)
- Logging volunteer hours for trail maintenance

MOUNTAIN BIKING TRAILS

Mountain bike trails take advantage of a location's topography to create routes that range from easy paths to technical courses. Most trails in the Region are provided on public land, typically controlled by counties, but developed and managed by volunteer organizations.

The Community for Outdoor Recreation, Biking, and Adventure (CORBA) is the most active trail manager in the Region, operating in Chippewa, Eau Claire, and Dunn counties (as well as others outside the Region). There has been a recent shift for mountain bike trails to be more inclusive, incorporating non-motorized users. As a result, these trails are commonly considered accessible to "silent sport" enthusiasts.



Regionally Significant Assets

Using available data, the team mapped known trails and looked for clusters of trails that could create a weekend excursion for visitors. There are two regionally significant clusters of mountain bike trails in the Region, one located around the City of Black River Falls and the other comprising areas in Chippewa County and the City of Eau Claire (hereafter called Chippewa / Eau Claire). The Black River Falls cluster consists of; Coon Fork / Evergreen Ski Trails, Levis / Trow Mounds Trails, Wazee Lake Recreation Area, and Black River State Forest. The Chippewa / Eau Claire cluster consists of; Hickory Ridge Trails, Area 178 / Riverview Reserve, City Wells Trails, Pinehurst Park, Centennial Park, Lowes Creek, Northwest Park. The significance of these trails was determined by their total mileage and their proximity to population centers. The Eau Claire cluster has 73 miles of trails, and Black River has 77 miles. Cyclists could spend several days at each location or visit both for a total of 150 miles of trails within less than a one hour drive.

Assessment/Methodology

For the assessment we looked at the trail systems / properties for quality, facilities (parking, restrooms, water, etc.), and the communities that are within proximity to the systems for services.

Black River Falls Area Trails:

Levis Mound (Clark County)

- **Description:** Levis Mound offers over 24 miles of designated singletrack that weaves through diverse terrain around two prominent sandstone mounds. It's renowned for its thoughtfully designed flow trails, challenging technical sections, and stunning natural features like sandstone bluffs and rock formations.
- **Difficulty:** This system caters to a wide range of riders, from easy beginner loops at the base to very difficult and technical climbs and descents on the Mounds themselves, featuring roots, rocks, and steep grades.
- **Highlights:** Exceptional singletrack variety, incredible views from the mound tops, a well-maintained system by the Neilsville Area Trail Association, and excellent fat biking opportunities in winter on groomed trails.
- **Facilities:** The trailhead off of Fisher Avenue provides several amenities including parking, restrooms, and a "chalet" which provides shelter and retail offerings. The extensive mix of uses for this area has resulted in developed facilities and substantial visitor amenities.

Black River State Forest (Black River Falls, Jackson County)

- **Description:** The Black River State Forest offers 32 miles of designated mountain bike trails, primarily accessible from the Castle Mound and Pigeon Creek Campgrounds. These trails traverse scenic pine and oak forests, providing a classic cross-country riding experience.
- **Difficulty:** Generally intermediate with some challenging terrain, including hills and rooty sections, making for an engaging ride through the forest. There are options for various fitness levels.
- **Highlights:** Expansive forest riding, opportunities to connect with numerous miles of forest roads for extended adventures, and a chance to experience the natural beauty of the state forest. The trails are part of a vast public land area, offering a sense of wilderness.
- **Facilities:** The campground facilities at the access points provide some amenities, such as restrooms and parking, but these facilities are intended to be used by campers. Additional amenities, such as the showers on-site are exclusive to campers.

Regionally Significant Mountain Bike Trails

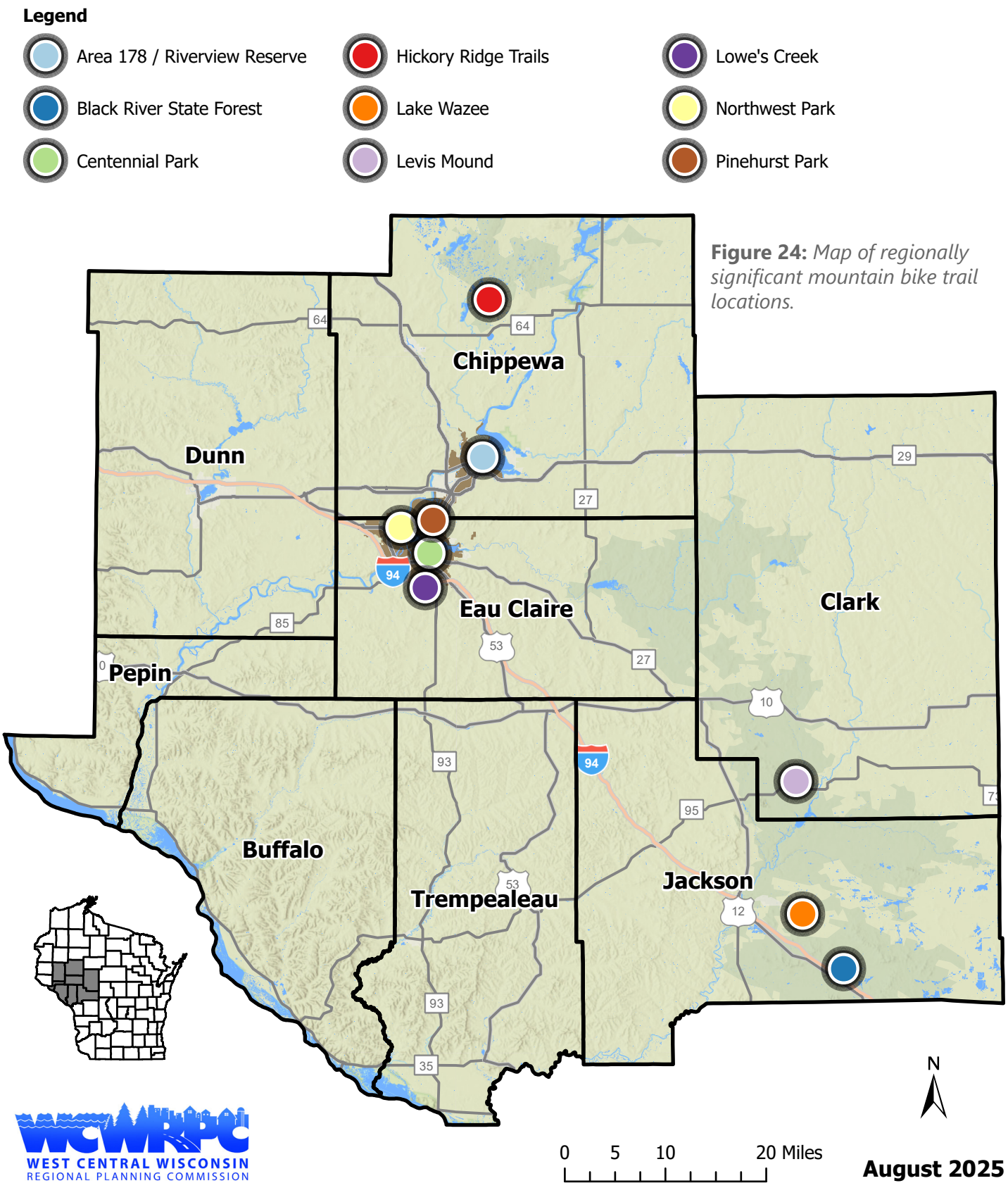


Figure 24: *Map of regionally significant mountain bike trail locations.*

Lake Wazee (Jackson County)

- **Description:** While often mentioned for its deep, clear waters for swimming and scuba diving, Lake Wazee also features approximately nine miles of trails around its perimeter. These trails offer scenic views of the lake, which is actually a former iron mine.
- **Difficulty:** The trails around Lake Wazee are generally considered easy to intermediate, providing a more relaxed riding experience compared to the technical challenges of Levis Mound.
- **Highlights:** Breathtaking vistas of Wisconsin's deepest inland lake, a unique landscape formed from a former mine, and opportunities for a scenic ride with swimming access.
- **Facilities:** The beach has restrooms, concessions, seating, and ample parking.

Chippewa / Eau Claire Area Trails:

The Chippewa / Eau Claire area offers a diverse range of mountain bike trails, catering to various skill levels and preferences. Many of the courses are located within the Urban Area and are highlighted in the companion Urban Area Plan. However, one course, Hickory Ridge Trails, is a unique asset to the Rural Area.

Hickory Ridge Trails (Chippewa County)

- **Description:** Hickory Ridge boasts approximately 15 miles of well-flowing singletrack that winds through quiet and scenic northern hardwood forests, often skirting numerous small lakes. It's known for its remote feel and natural beauty.
- **Difficulty:** Primarily intermediate cross-country riding. While not overly technical with many man-made features (though some "trail candy" like small jumps and berms are being added), the rolling to steep grades provide a good workout. It's suitable for beginners who want to build skills and experienced riders who enjoy fast, flowy trails.
- **Highlights:** Beautiful scenery with many lake views, well-marked trails with maps at intersections, and continuous development by CORBA.
- **Facilities:** This trail system is the most isolated of the regionally significant assets. The entrance has limited parking, but vault toilets are available. There is an active Friends group (Friends of Hickory Ridge) that have an on-going capital campaign to develop additional facilities, such as a warming cabin and additional parking.

Business Assessment

The newly emerging model for economic development is to improve the quality of life, and attract people to live in your community. The phrase "jobs follow people" is a concept in regional economics and urban development, and **Steven C. Deller** (often cited as S.C. Deller) is a prominent researcher who has contributed significantly to this debate. Steven C. Deller, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has conducted extensive research on rural economic development and the dynamics between population, employment, and income.

During discussions with stakeholders, Levis Mound was cited as an example of a model trail system. Specifically, the trailhead on Fisher Avenue provides amenities for visitors to the area. These types of amenities can provide some additional funding opportunities for trail managers through sales of food, gear, and promotional materials. Not every site can support a trailhead of this nature, but the larger systems could benefit from a centralized hub. As many of these sites are mixed-use, rental services could increase the amount of interest in the mountain biking aspect of these trails.

Additionally, volunteer groups managing these trails are unable to contribute full time staff due to a lack of dedicated funding streams. As a result, these groups struggle with turnover from "burn out". Increased financial support for these organizations could result in exponential growth in trail development, maintenance, and supporting services.

The International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) recently developed a Trail Friendly Community Self-Assessment tool to encourage Trail Friendly Communities in relation to mountain biking. Communities within the two cluster areas could complete the self-assessment and determine if there is opportunity for improvements to better cater to cyclists visiting the area. Education and outreach regarding the assessment and other IMBA tools should be conducted.

Thematic Recommendations

Corridor Development

- Develop additional clusters through partnerships with local organizations and public landowners.

Regional Organization

- Allocate resources towards the continued development of CORBA or a new entity to expand trail opportunities throughout the Region, particularly in the southern counties.
- Develop strategic plans with trail management organizations to identify facility development opportunities, funding sources, and
- Develop a consistent branding strategy across the trail systems and organizations in the Region.

Economic Development

- Partner with trail management organizations to conduct visitor counts and track trail usage. These would need to be done on a consistent basis and during similar times of the year.
- Utilize IMBA's trail friendly program to identify and establish "friendly" communities that support mountain biking.
- Develop trailheads to provide basic amenities for visitors (parking, restrooms, food, gear, repair services, etc.
  - These trailheads could also serve as the coordination centers for events or offices for organizations.
- Establish full-time, paid positions for trail development and management within the Region.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Host events on trails to highlight the quality of trails in the area and foster a sense of reverence and appreciation for mountain biking.
- Develop marketing partnerships with the communities in the Region and the state.

Key Performance Indicators

- Growth in CORBA or establishment of another trail entity
- Increases in the number of developed trail miles
- Increases in user counts
- Development of strategic plans
- Establishment of new trails or amenities
- Adoption of the IMBA Trail Friendly program

ROAD CYCLING

The Region offers excellent opportunities for road cycling through a mix of dedicated paved multi-use trails, quiet rural paved roads, and scenic river corridors, making it appealing for recreational riders, touring cyclists, and those seeking challenging hills.

From flat, family-friendly rail-trails to challenging loops, the Region boasts hundreds of miles of interconnected paved paths and designated bike routes, supported by Wisconsin's robust cycling infrastructure. Local tourism boards and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) highlight these areas for their low-traffic volumes, wide shoulders on many county roads, and integration with natural features like the Chippewa, Red Cedar, Black, and Mississippi Rivers. The Region's cycling appeal is enhanced by seasonal events, wildlife viewing opportunities, and access to small-town amenities.



Regional Assets

Road cycling enjoys considerable popularity in the Region, particularly in the urban and river valley areas of the Chippewa Valley (Figure 25). This is evidenced by extensive trail usage, active community organizations, annual events drawing hundreds to thousands of participants, and recognition through the League of American Bicyclists' Bicycle Friendly Community program (Eau Claire and Menomonie both hold Bronze-level designations). Groups like Bike Chippewa Valley promote cycling culture through events such as Wisconsin Bike Week celebrations, bike maps, and advocacy, while CORBA (Community for Outdoor Recreation, Biking, and Adventure) supports multi-use trails across multiple counties.

Major events further underscore demand such as the Ride Across Wisconsin (hosted in Eau Claire in 2025) which attracted over 1,000 riders across routes through Eau Claire, Chippewa, Dunn, and Trempealeau counties. There are also longstanding rides like the Chippewa Valley Century Ride which draws international participants for its scenic rural loops. The Region's interconnected paved trails see heavy recreational use, and Wisconsin's statewide reputation for cycling excellence and bike-friendliness make it a top cycling destination.

However, identifying and prioritizing regionally significant road cycling assets is challenging due to inconsistencies in county-level planning, funding, and infrastructure development. While Chippewa, Dunn, and Eau Claire counties feature comprehensive bicycle-pedestrian plans and strong advocacy leading to connected state trails, more rural counties often rely on WisDOT rustic roads or basic county highway improvements with varying degrees of bike accommodations (e.g., shoulders or signage).

- **Counties in the Region with bicycle and pedestrian plans or routes:**
  - Chippewa County Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan, 2019
  - Dunn County Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan, 2019
  - Eau Claire County Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan, 2019
  - Trempealeau County, Trempealeau Trails Bicycle Routes, 2013 (18 loop trail network)
- **Counties that rely on WisDOT Wisconsin Bicycle Maps:**
  - Buffalo County Bicycle Map
  - Clark County Bicycle Map - North I South
  - Jackson County Bicycle Map - East I West
  - Pepin County Bicycle Map

Differences in local priorities—urban connectivity versus rural tourism—result in fragmented networks, uneven maintenance, and limited cross-county coordination beyond state-managed trails. This patchwork approach complicates regional asset mapping for recreation planning, as data on usage, conditions, and improvements are not uniformly collected or shared across the eight counties. Enhanced inter-county collaboration could help elevate consistent, high-quality road cycling routes as true regional draws to the area.

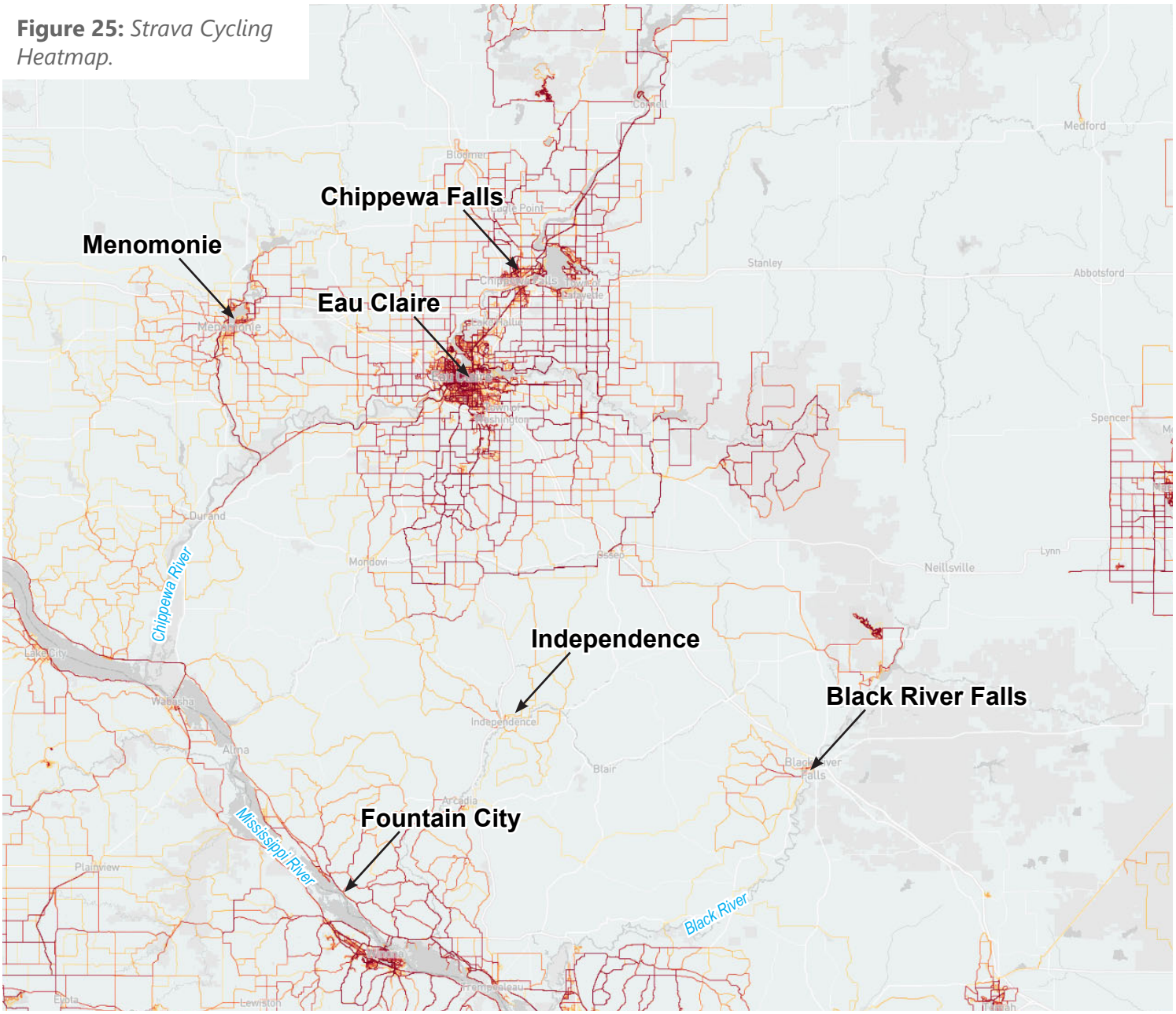
Road Cycling Heatmap

A review of the online *Strava Heat Map helps identify the preferred routes of individuals tracking their activity through use of the Strava mobile app. This can be a helpful planning tool when identifying existing uses or improving amenities, connectivity, or wayfinding throughout the Region.

***Note:** *Strava Heat Map is generated by application users who track their activity using a smartphone or tablet while engaged in cycling. The 'Heat' is produced through the aggregation of user activity over a 12-month period from high (darker color) to low (lighter color).*

An assessment of Strava App users cycling in the Region shows the greatest intensity concentrated in the Chippewa-Eau Claire urban area, with high concentrations additionally visible in the Menomonie area, tri-county forest, Black River State Forest, Black River Falls, and near the Mississippi River corridor.

Figure 25: *Strava Cycling Heatmap.*



Some key highlights that further support the planning and development of the Region as a road cycling destination include:

- **Interconnected River Valley Trails (Chippewa, Dunn, Eau Claire, Pepin Counties):** The Chippewa River State Trail spans 30 miles from Eau Claire's Phoenix Park southward through prairies, bluffs, and river bottoms to Durand in Pepin County, offering scenic riding with urban connections and natural vistas. Linking to this is the Red Cedar State Trail (14.5 miles) from Menomonie in Dunn County, following the Red Cedar River through wooded valleys to connect with the Chippewa trail. The Old Abe State Trail adds 20 miles from Chippewa Falls northward to Cornell, passing lakes and historic sites. These trails form loops ideal for day rides or multi-day tours, with amenities like rest stops and bike shops in Eau Claire and Menomonie.
- **Mississippi River and Bluff Country Routes (Buffalo, Pepin, Trempealeau Counties):** Along the western edge, the Great River Road (U.S. Bike Route 30) offers stunning paved road cycling parallel to the Mississippi River, with low-traffic segments through bluffs and wetlands. The Great River State Trail (24 miles) in Trempealeau County extends from Onalaska to Marshland, featuring flat, crushed-limestone surfaces (suitable for hybrid/road bikes) with river views, wildlife refuges, and connections to Perrot State Park. In Buffalo County, the Buffalo River State Trail (36 miles) from Mondovi to Fairchild traverses rural farmlands and forests, with paved sections for road cyclists. Pepin County's portions of the Chippewa River Trail end in Durand, linking to rustic roads with orchard views and minimal elevation changes.
- **Rural and Forested Loops (Clark, Jackson Counties):** These more remote counties emphasize quiet paved county roads and rustic routes for adventurous road cycling. Clark County features segments of the Wildcat Trail and numerous Rustic Roads (e.g., Rustic Road 34 near Neillsville) with rolling hills, dairy farms, and forested areas rated for moderate traffic and good shoulders by WisDOT maps. Jackson County includes paved trails around Black River Falls, such as paths in the Black River State Forest, and connections to the Elroy-Sparta State Trail system nearby, offering hilly challenges amid sandstone formations and rivers. These areas are perfect for self-guided tours, with low vehicle volumes and opportunities for wildlife spotting.
- **Regional Events and Resources:** Annual events like the Chippewa Valley Century Ride (35-100 mile options through Chippewa, Dunn, and Eau Claire) showcase the area's best routes. Resources include WisDOT county bike maps for conditions assessments, the Wisconsin Bike Federation for route suggestions, and apps like Komoot for user-generated rides in Eau Claire County. The Wisconsin Biking Trail Report provides real-time conditions, ensuring safe planning and several community groups promote expansions, aligning with regional recreation goals for sustainable tourism.

Business Assessment

Recent studies and reports highlight the popularity and economic benefit of bicycling in the state of Wisconsin. For example, The 2024 Economic Impact of Bicycling in Wisconsin identified $5.36 billion in total output of bicycle related industries in Wisconsin in 2022 which includes:

- **Employment:** 28,364
- **Labor Income:** $1.48B
- **Value Added:** $2.87B
- **Output:** $5.36B
- **Taxes (State and Local):** $264M

Data Source: IMPLAN® model, 2022 Data, using inputs provided by the user and IMPLAN Group LLC, IMPLAN System (data and software), 16905 Northcross Dr., Suite 120, Huntersville, NC 28078 www.IMPLAN.com

Road cycling is a popular activity in the Region, serving as both a means of fitness and a leisurely pursuit amid the area's scenic rural roads, rolling hills, and river valleys. However, dedicated bicycle sales and rental services remain concentrated in the City of Menomonie and the Chippewa-Eau

Claire urban area, limiting options for visitors and residents in more rural counties. Despite the lack of specialized bicycle businesses, the Region is well-equipped with supporting amenities, including abundant hotels, lodging, restaurants, and food options for cyclists undertaking single-day rides or multi-day tours. The Wisconsin Cycling Association (WCA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and supporting competitive cyclesport across the state, maintains a comprehensive calendar of sanctioned road racing events. With increasing regional interest in cycling infrastructure and events, developing a local race or race series could significantly boost visibility, foster community organization, and highlight the area's exceptional road cycling potential.

Thematic Recommendations

Regional Organization

- Allocate resources towards the continued development of CORBA or a new entity to expand cycling opportunities throughout the Region, particularly in the southern counties.
- Support existing plans and improvements identified to further enhance cycling opportunities and regional collaboration.
- Develop a consistent branding strategy for cycling in the Region.

Economic Development

- Partner with businesses and organizations to conduct visitor counts related to cycling.
- Work with the Wisconsin Cycling Association (WCA) to identify improvements or services needed to develop and support a series of races or cycling tours throughout the Region.
- Identify several "hub" communities or destinations throughout the Region that are and/or may become official Bike Friendly communities with the necessary supporting businesses and infrastructure.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Host events, tours, or races that highlight the unique physical landscapes and special features found throughout the Region.
- Develop marketing partnerships with the communities in the Region and the state.

Key Performance Indicators

- Growth in CORBA or establishment of another trail entity
- Increases in the number of improved routes
- Increases in user counts
- Development of strategic plans
- Establishment of regional routes, loops, or connections
- Establishment of cycling events or races

EQUESTRIAN TRAILS

Equestrian activity in Wisconsin involves horseback riding on designated trails, often through state parks, forests, and county-managed lands, as well as on private properties and at specialized equestrian centers. It's a seasonal activity, primarily enjoyed from spring through fall, as winter conditions typically close trails to horses due to snow and potential damage.



Description of Equestrian Activity

Horseback riding in these Wisconsin counties offers riders the chance to explore diverse landscapes, including rolling farmlands, dense forests, river valleys, and unique geological features like the bluffs of the Driftless Area. Riders can enjoy leisurely trail rides, more challenging long-distance treks, or camping with their horses at equestrian-specific campgrounds. The activity emphasizes a connection with nature and the use of natural surfaces.

Guidance and Regulation

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the primary regulatory body for equestrian use on state-owned lands (State Parks, Forests, and some State Trails). Key regulations and guidance include:

- **State Trail Pass:** A State Trail Pass is often required for horseback riding on designated state trails for riders aged 16 and older. These fees help fund trail maintenance [Wisconsin DNR - Wisconsin Trail Etiquette & Safety Guidelines].
- **Vehicle Admission Sticker:** A vehicle admission sticker may be required to park at state park and forest properties that offer equestrian trails.
- **Trail Etiquette:** The DNR publishes guidelines for trail etiquette, emphasizing courtesy towards all trail users (hikers, bikers, etc.), staying on marked trails, respecting private property, and practicing low-impact trail use [Wisconsin DNR - Wisconsin Trail Etiquette & Safety Guidelines]. Specific guidelines for horse riders include announcing intentions when passing, yielding right-of-way, and being prepared to advise other users about their horse's temperament.
- **Seasonal Closures:** Equestrian trails on public lands are typically open seasonally, often from late April/early May to late October/mid-November, depending on ground conditions (to prevent trail damage during wet periods) [Wisconsin DNR - Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Horseback Riding].

Promoting and Maintaining Facilities

The equestrian community in Wisconsin is well-organized, with several groups dedicated to promoting the sport and maintaining facilities:

- **Wisconsin State Horse Council (WSHC):** This is the leading non-profit organization representing horsemen and women and the equine industry in Wisconsin. The WSHC plays a crucial role in:
  - Advocacy: Lobbying for equestrian interests at the state level, including trail access and funding.
  - Education: Promoting horse care, riding safety, and responsible trail use.
  - Trail Development: Supporting efforts to create and maintain equestrian trails across the state [American Trails - Wisconsin State Horse Council].
- **Local Equestrian Clubs/Associations:** Throughout the counties, numerous local clubs are the backbone of trail maintenance and community engagement. These volunteer-driven groups:
  - Maintain Trails: Actively work with county parks and forest departments or private landowners to clear, sign, and maintain equestrian trails.
  - Host Events: Organize trail rides, clinics, competitive trail events, and social gatherings.
  - Landowner Relations: Cultivate relationships with private landowners whose property often hosts significant portions of trail networks.

Regionally Significant Assets

Trail Name	Mileage
Pietrek Park - Eagle View Horse Trail	3.81
Wild Rock Horse Trails	46.75
Tower Ridge Horse Trails	8.44
Old Abe State Trail	5.78
Hay Meadow Horse Trails	30.61
Black River State Forest	Unknown
Backwaters Horse Trails	16.10

Horseback riders can ride on more than 700 miles of trails in Wisconsin state parks, forests, recreation areas and unsurfaced trails on former rail lines. The six regionally significant equestrian trails are mapped and shown in Figure 26. Some of these locations offer nearby campsites where visitors can camp with their horses but may be closed seasonally or due to surface conditions. The access to nature and the experience of equestrian trails and camping facilities are unparalleled in the midwest and constitute a regionally significant asset (dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/parks/recreation/horse).

Equestrian Activity in Specific Counties:

Dunn County:

- **Description:** Dunn County offers equestrian opportunities on its multi-use trails, often through rolling rural landscapes and forested areas.
- **Organizations:** Local riding clubs would likely partner with the Dunn County Parks and Recreation Department. Specific named equestrian trails might include sections of larger multi-use state trails that allow horses.

Chippewa County:

- **Description:** Chippewa County is home to the Hay Meadow Horse Trail, a significant 22-mile equestrian trail system winding through scenic northern hardwood forests and glacial moraine landscapes, passing lakes, ponds, and streams [Chippewa County WI - Hay Meadow Horse Trail]. There are two trailheads with gravel parking, toilets, fire pits, and tie lines.
- **Organizations:** The Chippewa Valley Trail Riders Association is highly active in maintaining the Hay Meadow Horse Trail, with assistance from the Chippewa County Department of Land Conservation and Forest Management [Chippewa County WI - Hay Meadow Horse Trail].

Eau Claire County:

- **Description:** Eau Claire County offers equestrian trails within its county forestlands. Notably, there are Tower Ridge Horse Trails and Backwaters Horse Trails (east of Lake Eau Claire off CTH G) [Eau Claire County Parks & Forest - Recreational Trails]. These provide riding opportunities in wooded and natural settings. Trinity Equestrian Center is also a significant private facility [Travel Wisconsin - Trinity Equestrian Center].
- **Organizations:** The Eau Claire County Parks and Forest Department manages these trails, likely with support from local riding groups.

Regionally Significant Equestrian Trails

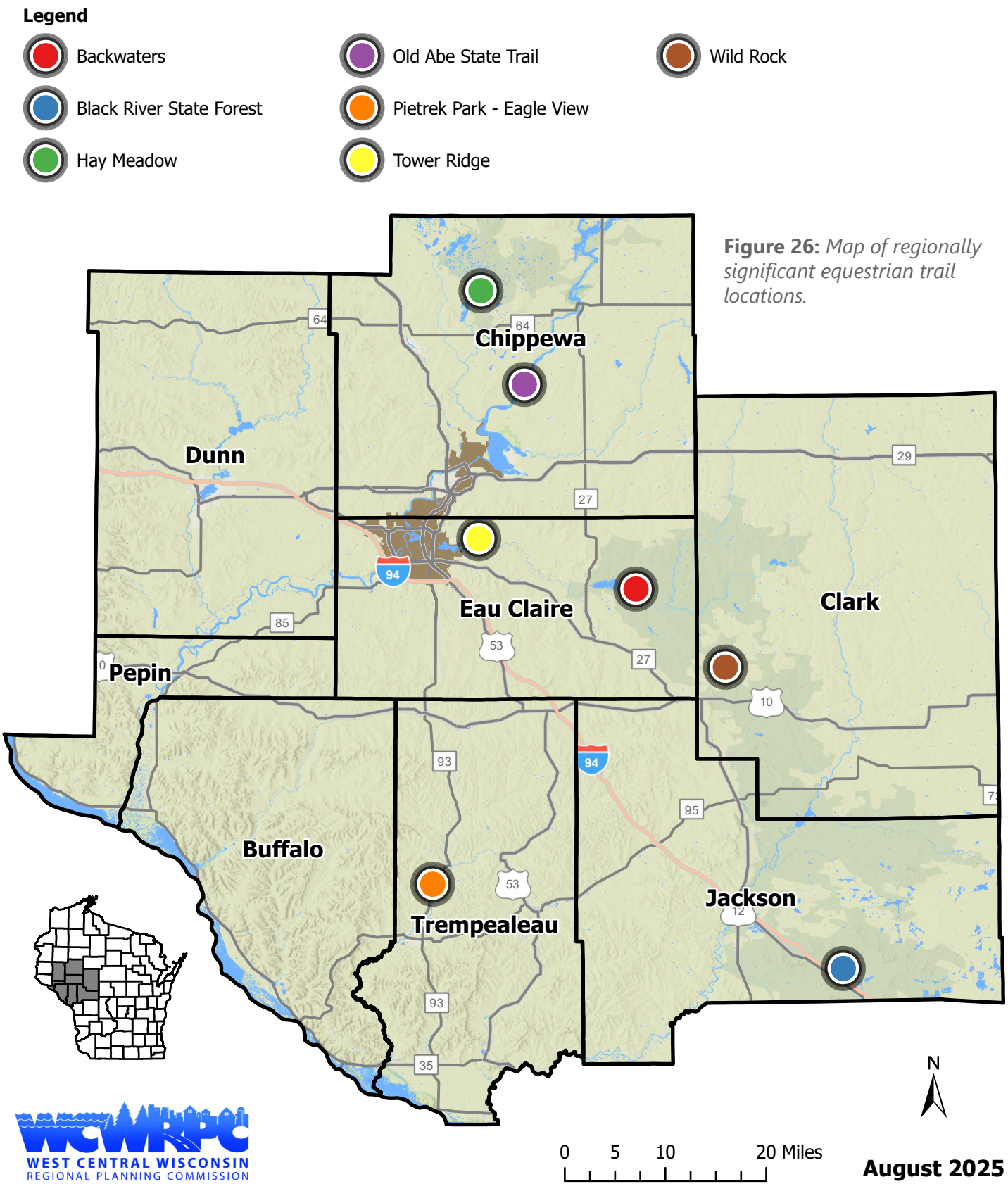


Figure 26: *Map of regionally significant equestrian trail locations.*

Buffalo County:

- **Description:** The Buffalo River State Trail (36.4 miles) is a multi-use rail trail that allows horseback riding. It offers scenic rides through farmlands, woods, hills, and marsh, following the Buffalo River valley [Wisconsin DNR - Buffalo River State Trail].
- **Organizations:** The DNR manages this state trail. Local horse organizations would utilize and potentially assist with maintenance.

Pepin County:

- **Description:** Pepin County's landscape, part of the Driftless Area, offers scenic routes for horseback riding, often connecting to trails in neighboring counties. Information on specific dedicated equestrian trails is less prominent for this county, but multi-use trails may be available.
- **Organizations:** Local riding clubs would be the primary promoters and maintainers in cooperation with county authorities.

Trempealeau County:

- **Description:** Trempealeau County boasts the Trempealeau County Horse Trail, which connects to Pietrek Park and runs along the Trempealeau River. This trail offers scenic views, including opportunities to see Bald Eagles, and Pietrek Park also features a horse arena for various activities [Trempealeau County - Horse Trails].
- **Organizations:** The Trempealeau County Parks Department manages the trail, with support from local 4-H clubs and riding associations.

Jackson County:

- **Description:** Jackson County features substantial equestrian opportunities, particularly in the Black River State Forest. Primitive horse camps are available.
- **Organizations:** The Wisconsin DNR manages trails in the Black River State Forest. Local riding clubs are also active participants in trail development and maintenance.

Clark County:

- **Description:** Clark County is a significant destination for horseback riding, with over 40 miles of trails at Wild Rock Park and Campground alone, winding through the vast Clark County Forest. The terrain ranges from easy to more difficult, and Wild Rock offers equestrian amenities like campsites with tie lines and manure bunkers [Clark County WI - Wild Rock Park and Campground].
- **Organizations:** The Clark County Forestry & Parks Department manages these trails, and local horse riding groups play a key role in their promotion and maintenance.

Assessment/Methodology

Access to quality datasets and stakeholders was limited throughout the planning process. Identifying and developing relationships with existing groups should be a priority to prepare a development plan and assessment of infrastructure. Working with these groups to identify facility needs, services desired, and unique infrastructure requirements will provide the factors necessary to analyze equestrian amenities.

Thematic Recommendations

Given our difficulty in acquiring information regarding trail locations and their use. The initial step should be to gather, record and share information for user datasets and promotional purposes.

Corridor Development

- Work with equestrian groups in the Region to map trails and develop an inventory.
- Develop services at trailheads to help facilitate increased usage and extended stays.

Regional Organization

- Work with the WSHC to coordinate efforts among local groups and enhance their ability to promote development and funding for equestrian trails.

Economic Development

- Develop an inventory of service providers and lodging options for riders and horses.
  - Service providers include guided tours, veterinary services, equipment providers, and grooming.
- Conduct user counts on trails. These would need to be done on a consistent basis and during similar times of the year.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Work with equestrian groups and clubs to identify opportunities to increase activity in the Region.

Key Performance Indicators

- Development of a trail map
- Development of a provider inventory
- Increased level of service at trailheads
- Increased user counts on trails

ATV / UTV

ATV (All-Terrain Vehicle) and UTV (Utility Terrain Vehicle) riding is a rapidly growing outdoor recreational activity in Wisconsin, enjoying significant popularity throughout the state and the Region. It involves operating specialized motorized off-highway vehicles on designated trails and routes.



Description of ATV/UTV Activity

ATVs are typically single-rider or two-rider vehicles designed for off-road use, characterized by handlebars for steering. UTVs (also known as side-by-sides) are larger, often resemble small off-road cars with steering wheels, roll cages, and seating for multiple passengers side-by-side. Both are designed to handle diverse terrain, including dirt, mud, gravel, and sometimes light snow, offering an adventurous way to explore Wisconsin's natural landscapes, including forests, farmlands, and old rail beds.

The activity varies by season:

- **Spring/Summer/Fall:** This is the primary riding season, with trails winding through wooded areas, open fields, and connecting towns. Riders enjoy scenic views, wildlife watching, and access to local businesses.
- **Winter:** In many counties, certain ATV/UTV trails also double as winter snowmobile trails. When trails are snow-covered and closed to wheeled vehicles (often due to grooming for snowmobiles or to protect the trail base), ATV/UTV activity shifts to designated winter routes or areas. Some trails allow winter ATV/UTV use, but riders must be aware of specific county rules and trail conditions.

ATVs and UTVs are permitted on roadways in most counties across Wisconsin. However, the draw for recreational riders is off-road trails that provide secluded and scenic experiences. Survey respondents reinforced this preference. Development of trails should be prioritized over increased access to roadways for the purpose of enhancing outdoor recreation experiences in the Region.

Guidance and Regulation

The Wisconsin ATV/UTV Association (WATVA) is a statewide organization that can provide assistance to local clubs. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the primary regulatory body for ATV/UTV operation in Wisconsin. Key regulations include:

- **Registration:** All ATVs and UTVs operating on public trails or areas in Wisconsin must be registered with the DNR [Wisconsin DNR - ATV].
- **Safety Certification:** Operators born on or after January 1, 1988, who are at least 12 years old for ATVs (and at least 16 years old for UTVs) must complete an approved ATV/UTV safety certification course to operate on public trails and areas [Wisconsin DNR - ATV]. The DNR recommends all operators complete a safety course [Wisconsin DNR - ATV].
- **Trail Passes:** In addition to registration, an annual Wisconsin ATV/UTV Trail Pass is required for vehicles operating on state-funded public trails. Non-residents also have options for annual or 5-day passes [Wisconsin DNR - Nonresident ATV and UTV Trail Passes]. These fees contribute to trail maintenance.
- **Operation Rules:** Regulations cover speed limits, operating on roadways (many towns designate roads as ATV/UTV routes, but this varies), operating on frozen waterways, and requirements for lights, mufflers, and other equipment.
- **Trail Closures:** Trails are often closed during "break-up" periods in spring (e.g., March 15 to May 15 in Eau Claire County) to prevent erosion and trail damage when soils are soft and wet [Eau Claire County Parks & Forest].

Local law enforcement (county sheriff's departments and municipal police) are responsible for enforcing these regulations.

Mapped ATV/UTV Routes - No Regional Significance Identified

Note: County policies regarding ATV use on municipal streets varies greatly throughout the Region. Similarly, there isn't consistent mapping of designated **on-street** *vs.* **off-road** *trails or routes. This map does not reflect all ATV/UTV roadways by County, is not an accurate representation of the regionally significant trails within the Region, and a revised map showing only off-road ATV/UTV trails should be developed.*

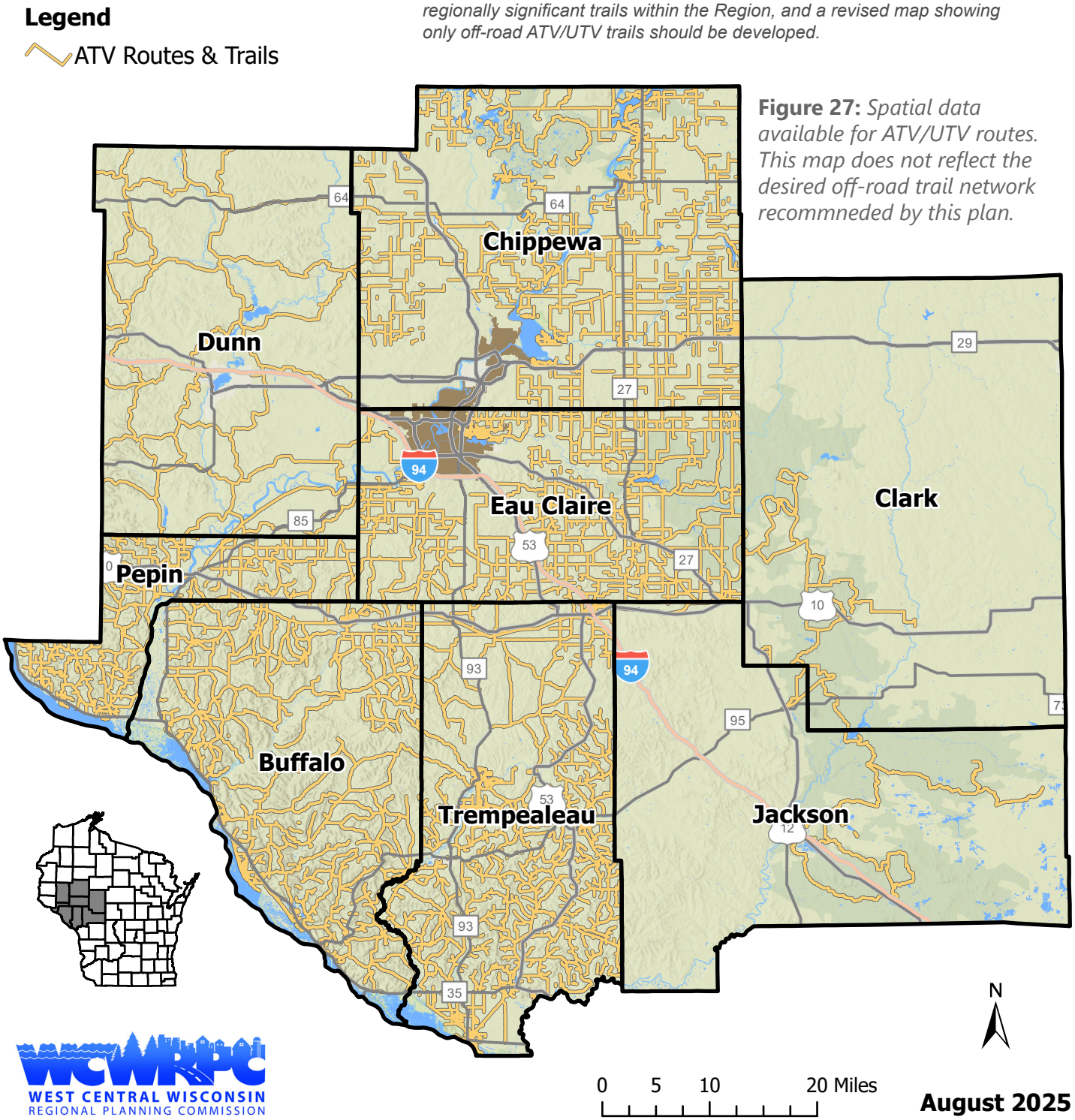


Figure 27: *Spatial data available for ATV/UTV routes. This map does not reflect the desired off-road trail network recommneded by this plan.*

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Regionally Significant Assets

Regionally significant infrastructure could not be determined with the available data.

Assessment/Methodology

Several counties included both on-road and off-road trails or connections, and a proper assessment of regional significance should include a delineation of on-road routes vs. trails that was not feasible to complete during this planning process. Once these routes have been identified, an important next step would be to assess trailheads and amenities offered on scenic and recreational trail corridors to those who are transporting machines via truck or trailer.

Thematic Recommendations

Given the rapid growth in popularity of ATV/UTV use, an effort to create maps, designate routes and grade the existing routes would be the first step. Promoting the routes through publications and state tourism organizations would be the second step. To create a regional attraction information has to be easily accessible in an electronic downloadable format.

Trail Development

- Collaborate with WATVA and local ATV/UTV clubs to develop existing trail maps for the Region as well as a proposed trail network. Avoid incorporating roadways to identify opportunities for in-fill trails and new connections.

Regional Organization

- Collaborate with ATV/UTV groups in the Region to develop a grassroots network that can support development of additional ATV/UTV projects.
- Encourage networking and shared resources across clubs and organizations to strengthen efforts throughout the Region.
- Leverage WATVAs statewide network to support regional projects.

Economic Development

- Explore opportunities to develop ATV/UTV parks with supporting services.
- Conduct user counts on trails. These would need to be done on a consistent basis and during similar times of the year.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Provide trail maps to WDNR and partner with the agency to promote the trails.

Tracking Successful Implementation

- Development of an off-road trail map
- Increased off-road trail mileage
- Increased ridership on trails

SNOWMOBILE TRAILS

Wisconsin is the birthplace of snowmobiling and continues to offer some of the best snowmobiling opportunities you are likely to find, especially in northern Wisconsin. More than 200,000 registered snowmobiles hit Wisconsin's 25,000 miles of groomed trails each winter (https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Snowmobile).

Snowmobiling is a popular winter recreation activity in Wisconsin, involving the operation of motorized vehicles designed for travel over snow. It offers a unique way to experience the winter landscape, access remote areas, and connect communities via extensive trail networks. The activity is deeply ingrained in Wisconsin's winter culture, contributing significantly to local economies.



The primary governmental body regulating snowmobiling in Wisconsin is the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The DNR sets statewide rules concerning:

- **Registration:** All snowmobiles operating on public trails, lands, or frozen waters must be registered with the DNR.
- **Safety Certificates:** Any person born on or after January 1, 1985, must possess a valid Snowmobile Safety Certificate to operate a snowmobile on public trails.
- **Trail Use:** Regulations cover speed limits, operation adjacent to roadways, crossing roadways, and rules for operating on frozen waters.
- **Helmet Use:** While there's no general helmet use requirement for all snowmobile operators, those under 18 often have specific requirements or recommendations depending on the circumstances (e.g., if on an ATV, which often shares multi-use trails).
- **Trail Passes:** In addition to registration, an annual Wisconsin Snowmobile Trail Pass is required for snowmobiles operating on funded public trails. Revenue from these passes helps fund trail maintenance and development.

Beyond the DNR, local county sheriff's departments and municipal law enforcement enforce snowmobile regulations within their jurisdictions.

Promoting and Maintaining Facilities

The vast majority of Wisconsin's extensive snowmobile trail system (over 25,000 miles) is maintained through a unique partnership between the state, counties, and local snowmobile clubs.

- **Association of Wisconsin Snowmobile Clubs (AWSC):** This is the largest snowmobile association in the world and the backbone of Wisconsin's trail system. The AWSC is a non-profit organization that:
  - Advocates: Represents snowmobilers' interests in legislative matters and works to preserve and expand trail access.
  - Coordinates: Works with the DNR and county snowmobile associations to fund and manage the statewide trail system.
  - Promotes Safety: Encourages and supports snowmobile safety courses.
  - Provides Discounted Trail Passes: Offers a discounted annual trail pass for members of AWSC-affiliated clubs, incentivizing club membership.
- **County Snowmobile Associations:** Each county typically has a county-level association that oversees the clubs within their county, coordinates with county parks/forests departments, and manages the county trail system.
- **Local Snowmobile Clubs:** These are the unsung heroes of the snowmobile trail system. Comprised entirely of volunteers, they are responsible for the hands-on work of:
  - Brushing and Clearing: Preparing trails before the season.
  - Signing: Installing and maintaining signage.
  - Grooming: Operating heavy grooming equipment to pack and smooth the snow.
  - Fundraising: Raising funds through local events to support their trail work.
  - Landowner Relations: Working directly with private landowners who grant permission for trails to cross their property. Without landowner cooperation, much of the trail system would not exist.

Regionally Significant Assets

Dunn County:

- **Description:** Dunn County offers a well-developed network of snowmobile trails that connect to surrounding counties. The terrain is generally rolling farmland and wooded areas.
- **Organizations:** Clubs include Boyceville Sno-Jammers, Colfax Snow Drifters, Downsville Sno-Drifters, Elk Lake Blizzard Breakers (also in Eau Claire), Menomonie Sno-Blazers, Prairie Farm - Ridgeland Ridge Runners, and Knapp Valley Riders, among others. These clubs work together under the Dunn County Snowmobile Association (Dunn County Snow).

Chippewa County:

- **Description:** Chippewa County boasts a very extensive trail system, leveraging its mix of farmland, forests (including parts of the Chippewa County Forest), and lake regions (like Lake Wissota). Trails offer diverse scenery.
- **Organizations:** The Chippewa Valley Snowmobile Organization, Inc. (CVSO) is the umbrella group. Numerous local clubs such as Bloomer Sno-Hawks, Lake Wissota Trail Blazers, Flambeau Area Trail Tenders, Stanley Sno-Chargers, and Wheaton Knight Riders actively maintain hundreds of miles of trails.

Eau Claire County:

- **Description:** Eau Claire County's trails traverse various landscapes, from urban fringes to more rural and forested areas, connecting communities like Augusta, Fall Creek, and Cleghorn.
- **Organizations:** The Eau Claire County Snowmobile Council coordinates clubs like Augusta Sno-Drifters, Brackett Bracketeers, Brunswick Beavers, Cleghorn Snowdrifters, Elk Lake Blizzard Breakers (shared with Dunn), Fall Creek Sherwood Foresters, and Pleasant Valley Rough Riders.

Buffalo County:

- **Description:** Situated in the Driftless Area, Buffalo County's trails offer scenic rides through bluffs, valleys, and along the Mississippi River. The terrain can be quite hilly in places.
- **Organizations:** The Buffalo County Snowmobile Association oversees clubs such as Alma Snow Drifters, Glencoe Drifters, Mondovi-Gilmanto Sno Blazers, Nelson Urne Snowmobile Club, River Valley Riders, and Waumandee Trailblazers.

Pepin County:

- **Description:** Similar to Buffalo County, Pepin County offers trails that wind through the picturesque Driftless Area, providing varied topography and beautiful winter vistas, often connecting to neighboring county systems.
- **Organizations:** The Pepin County Snowmobile Association works with clubs like the Durand Snowmobile Club to maintain around 119 miles of trails.

Trempealeau County:

- **Description:** Trempealeau County's trails are also within the Driftless Area, characterized by rolling hills, wooded coulees, and river valleys, offering diverse snowmobiling experiences.
- **Organizations:** The Trempealeau County Snowmobile Association works with clubs including Arcadia Sno-Riders, Eleva-Strum Sno-Trekkers, Elk Creek Trailblazers, G-E-T Trailblazers, Indee Snowrunners, Osseo Sno-Drifters, and Whitehall Sno-Packers. They often provide a dedicated trail conditions hotline.

Regionally Significant Snowmobile Trails

Estimated miles of snowmobile trails by County:

- » Buffalo - 278
- » Chippewa - 506
- » Clark - 426
- » Dunn - 331
- » Eau Claire - 204
- » Jackson - 379
- » Pepin - 96
- » Trempealeau - 311



Figure 28: *Map of regionally significant snowmobile trails.*

Jackson County:

- **Description:** Jackson County has a significant amount of public land, including the Black River State Forest, which provides extensive snowmobiling opportunities through diverse forest landscapes. The trails are generally well-maintained and connect to state-wide systems.
- **Organizations:** Clubs like the Jackson Moonlighters and JCATV (Jackson County ATV/Snowmobile Club) are active in maintaining and expanding the trail system.

Clark County:

- **Description:** Clark County's trail system, exceeding 300 miles, winds through its vast county forest (135,000 acres) and connecting smaller towns. It's known for its well-groomed and expansive network.
- **Organizations:** The Clark County Snowmobile Council coordinates efforts among clubs such as Boom Town Snow Chasers, G W R Riders (Greenwood-Willard-Rock Dam Riders), Loyal Snow Angels, Neillsville-Granton Trailbusters, Rip Riders, and Thorp Sno-Raiders. These clubs are integral to maintaining the county's significant trail mileage.

Overall, snowmobiling in the Region is a vibrant and essential part of the winter economy and culture, heavily reliant on the dedication of local volunteer clubs working in partnership with county and state agencies. The regional significance of snowmobiles is the extensive connected network that each county has (shown in Figure 28) and dedicated volunteers to maintain the trails.

Thematic Recommendations

Wisconsin, being the birthplace of snowmobiling has a well developed trail system, a volunteer grooming and maintenance force equipped with state-of-the-art equipment to take care of the trails.

Corridor Development

- Begin to transition to compact, looped trail systems that can be serviced with snowmaking equipment.
- Support snowmobile groups in their maintenance of existing trails.

Regional Organization

- Work with snowmobile groups across the Region to develop a comprehensive regional trail map.
- Solicit input from snowmobile groups on how to address shorter seasons and less rideable days.

Economic Development

- Support efforts to acquire snowmaking equipment for looped systems.
- Identify sites for compact, looped trail systems that have supporting services nearby
- Conduct user counts on trails on a consistent basis and during similar times of the year.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Share the comprehensive regional trail map with state agencies, local clubs, and communities.

Key Performance Indicators

- Development of a regional trail map
- Development of closed, loop systems
- Acquisition of snowmaking equipment

CROSS-COUNTRY SKI TRAILS

Cross-country skiing, often abbreviated as XC skiing, is a form of skiing where skiers propel themselves across snow-covered terrain using their own locomotion, without the aid of ski lifts. It's a full-body workout that combines elements of hiking, running, and skating, offering a serene way to experience winter landscapes.

There are two primary skiing techniques:

Classic (or Diagonal Stride): Skiers glide forward in parallel tracks, using a diagonal arm and leg motion similar to walking or running. Skis are typically longer and narrower, and wax, a "fish scale" pattern on the ski base provides grip for propulsion.

Skate Skiing: Skiers push off the snow with the edge of their skis, in a motion similar to ice skating. This technique is generally faster and requires wider, shorter skis and a firmer, wider groomed trail.



In the western and northwestern regions of Wisconsin, cross-country skiing is a popular winter activity. Various organizations and government bodies contribute to ski trail systems.

Guidance / Regulation on the Activity:

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the primary body for guidance and regulations of cross-country skiing on state-managed lands (State Parks, Forests, Trails). Key regulations often include:

- **State Trail Pass:** Most state parks and trails require a State Trail Pass for skiers aged 16 and older when trails are groomed. This pass helps fund trail maintenance.
- **Vehicle Admission Sticker:** A sticker may be required to park at state park and forest properties.
- **Trail Etiquette:** Strict rules can prohibit hiking, snowshoeing, pets, skijoring, or dog-sledding on groomed ski trails to maintain optimal conditions for skiers. Alternative trails may be designated for other activities.
- **Safety:** Skiers should check trail conditions, be aware of their skill level, and follow posted rules.

Local county parks departments and independent trail associations also set rules specific to their managed trail systems.

Regionally Significant Assets

Beaver Creek Reserve (Fall Creek, WI)

- **Description:** This popular 400-acre natural area offers approximately 9 miles of cross-country ski trails that wind through diverse habitats. Trails are regularly groomed and conditions posted for classic skiing, with a separate loop for snowshoeing. Beginner classes are offered for both skiers and snowshoers.
- **Difficulty:** Varied, with options suitable for different skill levels.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Beaver Creek Reserve staff and volunteers.
- **Notes:** Equipment rentals (skis and snowshoes) are available. An entry fee is required.

Black River State Forest (Black River Falls, WI)

- **Description:** Boasts over 20 miles of cross-country ski trails, groomed for both skate and classic techniques. The trails offer a variety of skill levels, from beginner to expert, winding through woodlands and rolling terrain. Features rest areas with shelters, fireplaces, and picnic tables.
- **Difficulty:** Easy, intermediate, and expert trails are available. Some sections, particularly on the Ridge, Norway Pine, and Wildcat trails, can be quite steep and are recommended for expert skiers.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by the Wisconsin DNR - Black River State Forest staff, often with support from local groups.
- **Notes:** A day or annual State Trail Pass is required for adults (16+). Heated shelter at Smrekar parking lot.

Brunet Island State Park (Cornell, WI)

- **Description:** Offers about 4.3 miles of cross-country ski trails, groomed for classical style skiing only. The trails pass through rolling glacial hills and along the Fisher River, providing a scenic experience through mixed hardwood and evergreen forests.
- **Difficulty:** Primarily rolling terrain with some hills, generally suitable for various skill levels, but not exceptionally difficult.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Wisconsin DNR - Brunet Island State Park staff.
- **Notes:** Requires a state trail pass.

Buffalo River State Trail (Mondovi to Fairchild, WI)

- **Description:** This 36-mile multi-use rail trail follows the scenic Buffalo River valley. While primarily a summer trail (biking, walking, horseback riding), it is generally open for cross-country skiing in winter, though grooming is typically minimal or non-existent as it's a multi-use rail trail. Skiers would likely be breaking their own tracks.
- **Difficulty:** Flat to gently rolling, due to its rail trail nature.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by the Wisconsin DNR.

Hickory Ridge (Bloomer, WI)

- **Description:** A sprawling trail system that is a haven for Nordic skiers. Offers over 16 miles of rolling to steep trails, meticulously groomed for both classic and skate styles. It winds through kettle lakes and the Chippewa County Forest, offering a remote and scenic experience. Also shares groomed trails for fat biking.
- **Difficulty:** Ranges from rolling to steep, providing challenges for all levels.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Chippewa County Forest and Parks Department with significant ongoing support and volunteer hours from local groups, including CORBA (Community for Outdoor Recreation, Biking, and Adventure).

Hoffman Hills State Recreation Area (Colfax, WI)

- **Description:** This 707-acre preserved area features wooded hills, wetlands, and prairie traversed by cross-country ski trails. Known for spectacular views of the surrounding countryside.
- **Difficulty:** Trails are marked for all skill levels, with varying terrain.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Wisconsin DNR - Hoffman Hills State Recreation Area staff.

Lake Wissota State Park (Chippewa Falls, WI)

- **Description:** Offers approximately 11 km (about 6.8 miles) of cross-country ski trails.
- **Difficulty:** General description implies a mix of terrain suitable for various skill levels.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Wisconsin DNR - Lake Wissota State Park staff.

Levis Mound (Near Neillsville/Black River Falls, WI)

- **Description:** Clark County's premier cross-country ski trail system, known for its extensive and expertly groomed trails. It offers about 17 miles of groomed trails for both skating and classic techniques, along with an additional 24 miles of ungroomed backcountry routes for a more adventurous experience. Features a large parking lot, warming shelter, and heated bathrooms.
- **Difficulty:** Diverse, with easy and intermediate trails near the base and more advanced, narrower, and difficult singletrack climbs on Trow Mound for spectacular views.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained and groomed by the Neillsville Area Trail Association (N.A.T.A.) in conjunction with the Clark County Forestry & Parks Office. This is a prime example of strong local volunteer efforts.

Regionally Significant X-Country Ski Trails

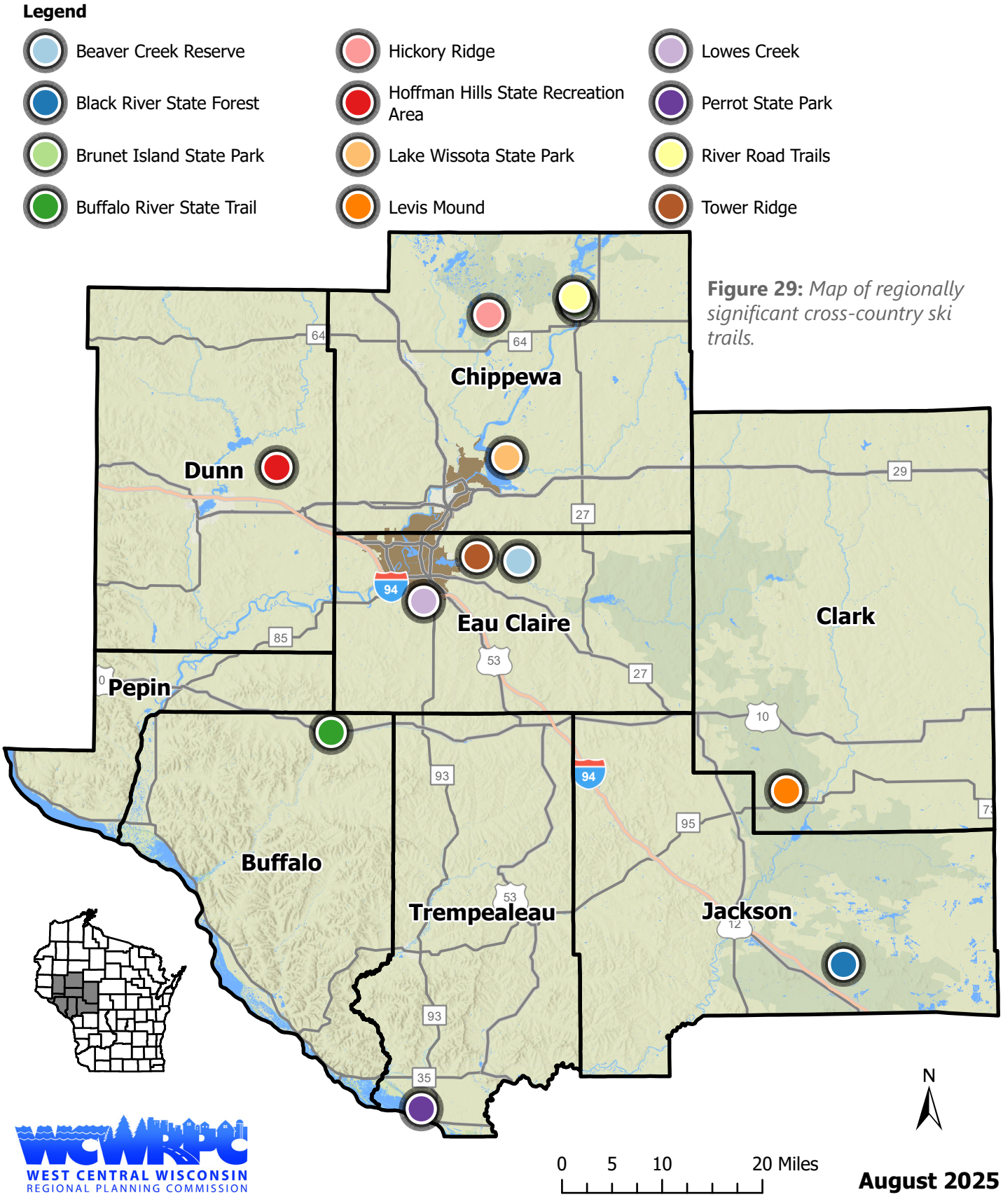


Figure 29: *Map of regionally significant cross-country ski trails.*

Lowes Creek (Eau Claire, WI)

- **Description:** This 250-acre park offers approximately 5 miles of multi-use trails that are groomed for cross-country skiing in winter. The trails wind through the park, crossing Lowes Creek via a bridge.
- **Difficulty:** Generally level to rolling, suitable for beginner to intermediate skiers.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Eau Claire County Parks and Forest Department, with volunteer support from groups like CORBA.
- **Notes:** Separate snowshoe/pet walking trails are groomed to keep ski trails clear. Daily/annual vehicle entrance passes are required.

Perrot State Park (Trempealeau, WI)

- **Description:** When snow conditions permit, about 9 miles of trail are groomed and tracked for classic cross-country skiing. A one-mile section in the campground is groomed for skate skiing. Trails include the easy Bay trail, intermediate Wilber's trail, and expert Prairie and Cedar Glade trails that head into ravines and offer more challenging terrain.
- **Difficulty:** Ranges from easy loops to expert trails with significant climbs and descents.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Wisconsin DNR - Perrot State Park staff.

River Road Trails in Harold Walter Memorial Forest (Near Cornell, WI)

- **Description:** This 3.5-mile cross-country trail meanders through the 270-acre Harold Walter Memorial Forest, paralleling the Chippewa River.
- **Difficulty:** General description suggests a pleasant, perhaps less challenging, winding trail experience.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Likely maintained by the Chippewa County Forest and Parks Department or a local township/volunteer group. Specific details on grooming are less widely published, so it may be more self-tracked or less frequently groomed than dedicated ski centers.

Tower Ridge (Eau Claire, WI)

- **Description:** The largest cross-country ski trail complex in Eau Claire County and west-central Wisconsin. It features approximately 12 miles of trail with varying degrees of difficulty, suitable for all levels of skiers. Trails are wooded and rolling, groomed and tracked for both skating and striding. Includes a chalet with flush toilets, pit toilets, and approximately 3 km (1.8 miles) of lighted trails for night skiing. Separate snowshoe trails are also available.
- **Difficulty:** Offers a wide range of terrain, from gentle slopes to challenging hills.
- **Maintenance/Organizations:** Maintained by Eau Claire County Parks and Forest Department, with significant support and grooming efforts from CORBA and other volunteers.

Assessment/Methodology

When considering users volume and type, existing infrastructure, grooming support, and climate trends, Tower Ridge in the Eau Claire and Levis Mounds in Clark County are regionally important assets. Both trail systems have high user volumes due to a regional draw, extensively developed trails, dedicated groomers and volunteer groups who build, and care for the trails and supporting infrastructure.

Thematic Recommendations

The trend for cross-country skiing in Wisconsin is a concerning decrease in reliable snow cover and skiable days. This is a direct consequence of a warming climate, driven by greenhouse gas emissions, leading to warmer winter temperatures, less consistent snowfall, and more frequent thaws that are challenging the very nature of winter recreation in the state [WUWM, February 14, 2025; WPR, March 5, 2024].

Given this warming trend and decrease in reliable snow cover and skiable days, if cross country skiing is to continue into the future artificial snow making will have to be provided. Artificial snowmaking for cross-country skiing is a very expensive and resource-intensive endeavor (requiring significant water, electricity, and cold temperatures). While common at downhill ski resorts, it is rare for dedicated cross-country ski trail systems in Wisconsin due to the cost and logistics. Most rely heavily on natural snowfall and efficient grooming practices to maximize their skiable days. A community effort would need to be undertaken to fundraise, plan, build and maintain an artificial snow making operation.

Despite these challenges, if a significant investment were to be made for cross-country snowmaking in this Region, Tower Ridge would present the most compelling case due to its existing popularity, infrastructure, community support, and potential to serve as a vital, reliable resource for a large number of skiers.

Corridor Development

- Focus on development of compact, looped trail systems that can be serviced with snowmaking equipment.
- Identify sites with sufficient land and existing infrastructure to support cross country ski trails.

Regional Organization

- Collaborate with ski clubs and organizations across the Region to identify facilities that can most efficiently and effectively utilize snowmaking equipment for the greatest regional impact.
- Coordinate with regional clubs and organizations to fundraise, acquire, and implement snowmaking projects.

Economic Development

- Support organizations seeking to acquire snowmaking equipment.
- Conduct user counts on trails. These would need to be done on a consistent basis and during similar times of the year.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Develop a regional map of ski trails, supporting services, and neighboring communities.

Key Performance Indicators

- Increased user counts
- Acquisition of snowmaking equipment
- Development of a regional cross-country ski map

B. WATER-BASED TRAIL SYSTEMS

The Region's rivers and backwaters form the backbone of the Region's outdoor recreation identity, inviting paddlers of all backgrounds to explore its unique blend of Driftless bluffs, wooded valleys, tranquil flowages, and vibrant river towns. This section highlights both the Region's navigable rivers including six officially designated water trails and a County by County look at the "system" including some smaller creeks and streams.

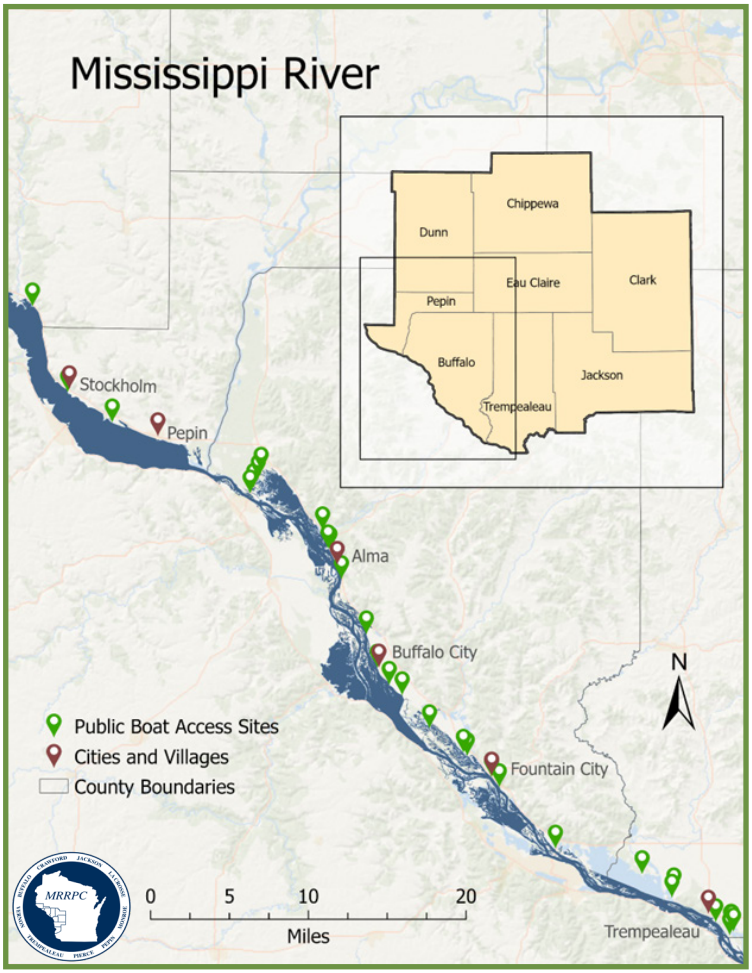
We have also looked at the need for improved amenities, mapping, and signage—as well as a rich network of unofficial but widely enjoyed paddle routes documented by local paddlers and trusted sources such as MilesPaddled.com and WisconsinRiverTrips.com. Together, these waterways reflect the Region's commitment to accessible, high-quality water-based recreation that promotes tourism, active living, and economic vitality across the Region.



A RIVER BY RIVER LOOK AT THE REGION

Mississippi River

The Mississippi is the Western most border of three of the counties in the Region. This is a working river that also offers great recreational opportunities for boating, paddling, swimming, fishing, bird watching, hiking and wildlife.



While not flowing through Pepin County in the traditional sense, Pepin County borders Lake Pepin, which is a naturally occurring lake on the Mississippi River. Lake Pepin is a wide, 23-mile-long expanse of the Mississippi, famous for its beauty and recreational opportunities including sailing, fishing, canoeing, water skiing, and boating. The Village of Pepin itself is located on the shores of Lake Pepin. The Mississippi River, being a major navigational waterway, also influences the ecosystem and history of the county's western edge. The lake is known for its scenic beauty, with views of bluffs and wildlife.

The lake itself is a popular destination, with rentals available in the Village of Pepin. You can explore the wide expanse of the lake, enjoy the views of the bluffs, and potentially encounter wildlife. Beyond the main lake, the Mississippi River offers numerous backwaters and tributaries that are ideal for kayaking and canoeing. These areas provide a chance to get closer to nature and discover hidden parts of the river.

In Buffalo County, the Mississippi and its extensive backwaters offer an incredibly diverse fishery, including commercial fishing, and are home to a wide array of wildlife, especially migratory birds along the Mississippi River Flyway. For example areas like Rieck's Lake, part of Pool 4 on the Mississippi, are known for large concentrations of Tundra Swans. Merrick State Park includes boat landings, a canoe launch, and a self-guided canoe trail. Rental canoes are available.

This immense waterway is a vital commercial route and a major recreational hub. While forming the western border of Trempealeau County, the "Mighty Mississippi" is a fundamental influence on the county's geography, ecology, and history. It's one of the world's great rivers, serving as a major transportation artery, a habitat for vast wildlife (including a crucial part of the Mississippi Flyway for migratory birds), and a popular destination for fishing, boating, and sightseeing. The Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge is located along the Mississippi in the county. Perrot State Park has the Voyageurs Canoe Trail and access to both the river and backwaters.

Black River

This is one of the most important rivers in central Wisconsin. Originating in Taylor County, it flows nearly 200 miles before joining the Mississippi River. The Native Americans called it “Neosheprah” (Dark River), and the French explorers named it “La Riviere Noire”. The Black River is known for its dark, tannic-stained waters, a result of leaching from oak and tamarack forests and sphagnum moss bogs in its watershed. Historically, it was vital for logging, with millions of logs floated downstream. Today, it’s popular for fishing (muskellunge, northern pike, walleye, bass, catfish) and paddling (canoeing, kayaking), with dams like those at Hatfield and Black River Falls creating flowages such as Lake Arbutus that are excellent for water recreation. The upper portions can be rocky, while central stretches offer quieter forest paddles.

Black River I

- 24.25 Miles
- Black River Falls to Melrose

Black River II

- 12.5 Miles
- Hatfield to Black River Falls

Black River III

- 9.75 Miles
- Melrose to North Bend

Black River IV

- 11.5 Miles
- River Avenue to Riviera Avenue

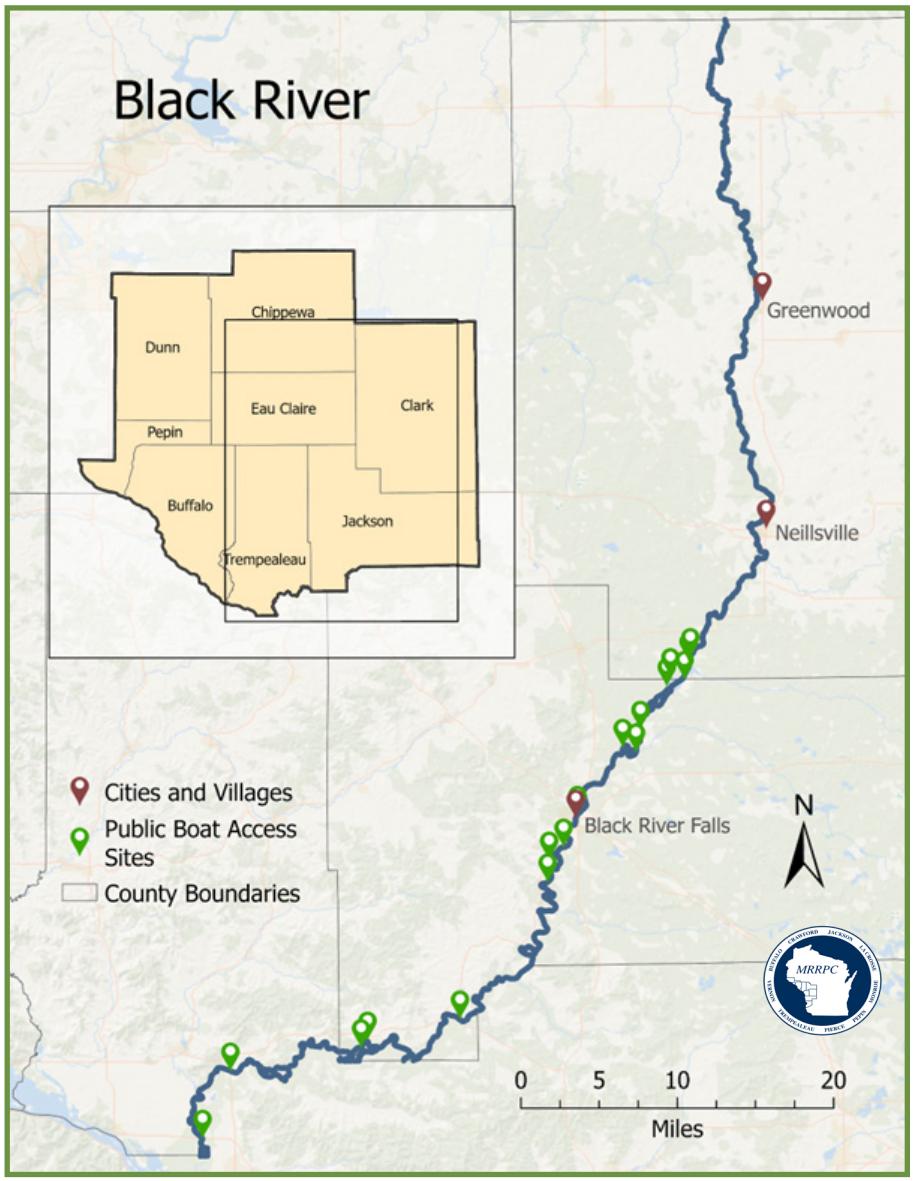
Black River V

- 15.25 Miles
- Willard Road to Grand Avenue

Black River VI

- 8.5 Miles
- Highway 73 to Willard Road

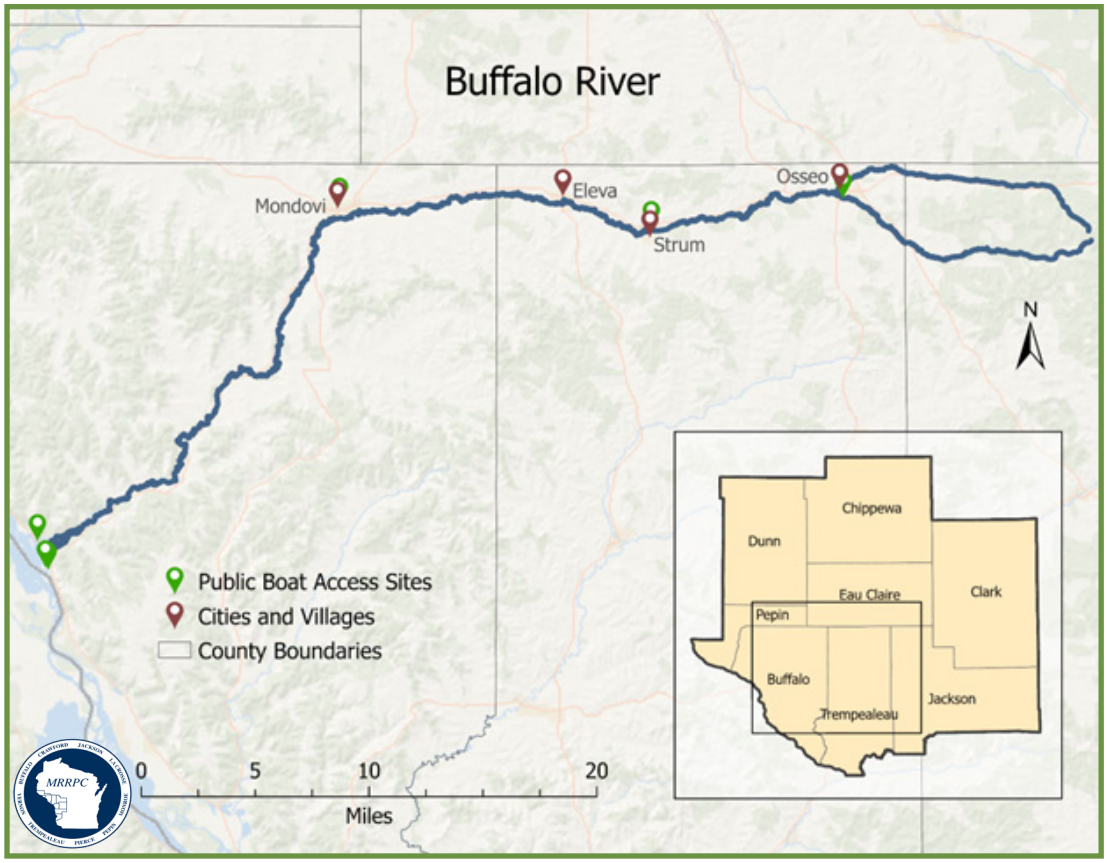
(*From MilesPaddled.com*)



Buffalo River

The Buffalo River originates in Eau Claire County and flows southwesterly through parts of Trempealeau and Buffalo counties before joining the Mississippi River. Within Trempealeau County, you'll find the North Fork Buffalo River and South Fork Buffalo River, which are significant tributaries. The Buffalo River basin is known for its steep bluffs and valleys characteristic of the Driftless Area. It offers fishing opportunities and contributes to the overall rich aquatic biodiversity of the Region. Historically known as "Beef River" or "Riviere des Boeufs" by early French voyagers, it was used for transporting logs during the timber boom. The Buffalo River is popular for fishing and paddling, and its lower course features marshlands that are important for waterfowl. The Buffalo River State Trail follows a portion of its course.The Buffalo River Fishery Area contains over 1,600 fragmented acres in Jackson and Trempealeau Counties as well.

Paddling the Buffalo River in Wisconsin offers diverse experiences depending on the section of the river and time of year. The upper section, particularly in spring, can be suitable for experienced paddlers seeking whitewater, while the middle and lower sections offer more leisurely floats. The river's flow is heavily dependent on rainfall, so paddling season length varies. It's wise to study satellite maps and consider using GPS, especially when navigating forks and side channels. The Upper Buffalo River is known for whitewater kayaking opportunities in spring due to higher water levels. The Middle and Lower Buffalo River is generally calmer and suitable for a wider range of paddlers. Canoes and kayaks are available for rent at Merrick State Park or from local outfitters like Rendezvous Paddle and Sports (*Wisconsin River Trips, Buffalo River*).



Red Cedar River

This is the most prominent river in Dunn County, flowing southward through the county and nearly bisecting it from north to south before joining the Chippewa River in southern Dunn County. Its name translates from Ojibwe as “Abundant with Red Cedar River.” The Red Cedar River is fed by numerous tributaries and features two significant reservoirs within Dunn County: Tainter Lake and Lake Menomin (which is in Menomonie). Historically important for logging, it’s now popular for fishing (especially walleye in Lake Menomin), boating, and connects to the scenic Red Cedar State Trail. While much of the Red Cedar River is located to the west in Dunn County, its lower reaches flow into the Chippewa River just below Menomonie, near the western edge of Eau Claire County. It’s a 60-mile river running from Chetek to the Chippewa. The Red Cedar is also an ideal float trip for novices and families in its upper, shallower sections.

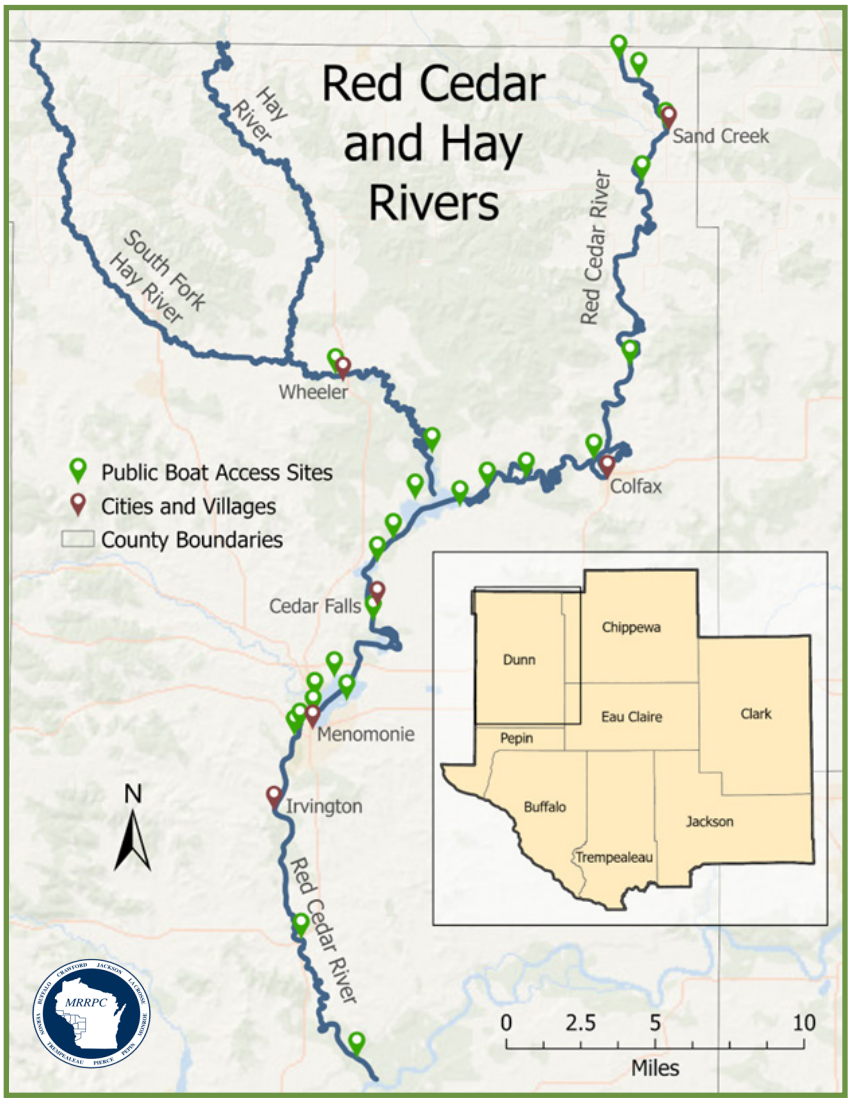
Red Cedar River I

- 14.75 Miles
- Menomonie to Dunnville

Red Cedar River II

- 12.5 Miles
- County Road W to Colfax Park

(From MilesPaddled.com)



Hay River

A significant tributary of the Red Cedar River, the Hay River flows through northern and central Dunn County. It’s praised for its clear water, a result of the sandy soil in its watershed. Paddling on the Hay River offers scenic views, including occasional sandstone cliffs. The South Fork Hay River is a notable branch that joins the main stem (*Wisconsin River Trips, Hay River*).

Chippewa River

A prominent waterway, flowing approximately 183 miles through west-central and northwestern Wisconsin. It's a major tributary of the Mississippi River. Historically, it was crucial for the logging industry, which used the river to transport timber downstream. Today, it's a popular destination for recreational activities like kayaking, canoeing, and fishing, with abundant muskellunge, northern pike, walleye, and smallmouth bass. Within Chippewa County, the river features significant flowages such as the Holcombe Flowage and Lake Wissota, created by dams. The Chippewa also forms the eastern boundary of Dunn County for a significant stretch and receives the Red Cedar River as a major tributary within Dunn County.

The Lower Chippewa River, particularly where it passes through Dunn County, is known for its wide floodplain, numerous riverine islands, and beautiful wild scenery, making it popular for kayaking, canoeing, and wildlife viewing, including bald eagles. Chippewa River Water Trail – Mississippi Segment offers multiple launches through scenic and historic river valleys, sandbars for camping, extended trip options, and proximity to river towns. The Chippewa River Water Trail – Eau Claire Segment offers an urban river corridor with excellent public infrastructure, signage, ADA accessibility, information kiosks, art installations, and close ties to markets and events in Eau Claire.

Chippewa River

- 10.25 Miles
- Dunnville to Durand

(From MilesPaddled.com)

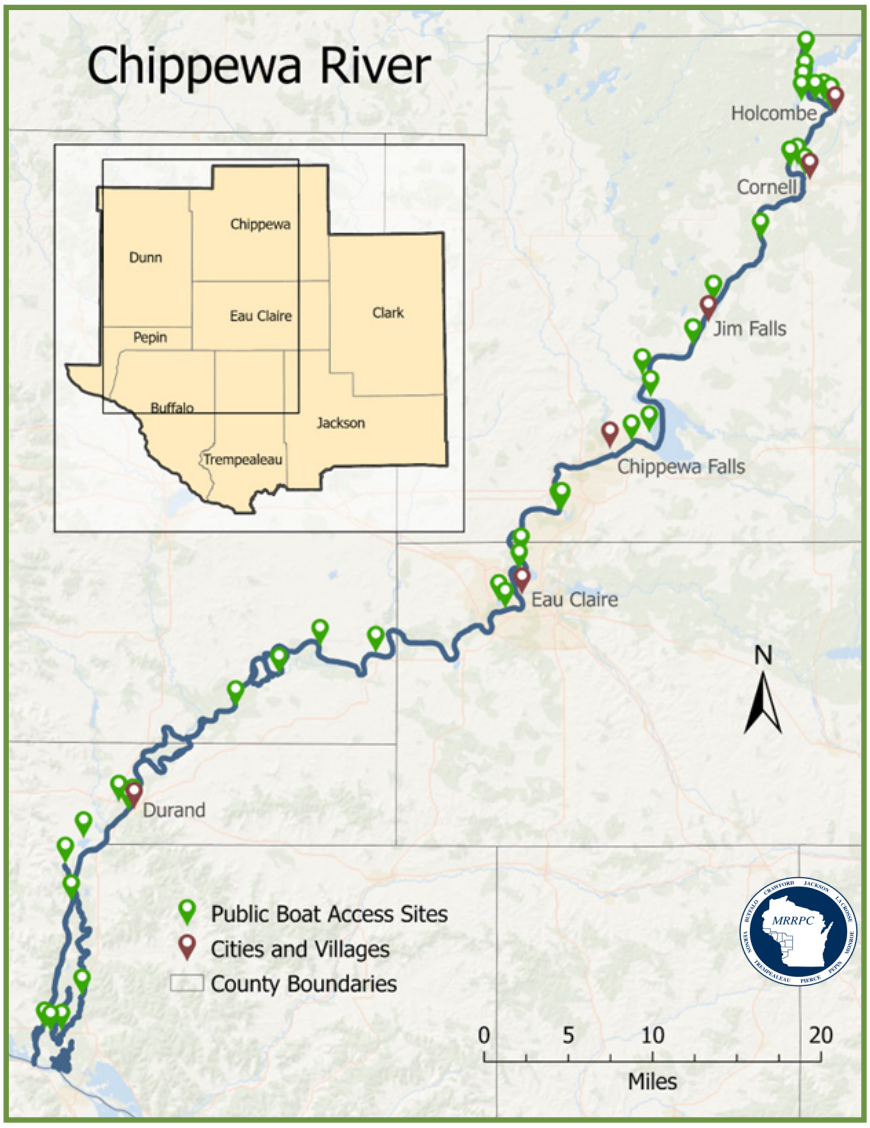
Eau Galle River

A tributary of the Chippewa River, the Eau Galle River flows through western Dunn County. It's known for the Eau Galle Recreation Area and Lake Eau Galle, a reservoir created by the Eau Galle Dam. The river and its associated lake offer opportunities for fishing, boating, and other water-based recreation.

Eau Galle River

- 3.5 Miles
- Spring Valley to 770th Avenue

(From MilesPaddled.com)



Eau Claire River (North and South Forks)

The Eau Claire River is a significant tributary of the Chippewa River. It rises as two main streams: the North Fork Eau Claire River and the South Fork Eau Claire River. Both forks originate in southwestern Taylor County and flow generally southwest through northeastern Clark and northwestern Eau Claire Counties. The North Fork flows past the village of Lublin and collects the Wolf River. This section is known for containing several rare aquatic invertebrates and is popular for fishing smallmouth bass, muskellunge, and common carp. The South Fork of the Eau Claire River is a longer fork that contributes to the main stem of the Eau Claire River. The South fork that eventually converges with the North Fork to form the main stem of the Eau Claire River. The combined Eau Claire River flows westward, creating scenic areas like the Dells of the Eau Claire River, which feature a narrow, rocky gorge, waterfalls, and unique tilted bedrock formations. After their convergence, the Eau Claire River flows westward, forming reservoirs like Lake Eau Claire and Lake Altoona, and features scenic spots like Big Falls. The river's name is French for "Clear Water River."

Eau Claire River I (Eau Claire)

- 5 Miles
- Lake Altoona Dam to Hobbs Landing

Eau Claire River II (Eau Claire)

- 13.5 Miles
- Harstad County Park to County Road K

Eau Claire River III (Eau Claire)

- 6 Miles
- Big Falls County Park to County Road QQ

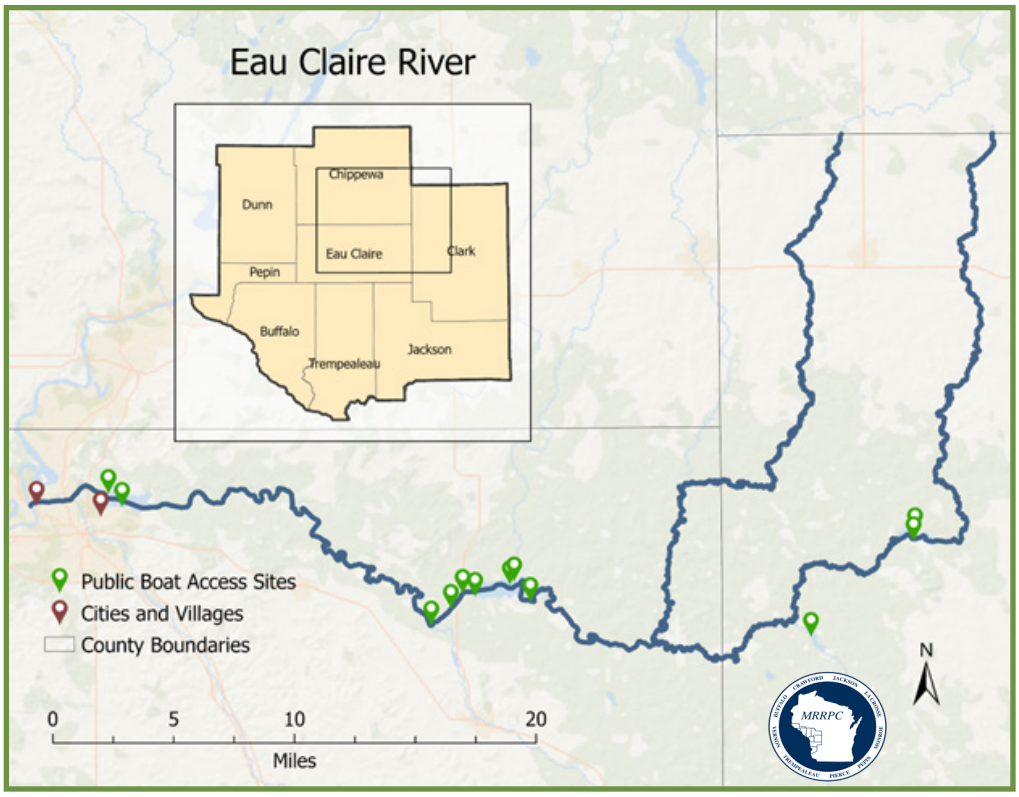
Eau Claire River: North Fork (Eau Claire)

- 7.75 Miles
- Hamilton Falls Canoe Landing to Canoe Landing Forest Road

Eau Claire River: South Fork (Eau Claire)

- 20.75 Miles
- Dickinson Road to County Highway G

(*From MilesPaddled.com*)



Trempealeau River

This river forms a significant portion of Buffalo County's eastern border with Trempealeau County. Like the Buffalo and Chippewa, it was historically important for log drives. Today, the Trempealeau River offers good fishing opportunities and is part of the larger Black, Buffalo, Trempealeau basins, known for their unique natural channel streams. The Trempealeau River is part of the Black River Region which represents the heart of brook trout country in the Driftless Area.

This river is where Trempealeau County gets its name (from "La Montagne qui trempe à l'eau," French for "the mountain steeped in water," referring to Trempealeau Mountain at its confluence with the Mississippi). The Trempealeau River rises in Jackson County and flows westward through the central part of Trempealeau County, eventually emptying into the Mississippi River. It's known for its sandy bottom, clear, and generally shallow waters, making it a popular spot for tubing, kayaking, and canoeing in summer. The Trempealeau River Meadow is a high-quality wetland complex along the river, vital for diverse plant and bird species. It supports a productive warmwater fishery, though its headwaters can be cold trout streams.

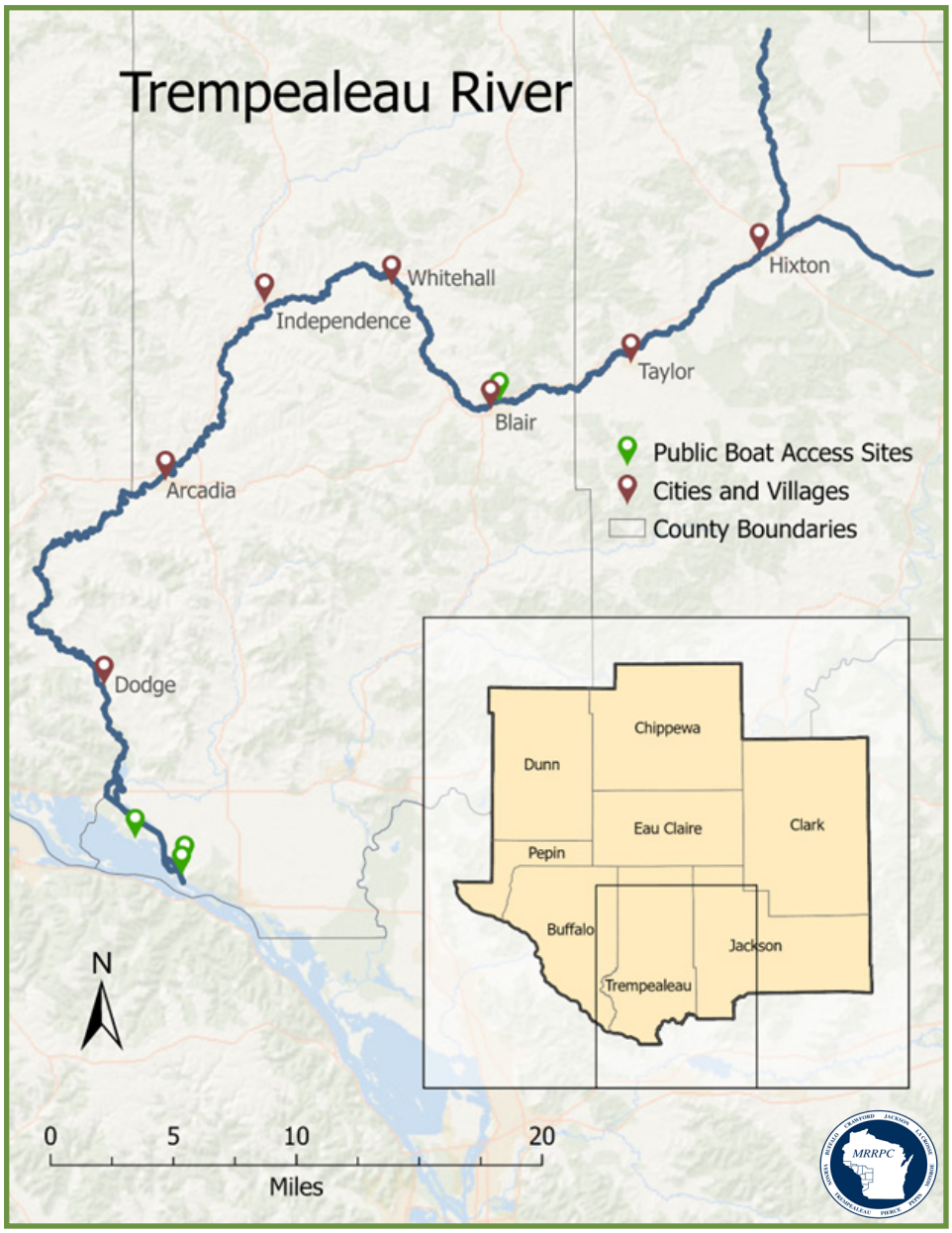
Trempealeau River I

- 8 Miles
- Whitehall to Independence

Trempealeau River II

- 5.75 Miles
- Highway 35 to Perrot State Park

(*From MilesPaddled.com*)



Other Rivers in the Region

- **Yellow River:** A significant tributary of the Chippewa River. It originates in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest and meanders through forested and agricultural landscapes. This river is characterized by its low gradient, numerous meanders, oxbow lakes, and floodplain forests. It's an important fishing spot, particularly for northern pike and suckers, and its upper sections are largely undeveloped. The Chequamegon Waters Flowage (Miller Dam) is a notable feature on this river.
- **Jump River:** A rocky river formed by the confluence of the North Fork Jump River and the South Fork Jump River. It flows about 25 miles through Rusk, Taylor, and Chippewa counties before merging with the Holcombe Flowage, thus joining the Chippewa River. Once used for log drives, it's now a popular recreational river for fishing (northern pike, smallmouth bass, musky) and paddling, featuring numerous rapids. Big Falls County Park offers a scenic gorge and trails along the Jump River.
- **Fisher River:** A stream located in Chippewa County, also intersecting with Taylor County. It's popular for fishing, with species like smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, and northern pike. It can offer good whitewater paddling during high water levels, and eventually joins the Chippewa River, particularly within the boundaries of Brunet Island State Park.
- **Wolf River:** While a much larger and more well-known Wolf River exists in northeastern Wisconsin (a tributary to the Fox River), there is also a smaller Wolf River referenced within Chippewa County. This local stream would typically be a tributary to one of the larger rivers in the county, contributing to the local drainage system. Details on specific recreational use for this smaller segment are less widely documented.
- **Hay River:** A significant tributary of the Red Cedar River, the Hay River flows through northern and central Dunn County. It's praised for its clear water, a result of the sandy soil in its watershed. Paddling on the Hay River offers scenic views, including occasional sandstone cliffs. The South Fork Hay River is a notable branch that joins the main stem. https://www.wisconsinrivertrips.com/segments/hay-river-dunn-county
- **Eau Galle River:** This river flows through parts of Pepin County, particularly in its northern sections, before eventually joining the Chippewa River. Below the dam at Eau Galle (which creates Lake Eau Galle), the river offers several miles of gentle current through rugged, wooded, and farmland areas. It's known to have variable flow, potentially requiring portages during low water due to shallows, logs, and fences. Lake Eau Galle, a 351-acre man-made lake, is a popular spot for fishing and includes Pineview County Park with recreational facilities.
- **Rush River:** While the majority of the Rush River is in Pierce and St. Croix counties, its watershed extends into the westernmost part of Pepin County, meaning some of its tributaries or headwaters originate there before the main stem flows southward to Lake Pepin (Mississippi River). It's locally known as an excellent trout stream, with varied habitat from flatter sections near its source to steep valleys typical of the Driftless Area.

Strategic Recommendations

Strategic recommendations for the Region's water trails and river towns chart a clear course toward making the Region a leader in water-based recreation, community vitality, and environmental stewardship. The following action steps outline a comprehensive approach to enhancing existing water trails, identifying and prioritizing new opportunities, expanding ADA accessibility, and ensuring all trails meet the highest standards of quality, safety, and user experience. These strategies are deeply rooted in the goals of equitable access, sustainable economic development, active community engagement, and the promotion of river towns as vibrant hubs for recreation and tourism. Collectively, these recommendations offer a roadmap for leveraging the Region's natural assets and community spirit to create a premier destination for paddling and riverfront living.

1. Amplifying Existing Water Trails

- Enhance Regional Identity and Quality Standards
  - Develop consistent branding for all designated water trails, leveraging signage, digital platforms, and trail maps with unified logos and trailhead markers.
  - Pursue state and National Water Trail endorsements to demonstrate quality and drive funding eligibility.
- Upgrade User Infrastructure Across Trails
  - Standardize, upgrade, and maintain amenities: durable restrooms, clear launch maps, camping, parking, and water access at primary put-ins and take-outs.
  - Expand wayfinding with water- and land-facing signage, informational kiosks, and mileage markers.

2. Designating and Prioritizing New Water Trails

- Criteria for Trail Designation and Prioritization
  - Demand & User Experience: Prioritize routes with consistent local and visitor use, high-quality scenery, wildlife, and connections to river towns.
  - Accessibility: Choose routes with existing or potential for public access points, safe parking, and low barrier to entry.
  - Community Support: Factor in local enthusiasm, leadership, and willingness to steward the trail.
  - Ecological Integrity: Select rivers with strong conservation value that can sustain increased recreation.
  - Gap Filling: Address counties, communities, or river types currently underserved by designated trails.
- Next Steps for Designation
  - Conduct formal feasibility assessments for candidate rivers using the above criteria.
  - Secure municipal, tribal, and county partnerships for long-term management and stewardship.
  - Apply for recognition through state-level water trail programs, which often come with grant options for access site upgrades and visitor amenities.

3. Effective Promotion of Water Trails

- Multi-Channel Marketing Approach
  - Develop and maintain a central website and interactive map dedicated to regional water trails—including both official and community-recognized routes.
  - Distribute branded print and digital trail guides at visitor centers, parks, and regional tourism events.
  - Invest in social media campaigns highlighting user stories, seasonal updates, and river town attractions.
- Partner-Driven Programming
  - Organize annual or seasonal water trail festivals, take-a-trip challenges, and photo contests.
  - Support outfitters, cafes, and local businesses in creating “paddle & dine,” guided tours, and trip package partnerships.

4. Integrating More ADA Accessible Water Trail Infrastructure

- Conduct a comprehensive audit of all launch sites to identify ADA compliance gaps.

- Prioritize upgrades where the highest use and need intersect, especially near high-traffic parks and towns.
- Implement best-practice standards for adaptive launches: gently sloped or transfer platform launches, tactile maps, accessible restrooms, and parking.
- Partner with organizations serving adaptive paddlers for design input, pilot events, and promotion.

5. Achieving the Region's Best Quality Water Trails

- Establish and routinely update a quality standards handbook for water trail maintenance, user amenities, information, signage, and stewardship—benchmarking against state and national best practices.
- Form a regional "Water Trail Advisory Group" with representatives from each county and river town to oversee standards compliance, share data, and coordinate upgrades.
- Adopt a continuous improvement process: annual user surveys, site assessments, and regular staff/volunteer training.

6. Advancing Stewardship and Community Integration

- Volunteer & Community Programs
  - Launch an "Adopt-a-Landing" or "Riverkeeper" program for regular cleanups, maintenance, and habitat restoration coordinated with paddling clubs, schools, and local organizations.
  - Integrate interpretive and environmental education signage at launches and along trails.
- Civic Pride Initiatives
  - Feature river clean-up accomplishments and stewardship champions in community newsletters and online.
  - Create events pairing stewardship with recreation—paddle-and-pick, invasive species pulls, or community river days.

7. Strengthening and Growing River Towns

- For Top-Rated River Towns
  - Encourage towns like Eau Claire, Alma, Chippewa Falls, Durand, and Menomonie to brand themselves as "Official River Towns" through signage, downtown art, events, and collaborative tourism campaigns.
  - Expand town-to-waterfront programming: outdoor concerts, festivals, art walks, paddler welcome events, and market days closely tied to river access points.
  - Incentivize business development catering to paddlers: rentals, shuttles, guides, lodging, and riverside dining.
- For Emerging or Aspirational River Towns
  - Initiate riverfront assessment workshops using toolkit criteria to identify quick-win improvements (e.g., adding seating, picnic spots, or kayak racks).
  - Partner with county parks and recreation to pursue grants for trailhead and signage investments.
  - Encourage community teams to participate in regional river town networks or "best practices" exchanges with leading towns.
  - Pilot small-scale events (e.g., beginner paddles, farmer's markets by the river) to build public recognition and use.

8. Other Strategic Steps

- Develop a Region-wide "River Towns & Water Trails" passport or rewards program to promote multi-site visits, connecting trail use directly to local business and tourism.
- Work with land and water conservation groups to maintain water quality, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and bank stabilization, ensuring recreation grows alongside ecological health.
- Gather and publish impact data—recreation participation, economic effects, environmental indicators—to strengthen support for continued investment in water trails and river towns.

By enacting these strategic recommendations, the Region can amplify its water trails and river towns as signature, inclusive, and high-quality assets—engaging communities, supporting stewardship, and positioning the Region as a premier destination for water-based recreation and riverside vitality.

River Towns Assessment

Identifying and supporting river towns within the Region offers a powerful opportunity to enhance outdoor recreation, stimulate local economies, and build stronger, more connected communities. As natural gateways to water trails, river towns play a vital role in welcoming residents and visitors to the Region's scenic rivers, providing access points, amenities, and authentic small-town hospitality. Recognizing these communities not only promotes cohesive tourism marketing but also supports recreation-driven economic development by encouraging investment in riverfront infrastructure, local businesses, and outdoor event programming. Embracing a river town identity fosters civic pride and community engagement, creating opportunities for volunteer-led stewardship efforts like river cleanups, habitat restoration, and public education around conservation. It also promotes healthier lifestyles by encouraging active engagement with nature through paddling, fishing, walking, and biking along connected trail systems. From a planning perspective, designating river towns helps identify infrastructure gaps—such as ADA accessibility or safe water access—and aligns regional efforts to create a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable recreation network. Ultimately, river towns are more than just places along the water—they are anchors of regional identity and engines of community vitality.

Based on the five-step framework from the NPS River Town Review Toolkit, the following categories have been adapted for a regional scan:

1. River Access & Recreation Infrastructure
2. Connectivity to Trails, Parks, and Downtowns
3. Tourism and Visitor Services
4. Wayfinding and Signage
5. Inclusivity, Accessibility & Community Engagement
6. Partnership Potential (Upstream/Downstream/Across River)
7. Outdoor Business & Economic Readiness

Each county has towns or villages situated along major rivers such as the Mississippi, Chippewa, Black, Red Cedar, Eau Claire, Trempealeau, and Buffalo Rivers. The assessment includes well-known river towns and emerging or underutilized hubs.

Figure 30: *Summary table of River Town Readiness Analysis. Scored 1 (low) to 5 (high) with a maximum 35 score.*

River Town (Sample)	River Name	Access & Recreation Infrastructure	Trails/Downtown Connectivity	Visitor Amenities & Events	Wayfinding & Signage	Accessibility & Inclusion	Regional Partnerships	Business Integration	Total
Durand	Chippewa	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	**25**
Alma	Mississippi	5	4	4	4	3	4	4	**28**
Chippewa Falls	Chippewa	4	4	4	4	3	3	5	**27**
Eau Claire (city)	Eau Claire & Chippewa	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	**33**
Menomonie	Red Cedar	4	5	4	4	3	3	4	**27**
Osseo	Buffalo	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	**16**
Black River Falls	Black	4	3	4	3	3	3	3	**23**
Galesville	Trempealeau	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	**19**
Whitehall/ Independence	Trempealeau	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	**14**
Nelson	Mississippi	3	2	2	1	1	2	2	**13**
Pepin (village)	Lake Pepin	4	3	3	3	2	3	3	**21**
Cornell	Chippewa	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	**16**
Neillsville (limited)	Black (tributary)	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	**13**
Mondovi	Buffalo	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	**18**

Key Regional Takeaways

Highlights & Insights

Eau Claire: Premier riverfront access and recreation infrastructure, with exceptional downtown trail connections and robust event programming. The presence of two rivers, modern parks, and frequent festivals position Eau Claire as the cultural and recreational leader. Strong business integration, accessible infrastructure, and regional partnerships further boost its role.

Alma: Historic Mississippi river town with notable river access, an attractive downtown, vibrant birdwatching, boating opportunities, and strong integration with regional tourism and events.

Chippewa Falls: Thriving community identity tied to the river, solid riverfront parks, connections to famous breweries, close-knit downtown, and river festival activity.

Durand: Walkable riverfront, proximity to the Chippewa River State Trail, and active summer event schedule. Strong potential for further trail-to-town linkages.

Menomonie: Red Cedar River and Lake Menomin waterfronts with ample parks, a flagship university, and integrated trails facilitate year-round outdoor activity.

Strengths

- Eau Claire, Durand, Chippewa Falls, Menomonie, and Alma lead the Region, with strong river integration, festivals/events, nearby paddling access, and business partnerships.
- River access infrastructure is well-established in most counties at key locations, especially state parks and city parks.
- Linkages to trails, parks, and downtowns are improving, notably in Eau Claire and Menomonie through greenway investments

Other Resources

- **Paddle Wisconsin - River Alliance of WI**
- **Paddle Wisconsin presented by River Alliance of Wisconsin**
- **Water Trails in Wisconsin**
- **Wisconsin Lakes DNR Lake Maps**
- **Lower Grand River Water Trail Assessment**
- **NPS River Town Assessment**
- **NPS River Access Planning Guide**

Key Regional Themes

- **Accessibility, Maintenance, and Safety:** Most trails offer high to excellent safety and access features, while more remote rugged trails like Nelson Trevino require future investment.
- **Integration with Communities:** Urban segments and state park trails benefit from close community and business ties; more rural/remote trails present opportunities for stronger economic, hospitality, and paddler service integration.
- **Interpretive/Educational Value:** State park and urban trails lead in interpretive offerings; there is room to expand educational signage, cultural/historic interpretation, and stewardship programs on all trails.
- **Trail Gaps:** Key improvement areas include standardizing signage, expanding ADA and universal design, bolstering community event promotion, and ensuring universal stewardship via multi-partner support.

Conclusion

The official water trails in the Region demonstrate a strong baseline of access, safety, and user amenities, with particular excellence in state park and city-managed corridors. Consistent standards across all trails; investments in accessibility, signage, and educational value; and stronger linkages to river towns and local economies will further align water trails with regional recreation, stewardship, and tourism goals.

Official Water Trails Inventory

The Region features six officially designated water trails that highlight the Region's scenic diversity and commitment to high-quality paddling experiences. Winding through the counties of Buffalo, Chippewa, Eau Claire, Pepin, and Trempealeau, these trails offer everything from tranquil backwater loops to meandering river journeys connecting vibrant towns and quiet natural areas. Each water trail is carefully developed with marked access points, interpretive signage, and amenities such as restrooms, parking, and, in many cases, ADA/universal access features.

Paddlers of all skill levels can enjoy calm state park environments, routes rich in wildlife and cultural history, or longer trips punctuated by scenic sandbars and riverfront communities. Together, these six trails form the backbone of the Region's water-based recreation system—balancing ecological stewardship, accessibility, safety, and deep integration with local tourism and community assets.

Perrot State Park Voyageurs Canoe Trail

Type: Looped Canoe Trail	**Length:** 3.4 miles
Difficulty: Beginner to Intermediate	**Typical Duration:** 2-3 hours
Access & Launches: Improved park landings; adaptive launch available	
Amenities: Interpretive signs, restrooms, parking, rentals	
Description: Explores Trempealeau Bay's scenic backwaters, rich in wildlife and fur trade history.	
Strengths: Exceptional infrastructure, access, ADA and universal use features, trail signage, interpretive panels, and strong integration with park services. High standards of maintenance and stewardship.	
Opportunities: Strong economic and visitor draw; could improve linkages with local businesses and events.	

Merrick State Park Canoe Trail

Type: Looped Canoe Trail	**Length:** Approx. 2-3 miles (loop)
Difficulty: Beginner	**Typical Duration:** 1-2 hours
Access & Launches: Boat landings with accessible kayak launch; rentals	
Amenities: Marked trail, restrooms, parking, camping	
Description: Quiet backwater loop through wetlands and refuge; marked for self-guidance.	
Strengths: Well-developed park amenities, universally accessible launches, quiet and sheltered paddling, and educational signage.	
Opportunities: Expanded outreach and connections to nearby river towns and additional interpretive programming.	

Chippewa River Water Trail - Eau Claire Segment

Type: Linear River Trail	**Length:** 4.2 miles
Difficulty: Beginner	**Typical Duration:** 1.5-2 hours
Access & Launches: City park launches, public riverfront landings	
Amenities: Parks, restrooms, historic markers, ramps	
Description: Urban-to-rural paddle through Eau Claire, combining parks, bridges, and scenic woods.	

Chippewa River Water Trail – Mississippi Segment

Type: Linear River Trail	**Length:** Varies; major segment from Durand
Difficulty: Beginner to Intermediate	**Typical Duration:** Day trips to overnight camping
Access & Launches: Multiple small-town/county park access points	
Amenities: Parks, camping, restrooms at some landings	
Description: Meandering waterway with sandbars, camping, wooded banks, rich birdlife.	

Nelson Trevino Canoe Trail

Type: Looped Canoe Trail	**Length:** 4.8 miles
Difficulty: Intermediate to Advanced	**Typical Duration:** 3 hours
Access & Launches: Primitive landings, some marker signage, GPS helpful	
Amenities: Limited amenities; camping on sand beaches	
Description: Wild backwater loops through floodplain forest and sloughs in a State Natural Area; high biodiversity.	
Strengths: Outstanding ecological and scenic value, primitive/wild experience for adventurous paddlers.	
Opportunities: Upgrades needed for signage, mapped routes, access infrastructure, ADA compliance, and interpretive assets for less experienced users.	

Aghaming Canoe Trail

Type: Looped Canoe Trail	**Length:** 6.7 miles
Difficulty: Intermediate	**Typical Duration:** 3-4 hours
Access & Launches: City park launch at Aghaming; interpretive signage	
Amenities: Signage, parking, near town services	
Description: Quiet, immersive paddle through Mississippi backwaters and forested islands.	
Strengths: Well-marked access, interpretive signs, integration with Pepin and Winona towns, abundant wildlife viewing.	
Opportunities: Expanding amenities and access points, boosting ADA compliance, and deepening town connections.	

Official Water Trails Assessment

Assessment Model Approach

The assessment combines nationally recognized water trail evaluation frameworks, particularly elements from the Lower Grand River Water Trail Assessment and Improvement Plan, and National Park Service's Water Trail Standards and River Access Planning Guides. Each water trail was rated across several dimensions critical to user experience, safety, stewardship, accessibility, amenities, community integration, and interpretive value. Quantitative scores (1–5; 1=Poor, 5=Excellent) and qualitative descriptors reflect this integrated, best-practices approach tailored to the Region.

Assessment Categories

- Access & Launch Quality
- Signage & Wayfinding
- Amenities (Parking, Restrooms, Camping)
- ADA/Universal Accessibility
- Safety & Hazards
- Information & Mapping
- Community/Town Integration
- Interpretation & Education
- Economic Opportunity
- Stewardship & Maintenance

Figure 31: *Assessment Table: Quantitative Review of Six Official Water Trails. Scored 1 (low) to 5 (high) with a maximum 50 score.*

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	**Aghaming Canoe Trail** Mississippi River	**Chippewa River Water Trail** Eau Claire River Segment	**Chippewa River Water Trail** Mississippi River Segment	**Merrick State Park Canoe Trail** Mississippi River	**Nelson Trevino Canoe Trail** Upper Mississippi River	**Voyageurs Canoe Trail** Perrot State Park - Trempealeau River
	OFFICIAL WATER TRAILS					
Access & Launch Quality	4	5	4	5	3	5
Signage & Wayfinding	4	5	4	4	2	5
Amenities	4	5	4	5	2	5
ADA Access	3	5	3	5	2	5
Safety	4	5	4	5	4	5
Information & Maps	4	5	4	5	3	5
Community Integration	4	5	4	3	2	4
Interpretation/Education	4	4	3	4	2	5
Economic Opportunity	3	5	4	3	2	4
Stewardship	4	5	4	5	3	5
Total	**38**	**49**	**38**	**44**	**25**	**48**

C. DISC GOLF COURSES

Note: Much of the data and information available for this activity was derived from UDisc (https://udisc.com/), an online platform and mobile application that provides extensive data on disc golf trends, statistics, and courses. This data was supplemented by interviews with stakeholders and site visits to courses.

The sport of disc golf is a relatively new form of recreation, having started around the 1960's. The sport continues to grow, and disc golf enjoys a strong niche market in the Chippewa Valley. According to the popular disc golf app, UDisc, Eau Claire is the number one destination in Wisconsin and twenty-sixth in the country.

When asked to identify a transformative idea for the Region, disc golf improvements were the second most popular response (behind hiking). Responses requested upgrades to existing courses, more challenging courses, and a better distribution of courses in the Region. Higher densities of courses can be found in and around the City of Menomonie and the Urban Area. In contrast, Pepin County has no courses.



The varied topography of the Region offers opportunities to experience a wide range of course types and surroundings. Open, flat locations provide easy layouts for beginners, while wooded and hilly locations can be more technical, appealing to Professional Disc Golf Association (PDGA) players and travelling hobbyists. Many courses are integrated into school campuses or parks and are free to the public; however, some are located on private land and require prior scheduling or fees to play. While the sport can be played year-round, some courses operate seasonally and close in the winter.

The disc golf community ranges from a formal network at the professional level – with the PGDA providing rules, standards, and ethics for everything from players to courses – to the communal disc golf organizations at the local level. Operating at a level in between the PGDA and the local organizations is the Wisconsin Disc Sports Association, which manages the Wisconsin Disc Golf Tour (WDGT). Three WDGT events are currently held in the Region:

- **Leinenkugel's Throwdown (Leinenkugel's Disc Golf Course, Chippewa Falls)**
- **Tower Ridge Open (Tower Ridge Courses, Eau Claire)**
- **Wakanda Open (Wakanda Park, Menomonie)**

Historically, the Region has hosted additional events. As it stands today, WDGT events are primarily held in eastern Wisconsin.

Local disc golf organizations in the Region are community-driven with club members, board members, and a president. Five local organizations were identified within the Region:

- **Chippewa Valley Disc Golf Organization**
- **Driftless Disc Golf Club**
- **Menomonie Area Disc Golf Organization**
- **Mississippi Valley Disc Golf Club**
- **Seven Rivers Disc Golf Club**

These groups organize social events and activities, assist with course maintenance, and typically host PDGA or WDGT events.

Building on the established popularity of disc golf will allow many of the other communities in the Region to enjoy the foot traffic regular disc golf players and the occasional tournament bring. Emphasizing disc golf as a focal activity in the Region will also maintain our position as a disc golf destination within the state and the country.

Regionally Significant Assets

Forty-seven disc golf courses were identified within the Region, of which thirty-six are within the Rural Area. Figure 32 shows the locations of the disc golf courses, differentiated by their location in the Rural or Urban areas. Course data was available for the number of holes, general location, tee types, property use, year established, and length of operation for each of the Rural Area courses. Most of this data was sourced from Udisc, which offers extensive information on disc golf courses nationwide and enables users to rank courses across various categories.

Urban & Rural Disc Golf Courses

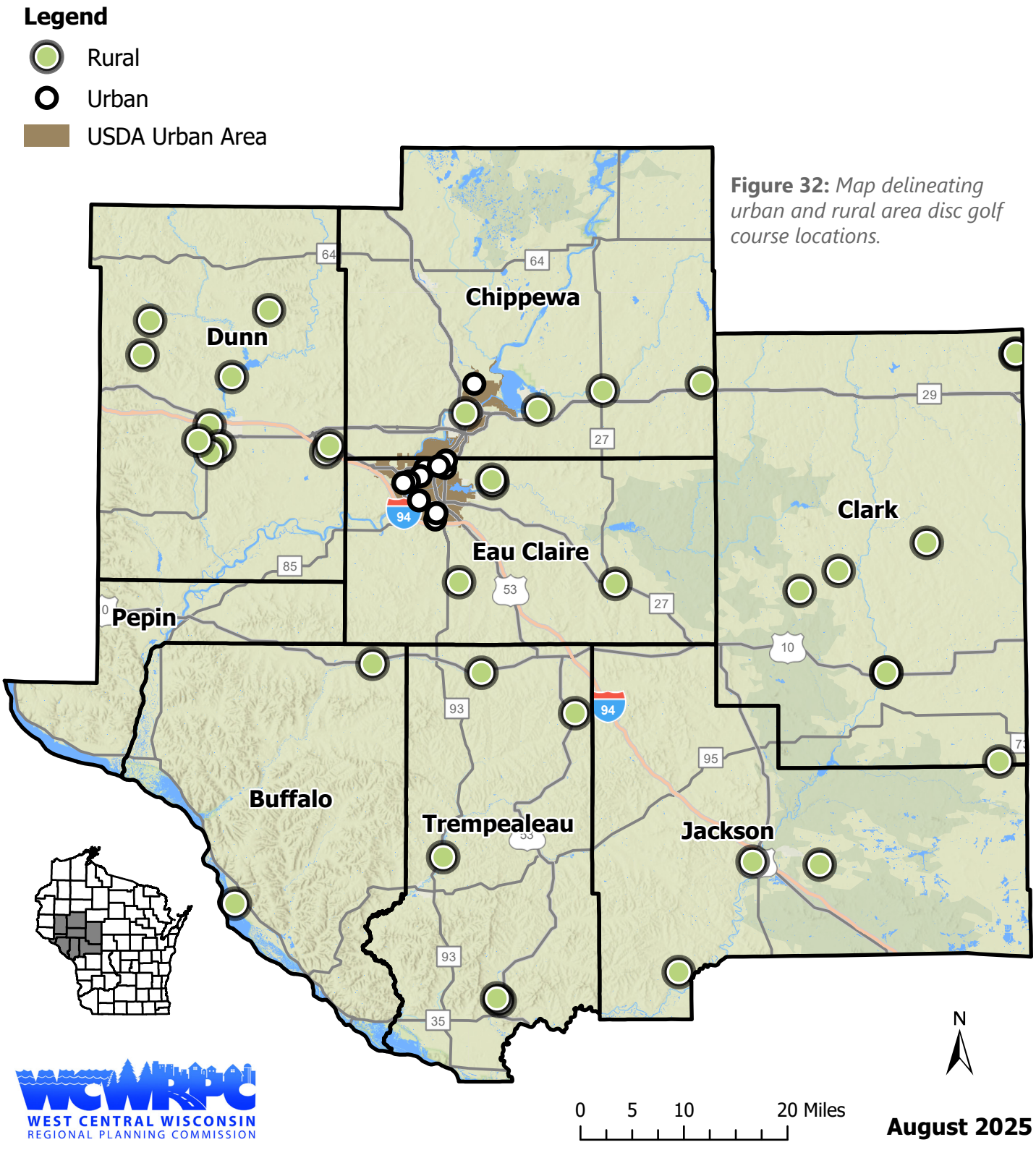


Figure 32: *Map delineating urban and rural area disc golf course locations.*

To identify regionally significant courses, the planning team consulted stakeholders and reviewed criteria set by the PDGA and the WDSA. Based on survey and stakeholder feedback, tournament-quality courses are considered regionally significant. These courses can host major events and attract more players by offering high-quality experiences. It was determined that courses with at least 18 holes can provide the varied layout requirements for multi-round tournaments. Additionally, concrete or grass tee areas are suitable for hosting tournaments at the WDGT or PGDA level. Of the thirty-three Rural Area courses, ten provide the required criteria.

- **Axldog Acres (Boyceville, Dunn County)**
- **Five Seasons (Willard, Clark County)**
- **Leinenkugel's Disc Golf Course (Chippewa Falls, Chippewa County)**
- **Lafayette Town Hall Park (Town of Lafayette, Chippewa County)**
- **Mahr's Meadow (Stanley, Clark County)**
- **Menomonie Middle School (Menomonie, Dunn County)**
- **Tower Ridge (has two 18-hole courses) (Eau Claire, Eau Claire County)**
- **Wakanda Park (Menomonie, Dunn County)**
- **WoodWind Park (Wheeler, Dunn County)**
- **VDGC (Strum, Trempealeau County)**

It is worth noting that the number of significant courses would increase to 11 if the requirement for grass or concrete tees were removed (or if these types of tees were installed). The additional course would be:

- **Wild Apple Disc Golf (Osseo, Trempealeau County)**

Assessment/Methodology

The team considered why only three of the twelve courses currently host events. We asked the disc golf groups this question, finding that the time and energy required to host such events can be burdensome. Serving as a board member or president is a voluntary effort. Tournament organization would be another task for these individuals, who are already balancing the maintenance of courses, hosting organization-based events, and handling administrative tasks. All events require a Tournament Director (as determined by the PGDA), sponsors, and vendors, which must be solicited by organization members. As board members and presidents transfer out of the organization, the knowledge they have gained for organizing events is lost.

Additionally, we learned during our conversations that the local organizations currently operate in silos. While these groups are active within their own communities, collaboration and competition between groups does not occur in a formal capacity, if at all.

The planning team believes that increasing the level of interaction and competitive play amongst groups can increase the knowledge and efficiency for leadership through supportive efforts and shared learning opportunities. Organized competition amongst the groups could generate interest and develop pride within the organizations. Once a regional network has been developed, it will be easier to establish new or larger courses.

Business Assessment

Lodging, gas stations, grocery stores, restaurants, and sporting goods stores were identified as the essential facilities for disc golf courses. They provide the accommodations needed for visitors to the area and during multi-day tournaments. A five-mile driveshed was used to identify businesses near each of the courses.

Axldog Acres

» Axldog Acres is in rural Dunn County, which limits the number of services available within a short distance. There are camping opportunities within 5 miles of the course, but no brick-and-mortar lodging facilities are available. One gas station, three grocery stores, and four restaurants are located within the five-mile driveshed. Almost all of these businesses are located in the Village of Boyceville.

Five Seasons

» Five Seasons is also located in a rural area. The nearest businesses are located in the cities of Greenwood and Neillsville, both roughly 15 miles away. Camping options are available in the adjacent Clark County Forest Lands. No other businesses are located within the five-mile driveshed.

Leinenkugel's Disc Golf Course

» The Leinenkugel's Disc Golf Course benefits from its proximity to the Urban Area. The fourteen lodging options range from campgrounds to hotels. There are over thirty grocery stores and eighty restaurants nearby, as well as six sporting goods stores.

Lafayette Town Hall Park

» The Town of Lafayette's course is slightly more removed from the Urban Area, resulting in fewer but still plentiful business accommodations. Five nearby lodging options range from campgrounds to hotels. Other services include two gas stations, ten grocery stores, and eleven restaurants. No sporting goods stores are within the five-mile driveshed, though there are options available in the Urban Area.

Mahr's Meadow

» Mahr's Meadow is located just outside of the City of Stanley, which provides all of the essential services identified. Visitors can camp at the adjacent Chapman Park Campgrounds or stay at a hotel just off State Road 29. The City of Stanley has four gas stations, six grocery stores, and nine restaurants. There is a sporting goods store located in the City, but it does not appear to offer disc golf equipment.

Menomonie Middle School

» The Menomonie Middle School course is on the periphery of the City of Menomonie. There are several businesses located within the five-mile driveshed. They include twelve lodging options, nine gas stations, thirty-three food or grocery stores, seventy-four restaurants, and three sporting goods stores with at least one providing disc golf equipment.

Tower Ridge

» Tower Ridge is just outside the Urban Area, but far enough away that it lacks the abundance of supporting services other urban disc golf courses have. There are two lodging options, one gas station, one grocery store, and three restaurants. However, the Urban Area is roughly 10 miles away, and within that area is a substantial number of businesses that could make development around the course infeasible at this time.

Wakanda Park

» Wakanda Park is located in north Menomonie near I-94. Its proximity to this highway, and being located in a city, means the disc golf course has many supporting services nearby. These services include twelve lodging options, including a mix of camping and hotel accommodations, six gas stations, twenty-nine food and grocery stores, seventy-two restaurants, and three sporting goods stores, with at least one providing disc golf equipment.

WoodWind Park

» WoodWind Park is located between the Villages of Wheeler and Colfax. Both villages are outside the five-mile driveshed. While they provide most of the essential services identified the nearest sporting goods store offering disc golf equipment is nineteen miles away in the City of Menomonie. There are not services located within a five-mile drive of the course.

VDGC

» Viking Disc Golf Course (VDGC) is located in the Village of Strum, but the Village of Eleva provides services within the five-mile driveshed as well. Crystal Lake Campgrounds are the only lodging option. Other services include two gas stations, seven food or grocery stores, and ten restaurants. There are no sporting goods stores within the driveshed.

Thematic Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed around making the Region a hub for disc golf enthusiasts, developing a strong tournament / event culture, and improving the disc golf community both now and for future generations. Improvement requires both physical development of sites and educational outreach and event promotion to continue to draw individuals to the sport of disc golf.

Course Improvements / Development

» Increase the number of tournament-ready courses.
» Establish a 36-hole course in the Region to help facilitate WDSA and PDGA tournament interest.
» Host an event with course owners to develop a strategic improvement plan.
» Standardize signage across courses for a consistent layout while allowing unique branding capabilities.
» Facilitate ADA assessments.
» Invest in restrooms, accessible pathways, and parking at priority sites.
» Establish a regional course in each county.
» Develop recommendations for enhancements to address age and ability limitations.

Regional Organization

» Improve coordination among disc golf organizations.
» Formalize a regional disc golf roundtable for leadership succession, knowledge exchange, and coordinated event planning.
» Establish a regional disc golf organization.
» Establish a regional Tournament Director to assist local organizations.
» Establish a regional development center (see Lemon Lake Flight Center).
» Partner with school districts to establish disc golf club teams.
» Initiate youth and women's programming to diversify participation.

Regionally Significant Disc Golf Courses

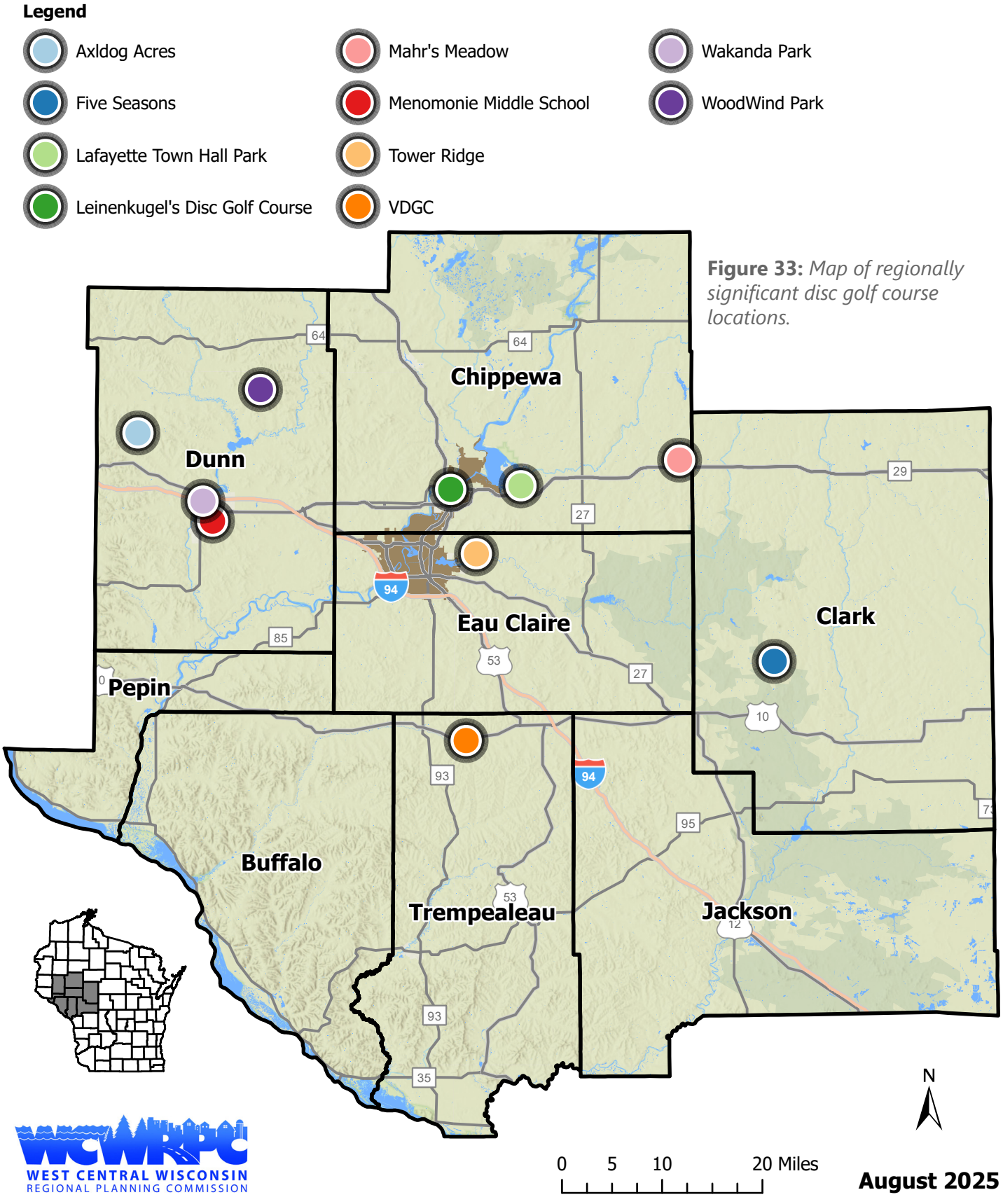


Figure 33: *Map of regionally significant disc golf course locations.*

Economic Development

- Leverage the regional draw of disc golf to actively recruit disc golf manufacturers, suppliers, and supporting services.
- Develop “Disc & Drafts” or passport programs, incentivizing visits to multiple courses with rewards from local businesses.
- Attract regional and national tournaments to grow visitor numbers.
- Leverage UDisc, PDGA, and other disc golf organizations to gather data on course usage, visitors, and ratings to support economic development efforts and track trends.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Collaborate on disc golf-themed festivals, event series, and family-friendly programs to support hospitality and retail sectors.
- Identify potential sponsors and develop fundraising programs to fund competitive tournament purses.
- Host events on National Disc Golf Day (1st Saturday in August).
- Increase the number of WDSA events in the Region.
- Host PGDA events in the Region.
- Host an annual regional tournament (across courses in the Region) to encourage club memberships and pride.
- Promote winter tournaments to encourage year-round participation.
- Launch regional marketing efforts emphasizing accessibility, scenic qualities, and year-round play.

Key Performance Indicators

Tracking successful implementation of these recommendations will first require establishing a baseline. UDisc provides extensive data for courses, especially for “Course Ambassadors”. Pulling this data for the Region’s courses will determine current activity levels prior to implementation efforts. Pulling this same data annually, once efforts are underway, can help measure impact:

- Number of rounds played
- Course criteria rankings
- Overall course rankings
- Number of new players or number of visiting players

Another measure is the growth of disc golf infrastructure. Easily verifiable trends would include increases in:

- Number of tournament-ready courses (10 currently)
- Number of public courses (34)
- Number of PDGA / WDSA events (3)
- Number of recommendations achieved (0)
- Amount earned in grant dollars (unknown – survey disc golf organizations)
- Number of clubs / memberships (5 / unknown)
- Number of school programs (0)

D. GOLF COURSES

Golf plays a significant role in the Region's outdoor recreation landscape. It offers a blend of championship-caliber experiences, family-friendly outings, and tourism opportunities across the Region. Local courses are set among rolling hills, forests, and river valleys, with amenities ranging from basic greens to full-service clubhouses supporting tournaments, instruction, and social events.



Golf is governed by the United States Golf Association (USGA). The Wisconsin State Golf Association (WSGA) works with the USGA to promote the sport within Wisconsin. Ownership of courses is a mix of public, private, and semi-private facilities. There are a variety of course types from 9-hole par three courses to 18-hole championship layouts.

Regionally Significant Assets

Developing opportunities to host amateur and professional tournaments in the Region would help promote the Region as a destination for golfing. Professional tournaments provide ancillary benefits to the courses that host them. The events themselves provide marketing and media awareness, as well as heightened economic activity over multiple days. Outside of the event itself, the prestige of being a tournament location brings semi-pro and amateur golfers that want professional-quality experiences.

The planning team identified tournament-level criteria for the Region's courses to identify regionally significant courses.

Criteria for Significance

- Course length (championship orientation, 6,500+ yards)
- Amenity mix (range, instruction, food, event spaces)
- History of, or ability in, hosting tournaments and economic events
- Accessibility and community integration

There are several courses within the Rural Area that can be considered regionally significant:

- **The Grove Golf Course (Buffalo County) - 18 holes**
- **Valley Golf Course (Buffalo County) – 18 holes**
- **Lake Wissota Golf & Events (Chippewa County) – 18 holes**
- **Trempealeau Mountain GC (Trempealeau County) – 18 holes**
- **Whispering Pines GC (Chippewa County) – 18 holes**
- **Skyline Golf Club (Jackson County) – 18 holes**

Assessment & Methodology

In 2021, the USGA developed a classification system for courses based on prestige, facilities provided, and quality of related amenities and services provided.

USGA Facility Classifications:

- Focused Facilities: Minimal amenities; accessible, straightforward golf.
- Enhanced Facilities: Additional features like practice greens, teaching, small dining.
- Comprehensive Facilities: Complete suite; lessons, advanced practice, banquet space, major events.
- Lifestyle Facilities: Social, dining, health, wellness, and entertainment, often tied to club membership.
- Resort: Integrated hospitality focus, typically part of larger resorts (less common in this Region).

In addition to regionally significant courses, several courses in the Region fill the role of community-oriented "Focused" facilities, providing accessible, affordable recreational opportunities at the local level.

Regionally Significant Golf Courses

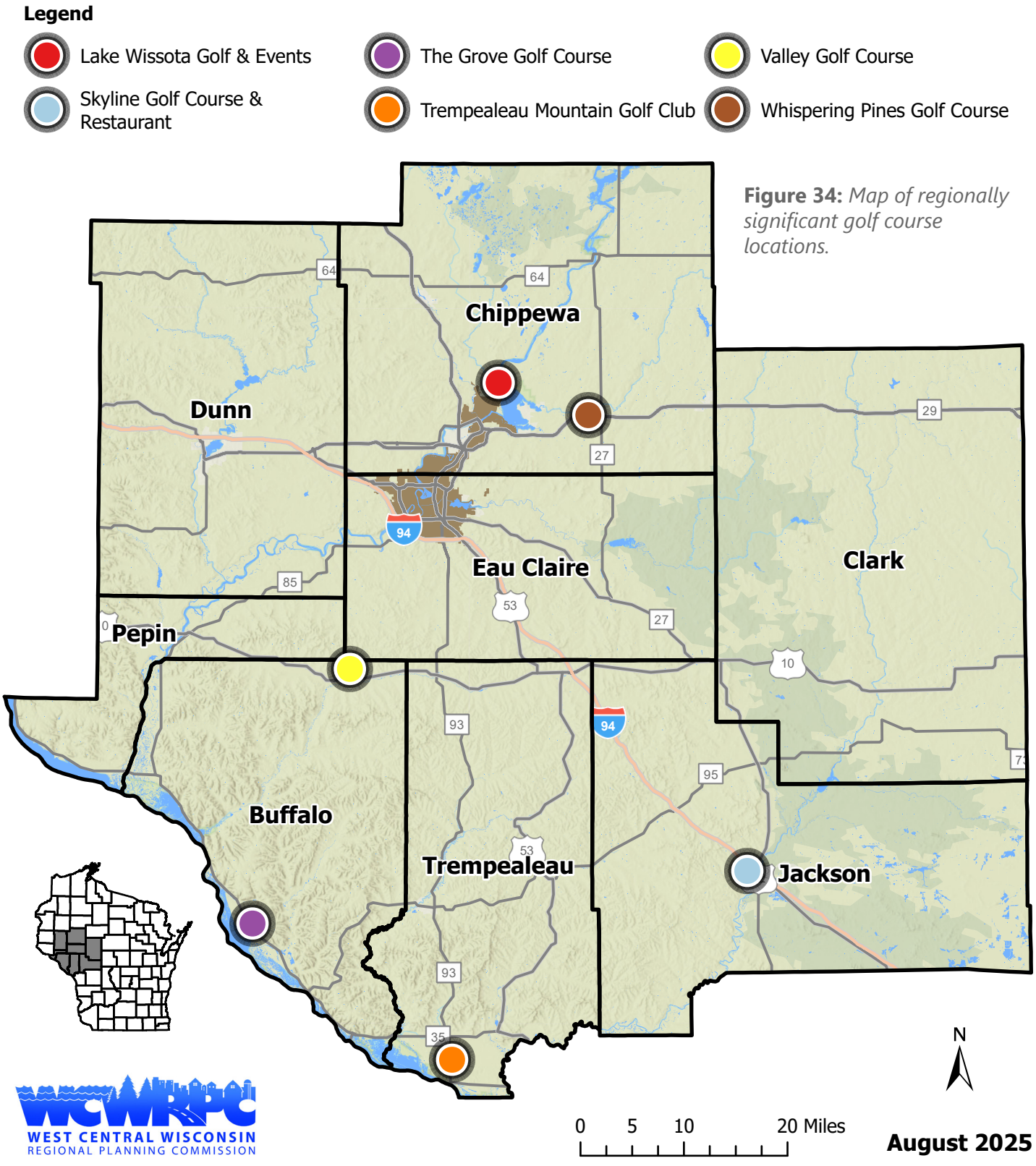


Figure 34: *Map of regionally significant golf course locations.*

Regionally significant courses were analyzed according to USGA's recommended classification scheme, which focuses not only on the number of holes and ownership but on golfer experience and facility offering.

Figure 35: *List of regionally significant golf courses and additional facility information.*

Course Name	Facility Classification	Key Amenities	Notable Features
The Grove Golf Course	Enhanced	Pro-led lessons, range, bar/ grill, banquet space	Community events, coaching
Valley Golf Course	Focused	Basic pro shop, snack bar	Affordability, accessibility
Lake Wissota Golf & Events	Comprehensive	Full-range, lesson programs, pro shop, banquet	Major event hosting
Trempealeau Mountain Golf Course	Lifestyle	Dining, social events, learning center	Community engagement, entertainment
Whispering Pines Golf Course	Enhanced	Driving range, restaurant, winter simulator	Year-round play, technology
Skyline Golf Course & Restaurant	Enhanced	Pro shop, driving range, social events, restaurant	Mixed urban/natural setting, events

Features such as instruction, event hosting, and technology integration (simulators, Top Tracer) are steadily increasing in the Region's "Comprehensive" and "Lifestyle" facilities. Further development of these courses, as well as increasing the number of these courses, will help increase the overall interest in golfing within the Region and help attract interest in tournament-level competition. Collaborating with course owners and tournament organizers to create development plans should be a priority.

Business Assessment

Golf courses represent a unique asset type in this plan, as the courses themselves often strive to be all-inclusive. Lodging, food, and equipment are provided on-site on the most developed courses, while food and equipment are provided at most courses via a clubhouse or pro shop. High-quality clubhouses host banquets, weddings, and community events, supporting off-peak facility use and economic benefit. For those courses without lodging, partnerships exist or could be expanded for lodging packages and food service at events.

Thematic Recommendations

Improvements / Development

- Development plans to increase the USGA Facility Classification for courses throughout the Region.
  - Plans must be developed in collaboration with course owners.
- Encourage owners to invest in technology upgrades to improve user experience, attract new players, and create year-round opportunities for golf-related events.

- Invest in online booking software, mobile apps, and digital scorecard systems to improve user experiences.
- Consider adoption of simulator technology to provide off-season golf-related experiences and provide year-round services for players.
  - Utilize simulator technology to attract casual or newer players.

» Expand youth, club, and training programs to increase the number of golfers and introduce new users to the sport.

» As needed, develop ADA compliance in clubhouses, pro-shops, event areas, and along courses.

Regional Organization

» Develop a regional tournament series to elevate golfing within the Region.

» Identify opportunities for regional branding and promotion.

- Encourage course owners to engage in collective marketing efforts to expand their outreach and presence.

Economic Development

» Create a regional pass to encourage players to experience multiple courses in the Region.

» Identify opportunities to develop partnerships between the courses and affiliated businesses (hotels, food, retailers, and event promotion).

Marketing, Events, Promotion

» Collaborate with the WSGA to enhance the promotion of the Region's courses and identify opportunities to attract tournament-level competition.

Key Performance Indicators

Work with course owners to identify a baseline for the following criteria:

» Number of rounds played

» Number of tournaments conducted

» Number of club members

» Number of junior leagues / club leagues / training programs

With a baseline established, tracking growth can be done on an annual or seasonal basis. Successful implementation of this plan includes:

» Increasing rate of adoption of new technologies

» Improvements in facility classifications (according to USGA standards)

» Establishment of a regional pass

» Increases in the number of courses participating in the pass

E. WATER-BASED RECREATION

Wisconsin has over 15,000 lakes, providing some of the best recreational opportunities in the nation. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources provides a host of online resources to help identify lakes for recreation purposes which include lake maps, fishing access and fisheries information (Wisconsin Fishing Finder), water quality reports and studies (Surface Water Data Viewer), and lakes with public amenities such as parking lots, shore fishing sites or piers, boat landings, beaches, and adjacent public lands or parks.



Wisconsin has over 15,000 lakes, providing some of the best recreational opportunities in the nation. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources provides a host of online resources to help identify lakes for recreation purposes which include lake maps, fishing access and fisheries information (Wisconsin Fishing Finder), water quality reports and studies (Surface Water Data Viewer), and lakes with public amenities such as parking lots, shore fishing sites or piers, boat landings, beaches, and adjacent public lands or parks.

The Region includes a rich array of lakes offering diverse recreation opportunities like fishing, boating, swimming, scuba diving, and wildlife viewing. While most lakes have good water quality, some face challenges from algae or invasive species. Recreation opportunities are enhanced by the size of the waterbody and availability of public boat launches, beaches, and parks. Proximity to state parks, campgrounds, gas stations, and trails also contribute to the regional significance of specific waterbodies, making them ideal for families and outdoor enthusiasts seeking water-based recreation opportunities.

Regionally Significant Assets

There are dozens of lakes available for water-based recreation opportunities in the Region. Of those, thirteen were identified in this study as regionally significant given their access to a public boat launch, public beach, and public park at the lake. These include:

- **Arbutus Lake**
- **Coon Fork Lake**
- **Cornell Flowage**
- **Holcombe Flowage**
- **Lake Eau Claire**
- **Lake Eau Galle**
- **Lake Menomin**
- **Lake Pepin**
- **Lake Wissota**
- **Long Lake**
- **Mead Lake**
- **Rock Dam Lake**
- **Wazee Lake**

Assessment/Methodology

The water-based recreation assessment focuses on activities such as boating, fishing, kayaking, paddleboarding, swimming, and nature-based recreation like birdwatching or shoreline hiking. These sites require accessible water bodies with sufficient area and depth, infrastructure like boat launches, docks, beaches, parks, or trails, and amenities such as parking, restrooms, picnic areas, and nearby campgrounds and nearby businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores, and gas stations.

Business Assessment

Lodging, gas stations, grocery stores, restaurants, and sporting goods stores were identified as the essential facilities for water-based recreation. A five-mile driveshed was completed from the most popular public boat launches, with the launch listed after the destination.

Arbutus Lake (Russell Memorial Park and Campground)

- Arbutus Lake is a 774-acre lake on the Black River located in Clark and Jackson Counties. It has a maximum depth of 50 feet and visitors have access to the lake from six public boat landings and two public beaches. Fish include Musky, Panfish, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Northern Pike, Walleye and Catfish. There are a dozen lodging/camping locations within five miles of the lake including

Russel Memorial Park and Campground (Clark County). There is a single gas station nearby and a few restaurants, food and grocery stores, and sporting goods stores in Hatfield and Black River Falls to the southwest.

Coon Fork Flowage (Coon Fork Lake County Campground Entrance on County Highway CF)

» Coon Fork Flowage is a 62-acre lake located in Eau Claire County. It has a maximum depth of 20 feet and visitors have access to the lake from a public boat landing and beach within Coon Fork Lake County Park (Eau Claire County). Fish include Musky, Panfish and Largemouth Bass and there are several amenities associated with the county park including 108 campsites complete with shower buildings and flush toilets. Watercraft rentals are available, and both the campground and day use areas include swimming, beaches, volleyball courts, boat landings, pit toilets, and hiking and mountain biking trails. The day use side also includes groomed cross country ski trails for winter use, and the lake is electric trolling motors only. Surrounded by county forest land, the lake is in a remote area, with no other nearby lodging or campgrounds. The nearest gas station, restaurants, or food and grocery store is 6.5 miles away in the City of Augusta and the nearest sporting goods store is 26 miles away in the City of Eau Claire.

Cornell Flowage (Brunet Island State Park Public Boat Launch)

» Cornell Flowage is an 897-acre lake located on the Chippewa River in Chippewa County and is primarily accessible via Brunet Island State Park. It has a maximum depth of 55.7 feet and visitors have access to the lake from two public boat landings and a large public beach within the state park. Fish include Musky, Panfish, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Northern Pike, Walleye, Sturgeon and Catfish. Brunet Island State Park offers more than 1,300 acres of recreational opportunities in the form of parks, camping, and hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing trail networks. Quiet lagoons and channels are excellent for canoeing and wildlife watching. The rolling landscape in Chippewa County is a product of the most recent Ice Age and the park links to the Old Abe State Trail which runs from Cornell to Chippewa Falls (76 miles). There are only a couple of lodging/camping locations within five miles of the flowage but there are gas stations, grocery stores, restaurants, and sporting goods available in nearby Cornell.

Holcombe Flowage (Pine Point County Park Boat Launch)

» The Holcombe Flowage, also known as Lake Holcombe, is a 2,881-acre reservoir on the Chippewa River in Rusk and Chippewa Counties with a maximum depth of 62 feet. Visitors can access the flowage via nine public boat landings and a public beach, with additional coves, bays, and open water areas along its 120 miles of shoreline. The area offers year-round recreation, including access to groomed snowmobile trails in the winter and is popular for fishing trophy musky and walleye, as well as boating, water skiing, and swimming. There are several campgrounds surrounding the lake which include Pine Point County Park (Chippewa County), with few other services in the form of restaurants, gas stations, grocery stores, or sporting goods within five miles of the lake.

Lake Eau Claire (Boat Launch near Lake Eau Claire County Park)

» Lake Eau Claire is an 870-acre lake located in Eau Claire County. It has a maximum depth of 25 feet and visitors have access to the lake from four public boat landings and a small beach area on the northcentral shoreline. Fish include Musky, Panfish, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass and Walleye. There are only a few lodging options available which is mostly comprised of campsites, including Lake Eau Claire County Park (Eau Claire County). There is a single gas station, grocery store, and restaurant within five miles of the lake and the nearest sporting goods store is 22 miles away in the City of Eau Claire.

Lake Eau Galle (Pineview Park Public Boat Launch)

» Lake Eau Galle is a 360-acre lake located in Dunn County. It has a maximum depth of 18 feet and visitors have access to the lake from two public boat landings and a public beach in Pineview Park. Swimming,

Regionally Significant Water Bodies

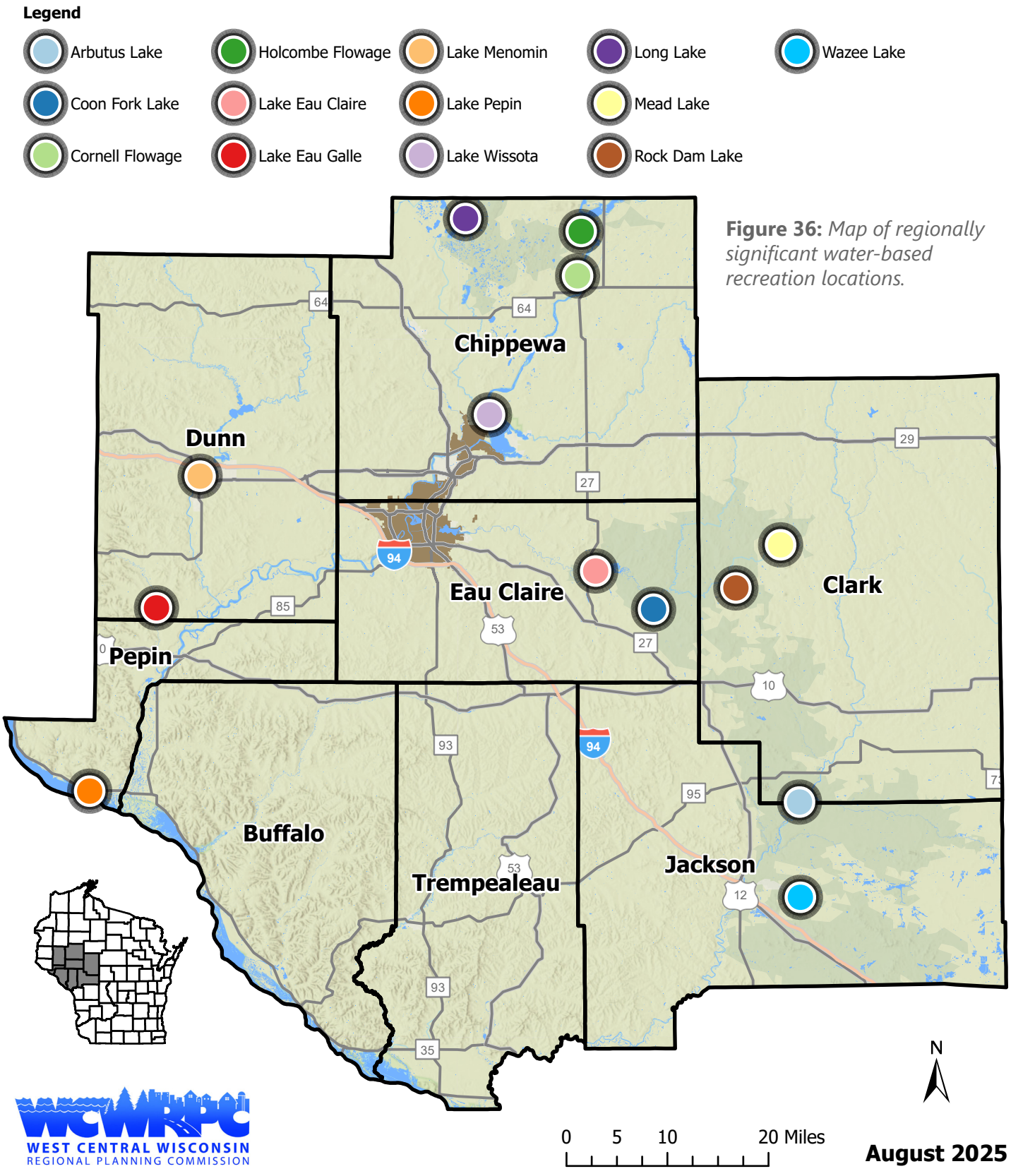


Figure 36: *Map of regionally significant water-based recreation locations.*

fishing, and boating draw most visitors to the park and fish include Panfish and Largemouth Bass. There is a handicap accessible fishing pier, playground, and restrooms but the Lake depth is being impacted by sedimentation along with invasive weeds that make recreational boating difficult. There aren't any services within five miles of the lake, but visitors can access lodging, gas, restaurants, groceries, and sporting goods 8 miles away in nearby Durand.

Lake Menomin (Lakeside Park Boat Landing)

» Lake Menomin is a 1,009-acre reservoir on the Red Cedar River, located in the City of Menomonie, Dunn County. It has a maximum depth of 34 feet and visitors have access to the lake from four public boat landings and public beach at Wakanda Park. Fish include Panfish, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Northern Pike and Walleye. Due to its centralized location within the City of Menomonie Micropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), the lake is supported by dozens of support services in the form of lodging, parks, nearby trails, restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, and sporting goods stores.

Lake Pepin (Public Boat Ramp East of Pepin Marina and Yacht Club)

» Lake Pepin is a naturally occurring 24,550-acre lake along the Mississippi River on the border between Wisconsin and Minnesota, stretching along the shoreline of Pepin, Pierce, and Buffalo Counties. It has a maximum depth of 60 feet and visitors have access to the lake from six public boat landings. Fish include Panfish, Largemouth Bass and Northern Pike. There are nearby services in the Village of Pepin in the form of restaurants, Bed and Breakfast inns, motels, galleries, artists' studios and shops selling such diverse commodities as antiques, books, live bait, and lawn ornaments.

Lake Wissota (Boat Launch at County Highway S)

» Lake Wissota is a 6,148-acre lake located in Chippewa County that includes nearby Lake Wissota State Park, northeast of Chippewa Falls. Within the state park there are secluded campsites, hiking, biking and horseback riding trails, picnic and playground areas and a swimming beach. Boating, canoeing, kayaking and water skiing are popular summer activities on the lake. It has a maximum depth of 64.4 feet and visitors have access to the lake from seven public boat landings and two public beaches. Fish include Musky, Panfish, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Northern Pike, Walleye, Sturgeon and Catfish. There are nearby services in the surrounding towns in the form of lodgings, restaurants, gas stations, and grocery stores. There are a few small bait stores nearby with larger sporting goods businesses in the City of Chippewa Falls and further south in the City of Eau Claire.

Long Lake (Morris-Erickson County Park)

» Long Lake is a 936-acre lake located in Chippewa County. It has a maximum depth of 101 feet and visitors have access to the lake from four public boat landings and a public beach. Fish include Musky, Panfish, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Northern Pike and Walleye. The lake's water is moderately clear and while there are a few lodging/campground options nearby including Morris-Erickson County Park (Chippewa County), the lake is situated in a mostly rural area with few supporting businesses in the form of grocery stores, restaurants, or gas stations and the nearest sporting goods store is 22 miles away in the Town of Holcombe.

Mead Lake (Mead Lake County Park Boat Launch)

» Mead Lake is a 310-acre lake located in Clark County. It has a maximum depth of 16 feet and visitors have access to the lake from two public boat landings and a public beach in Mead Lake Park (Clark County). Fish include Musky, Panfish, Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, and Walleye and popular activities include camping, hiking, swimming, water skiing, and ice fishing. Besides campground facilities, there are no other nearby amenities and the nearest sporting goods store is 25 miles south, along Highway 10 and west of the City of Neillsville.

Rock Dam Lake (Rock Dam County Park Boat Launch)

» Rock Dam Lake is a 96-acre lake located in Clark County. It has a maximum depth of 10 feet and visitors have access to the lake from a public boat landing and public beach in Rock Dam Park (Clark County). Fish include Panfish and Largemouth Bass and popular activities include camping, hiking, swimming, water skiing, and winter sports like ice fishing and snowmobiling. There is a single gas station nearby but no other lodging, restaurants, or food and grocery stores nearby. The nearest sporting goods store is 17 miles south, along Highway 10 and west of the City of Neillsville.

Wazee Lake (Jackson County Boat Landing)

» Wazee Lake is a 146-acre lake located in Jackson County. It has a maximum depth of 350 feet and visitors have access to the lake from a public boat landing, a large public beach, and recreation amenities associated with Wazee Lake Recreation Area (Jackson County). The lake is the clearest and deepest inland lake in Wisconsin and has become the most popular scuba diving site in the Midwest, attracting more than 1000 divers annually. The lake's origin as an iron mine contributes to its distinct characteristics, including underwater features like old roadways and boulders that provide habitat for fish and is a two-tier fishery including two species of trout, smallmouth bass, bluegills and walleye. The lake is non-motorized to ensure protection of the pristine water quality, and to promote a "quiet" recreational experience. The area offers 12 rustic campsites with pit toilets and water, 9 miles of hiking trail, 3 miles of surfaced bicycle trail, picnic areas, handicap fishing pier, and several scenic vistas of the surrounding forest land. There are no other services in the immediate vicinity but additional lodging, gas, food, grocery, and sporting goods are available 8.5 miles away in the City of Black River Falls.

Thematic Recommendations

Facility Improvements / Development

» Enhance regionally significant water bodies with additional boat launches, docks, swimming areas, and accessible trails to support diverse activities.

» Ensure regionally significant lakes have pontoon boat access and facilities.

» Standardize signage for safety, access points, and amenities across counties while preserving unique identities.

» Conduct ADA assessments to ensure inclusivity at key sites and water access points.

» Invest in restrooms, accessible pathways, docks, and parking at priority sites, prioritizing high-traffic areas.

» Explore opportunities for fueling stations for motorized watercraft at regionally significant sites.

» Establish additional water monitoring sites to track water quality and report conditions to the public.

Regional Organization

» Form a Western Wisconsin water recreation roundtable to foster collaboration among counties, focusing on shared goals like water quality and improved access.

» Create a regional water recreation coalition to advocate for funding and coordinate efforts, building on existing groups like lake associations or districts.

» Improve coordination among local boating clubs, fishing groups, or environmental organizations that can help raise needed funding and leverage resources for projects.

» Partner with school districts in counties to establish youth programs, such as kayaking clubs or river ecology workshops, to engage the next generation.

» Launch initiatives to attract underrepresented groups, with accessible events at regionally significant sites.

Economic Development

- Leverage the appeal of water-based recreation in the Region to attract businesses such as boat or equipment rentals, bait shops, or eco-tourism outfitters, supporting local economies.
- Support plans for water trail development, encouraging visitors to explore water bodies and rivers throughout the Region, with incentives from local businesses in cities, villages, and towns.
- Promote the Region as a premier water recreation destination, highlighting the large lakes, rivers, and unique opportunities that set the Region apart from other areas of the state to boost tourism.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Collaborate on water recreation festivals or events, such as organized paddle or float trips, family lake days, or scenic and educational pontoon trips.
- Host events tied to National Fishing and Boating Week, with county-specific activities like fishing and boat clinics or non-motorized watercraft races.
- Increase regional events, including paddle festivals, shoreline cleanups, or eco-tours, leveraging regionally significant sites.
- Promote seasonal activities, such as summer swimming, boating, fishing, or winter ice fishing.
- Launch a regional marketing campaign emphasizing the accessibility of lakes and rivers, their scenic beauty, and year-round opportunities across all eight counties.
- Collect and analyze visitor data from events to demonstrate economic impact, supporting grant applications for projects.

Key Performance Indicators

- Increases in the number of access points
- Increases in the number of amenities and facilities at access points
- Hosting of a water roundtable
- Increases in the number of water-based events

F. FISHING

Fishing is a cornerstone of outdoor recreation in West Central Wisconsin, supported by the Region's abundant natural resources, including over 15,000 inland lakes, 43,000 miles of rivers, and numerous streams across the state. Wisconsin is home to more than 160 different fish species supported by the state's eleven hatcheries and rearing stations that raise millions of fish to be stocked yearly in lakes and rivers where there is little or no natural reproduction. Some popular species for fishing in the Region include Bass, Catfish, Muskellunge (Musky), Northern Pike, Sturgeon, Trout, and Walleye.



In the Region, there are nearly 9,600 inland lakes and over 12,000 miles of rivers. This includes over 1,800 miles of Class I-III trout streams and 398 miles of Outstanding Resource Waters (ORWs) or Exceptional Resource Waters (ERWs). Water designated as ORW or ERW are surface waters providing outstanding recreational opportunities, support valuable fisheries and wildlife habitat, exhibit good water quality, and are not significantly impacted by human activities.

Regionally Significant Assets

To determine regional significance, the planning team utilized data available through the DNR. Datasets reviewed included a 5-year summary of permitted events in the Region, trout streams, and waterbody access points. In reviewing this data, it was determined that larger waterbodies and rivers, which are capable of hosting events with diverse populations of fish, were of regional significance:

- **Black River (Clark/Jackson/Trempealeau)**
- **Buffalo River (Buffalo/Jackson/Trempealeau)**
- **Chippewa River (Chippewa/Dunn/Eau Claire):** Facilitates several events across Chippewa, Dunn, and Eau Claire counties. It is a popular destination for Musky and Catfish.
- **Holcombe Flowage (Chippewa)**
- **Lake Arbutus (Clark/Jackson):** Facilitates all DNR tournaments in Clark County and most tournaments in Jackson County since 2020.
- **Lake Menomin (Dunn)**
- **Lake Pepin (Pepin)**
- **Lake Wissota (Chippewa)**
- **Mississippi River (Buffalo/Pepin/Trempealeau)**
- **Tainter Lake (Dunn)**
- **Trempealeau River (Buffalo/Jackson/Trempealeau)**

Assessment / Methodology

During the analysis process, the planning team found several missing features within the DNR dataset. The team provided as much detail to the asset inventory as possible, but extensive work in reviewing, updating, and maintaining these data points will be an on-going challenge. Furthermore, the Mississippi River does not have a singular resource for data. Rather, the river is broken out into pools, with varying levels of data available for each pool. It is possible this data will be more accurate as DNR continues to role out new portals, tools, and features.

Five of the assets are considered impaired according to WDNR's official list: Lake Menomin (phosphorus), Tainter Lake (phosphorus), Lake Pepin (phosphorus), Lake Wissota (phosphorus, PCBs), and segments of the Mississippi River (varying issues).

All waterbodies were assessed for access to lodging, gas stations, grocery stores, food service, and sporting goods stores. Generally, these waterbodies have sufficient access to the types of stores referenced with the exception of sporting goods stores, for which the Buffalo River, Lake Pepin, and Tainter Lake lacked any sporting goods stores within a 5-mile buffer. Additionally, while gas stations are located within a 5-mile buffer of all regionally significant waterbodies, providing fueling stations for boats at launches would be an improvement in service.

Regionally Significant Fishing Assets

Number of fishing tournaments held in 2024 by County:

(Data Source: Wisconsin DNR Fisheries Management Information System)

- » **Buffalo - 28**
- » **Chippewa - 15**
- » **Clark - 4**
- » **Dunn - 9**
- » **Eau Claire - 3**
- » **Jackson - 5**
- » **Pepin - 14**
- » **Trempealeau - 14**

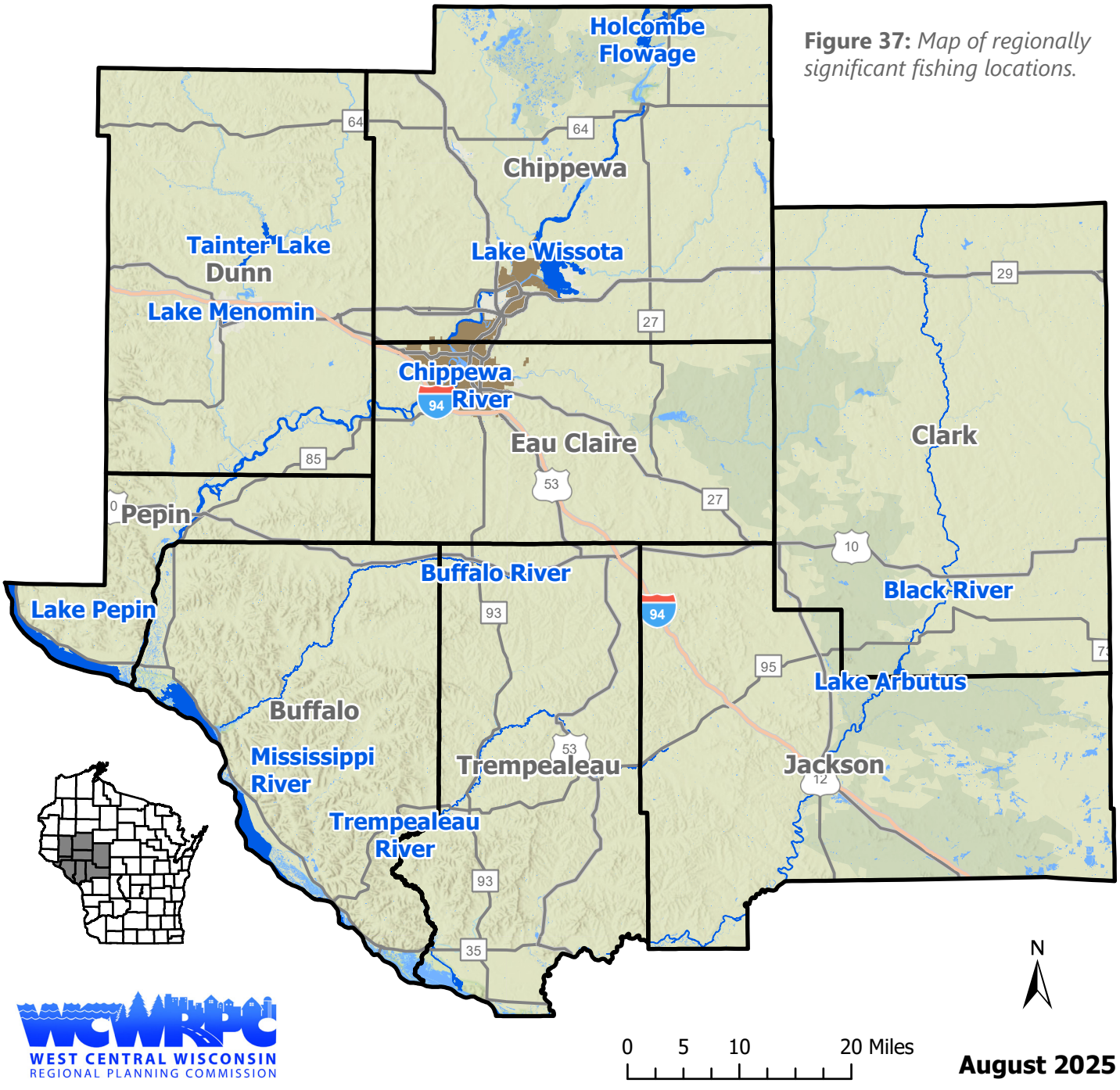


Figure 37: *Map of regionally significant fishing locations.*

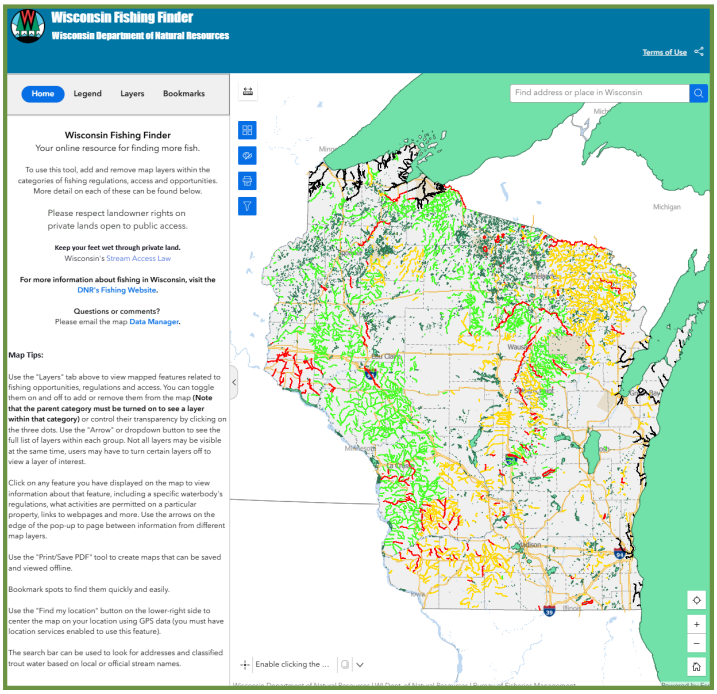
Thematic Recommendations

It is important to note that the new DNR Wisconsin Fishing Finder tool was released towards the end of the development of this project. As a result, some of these recommendations may already be achieved using that resource.

PRESS RELEASE: *2025-04-16*
Contact: *DNR Office of Communications*

DNR Launches The Wisconsin Fishing Finder

A New Web Tool To Help Anglers



MADISON, Wis. – The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced the launch of their new Wisconsin Fishing Finder, a comprehensive online fishing resource for anglers.

There are lots of great places to fish in Wisconsin, including over 15,000 inland lakes, 42,000 miles of perennial streams and rivers, 1,000 miles of Great Lakes shoreline and 260 miles of the Mississippi River. With so many places to choose from, finding the place you want to fish is a little like finding a needle in a haystack. The Wisconsin Fishing Finder is here to help anglers find the fishing spot they are looking for.

The Wisconsin Fishing Finder works using any internet browser to give anglers access to various fishing information, including:

- **Fishing regulations (including bag and length limits) for lakes and trout streams**
- **Boat launch locations and access points**
- **Shore fishing locations**
- **Public lands and easements**
- **Healthy guidelines for eating fish**
- **Lake habitat information**
- **Habitat improvement projects**
- **Invasive species**
- **Fish stocking information**
- **DNR service center locations and where you can buy a fishing license**

“We’ve created this tool to help anglers find new places to fish or get insights into their current favorite fishing spots,” said Justine Hasz, DNR Fisheries Management Bureau director. “This is an easy-to-use resource that we hope will become a staple for all anglers looking to discover more about Wisconsin’s fishing opportunities.”

Asset Development

- Address water quality issues throughout the Region to improve habitat and appeal.
- Partner with DNR to implement habitat improvement projects to increase the quality of fishing stock across regional lakes and streams.
- Provide fuel and other services at boat launches.
- Continue data enrichment efforts for regional facilities.

Regional Organization

- Host a regional fishing competition that incorporates events at multiple waterbodies and species across the Region to encourage anglers to spend more time in the Region.
  - Each event could have a day-of winner (for those unable to commit several weekends to fishing).
  - Each species could have a categorical winner based on total points for events with that species (for those that prefer a specific type of fish)
  - Points from each event would be totaled at the end of the competition to determine a winner (for professional and/or committed anglers).
- Develop a regional reporting system to identify record catches for the Region.

Economic Development

- Develop a catalog of regional businesses supporting the fishing industry (guides, anglers, bait shops, outfitters, equipment rentals, etc.).
- Encourage waterfront businesses to facilitate / invite traffic from the water (ex. Sandbar & Grill).
- Partner with businesses to host events that pair with fishing tournaments (i.e. a restaurant to hold a fish fry).
- Collaborate with DNR and other organizations to collect data for the Region for purposes of identifying the economic impact of fishing.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Develop a fishing atlas that shows waterbodies, species of fish, access points, and amenities
- Partner with the DNR to better market fishing events within the Region.
- Develop a seasonal calendar that highlights species, locations, and events for fishing.
- Partner with DNR to host youth fishing / citizen scientist events to help promote fishing and advance DNR efforts.

Key Performance Indicators

- Delisting of imparied waterways from DNRs 303(d) list
- Facilitation of habitat improvement projects
- Development of a regional event calendar
- Increaes in the number of fishing tournaments or events held
- Development of a fishing atlas

G. HUNTING

Wisconsin provides ample opportunities and diversity for hunters. Black bear, white-tailed deer, wolves, and wild turkey are just some of the options available throughout the year. The reintroduction of elk populations adds to this diversity and provides a more unique option that is not available in many other states.

The Region is renowned for its white-tail deer hunting. While the largest bucks on record are recorded in the southern counties, hunting numbers are increasing in Chippewa, Dunn, and Pepin counties. During the public outreach meetings, it was shared that there is not much public land acreage available in Pepin and Buffalo counties for hunting. Most land is privately held with limited access for interested hunters.



Wisconsin DNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife manage public lands across the state and provide regulations by which all hunters must abide. The DNR sets hunting seasons, hunting zones, and issues hunting licenses. They also develop hunting statistics and study the spread of diseases across the state in partnership with hunters.

County Forestry departments provide additional regulations for hunters, and they and other conservation organizations provide the majority of publicly accessible hunting land in the Region. The hobby of hunting is encouraged by local sportsmen's or rod & gun clubs.

Regionally Significant Assets

While the State provides data on hunting, the breakdown of that data is limited to hunting zones determined by the DNR. This Region is either part of a larger hunting zone or split between two hunting zones, which limits the usefulness of the data produced. Extensive data is available for deer and turkey hunting within the State, broken down to the county level in most instances. With a lack of publicly available County or Regional hunting statistics, it is difficult to identify consistent criteria for evaluation. Therefore, we identified areas where hunting is permissible and utilized some data and anecdotal reporting to identify regionally significant assets.

Tri-County Forest land: Consisting of land owned by Clark County, Eau Claire County, Jackson County, and the DNR, roughly 370,000 acres of contiguous forest land are open to hunting. This expansive area is part of an even larger publicly held forested area providing diversity and higher populations of game species, while decreasing congestion and competition amongst hunters.

Lower Chippewa River Ecosystem: South of the City of Eau Claire, the Chippewa River is relatively undisturbed by development, protected by several local, state, and federal agencies that permit hunting (with some exceptions). Similar to the Tri-County Forest Lands, the large acreage provides diversity, high populations, and space for hunters to enjoy.

Buffalo & Trempealeau Counties: These two counties are well known for their whitetail deer hunting and record-setting trophy bucks. According to the Boone and Crockett Club, "Buffalo County, Wisconsin, has produced more Boone and Crockett Club record-book whitetails than anywhere else. It's the number one county in the number one state, according to Club records."

Assessment/Methodology

Assets were reviewed for contiguity, access, and proximity to lodging, gas stations, food or grocery stores, and sporting goods stores were identified as the essential facilities to provide hunting supplies and accommodations. Given the size of regionally significant assets and the potential for multiple points of entry, the planning team utilized a broad scope for identifying services within proximity to each asset.

Game processing is an important component of hunting. The team utilized NAICS codes to identify businesses and meat processors are grouped in with "food or grocery stores" as they often double as butcher shops or specialty meat stores.

Tri-County Forest

The three forest areas are relatively contiguous. There are pockets of privately held land within each county forest system, which could result in accidental trespassing. The forests are good areas for grouse, deer, turkey, and bear.

The area is surrounded and bisected by several major roadways including Interstate 94, US Highway 10, and State Highways 95 and 54. The cities and villages around the periphery of the forests provide hunters with the services and supplies they need before starting a hunt.

There are several campgrounds scattered throughout the county forests along with hotels, motels, lodges, and inns in the surrounding communities.

There is access to gas stations and food services all along these routes and in several of the cities and villages that surround the county forests. Game processing is more limited. Processors are located outside of incorporated areas, primarily along US Highways 10, 12 and State Road 29.

Based on the asset inventory of sporting goods establishments identified in this area, the existing businesses appear to be tailored for specific activities with an emphasis on hunting, fishing, and ATVs / UTVs.

Jackson County currently hosts one of two elk herds in the State. Previous plans suggest expansion of the herds into the Tri-County Forest area (primarily into Clark County). Increased territory would increase the number of elk in the area, providing benefits to the ecosystem and, potentially, increasing the number of permissible elk hunts in the Region.

Lower Chippewa River Ecosystem

Roughly 34,000 acres of public land line the Chippewa River southwest of the City of Eau Claire, which is dispersed across 19 organizations, creating a patchwork of regulations for hunting. Additionally, several organizations hold the land for conservation and preservation purposes. While these organizations allow hunting to an extent, there may be a perceived conflict between hunting and conservation efforts. Ensuring adequate communication of the rights for both hunters and recreational users, including safety recommendations, at the access points to these lands can alleviate any confusion.

An analysis was run with a 5-mile buffer along the Chippewa River. There are several business establishments along the river, primarily in the cities and villages that line the banks. There does not appear to be a deficiency in services for hunters in this area.

Buffalo & Trempealeau Counties

These counties are renowned for the quality of white tail deer hunting. While there are several county forests throughout the counties, the contiguous character found in the other two areas is not found here. There are 9,500 acres of public land along the Mississippi and Black Rivers, but the entirety of the counties is identified as good hunting grounds. Therefore, the team assessed accessibility to business by looking at establishments within the counties' boundaries.

Both counties have the relevant businesses. However, there are only six gas stations identified in Buffalo County and five and seven sporting goods stores in Buffalo County and Trempealeau County respectively. Some pre-planning for hunting trips may be required to acquire supplies and fuel.

Regionally Significant Hunting Assets

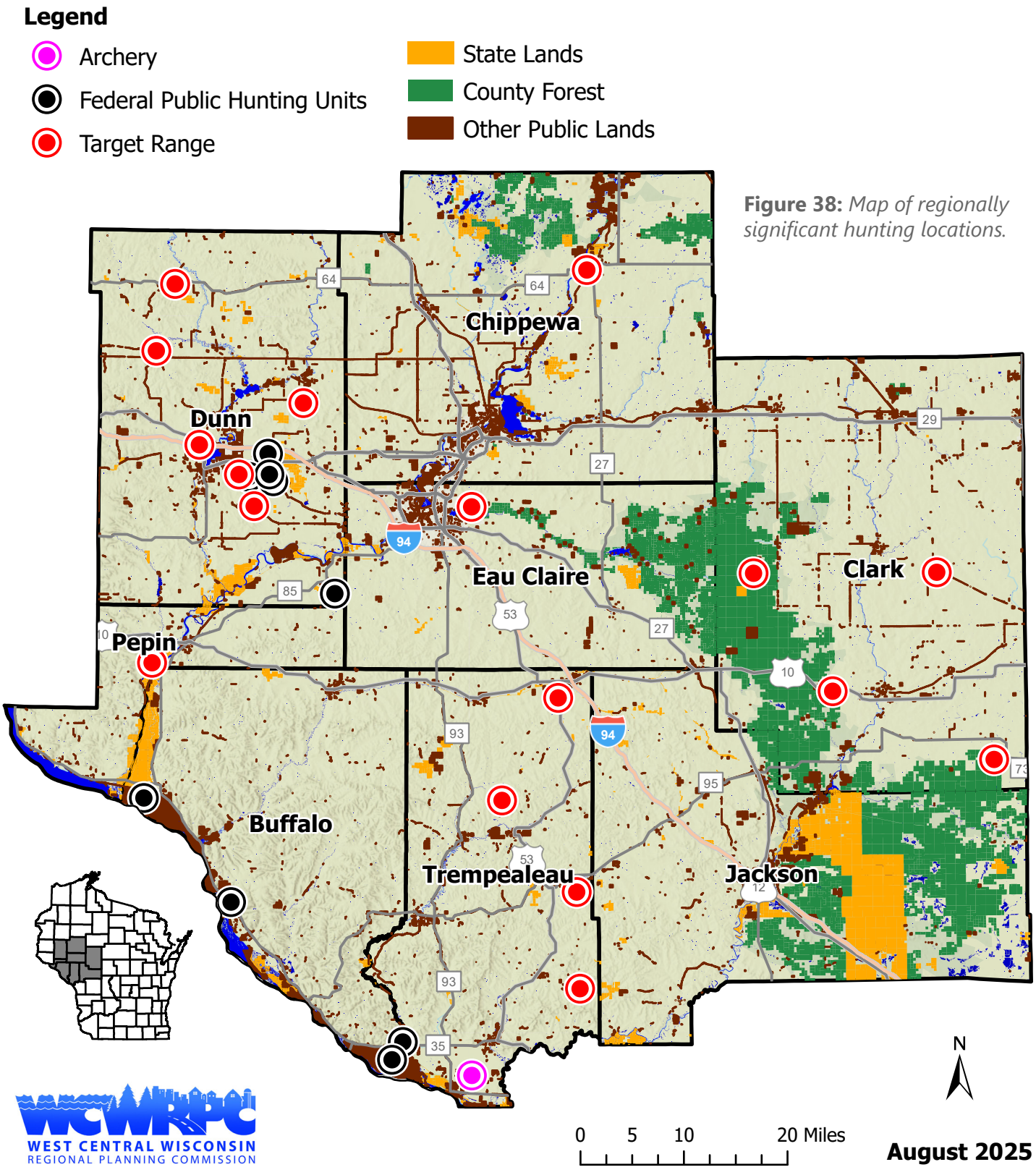


Figure 38: *Map of regionally significant hunting locations.*

Thematic Recommendations

Improvements / Development

- Improve kiosks at public lands to provide additional information on safe hunting practices, regulations, and safety measures for non-hunting users of public land.
- Identify methods to track hunting activity within the Region to identify trends.
- Encourage increasing public land available to hunting within Buffalo, Dunn, and Pepin Counties.
- Support development of ecological corridors between larger public lands to improve the quality and diversity of wildlife where hunting is publicly available.

Regional Organization

- Encourage regional interactions between sportsmen's clubs and rod and gun clubs through networking events, competitions, and educational workshops.
- Consider a regional competition with multiple events, across multiple seasons, and a cumulative scoring system.
- Explore opportunities to expand the Black River elk herd into adjacent forest lands.

Economic Development

- Coordinate with DNR to get more regionally significant datasets, wherever possible.
- Identify opportunities for hunter / researcher partnerships to provide additional benefits to hunting and support ongoing DNR and educational initiatives.
- Provide spaces on kiosks or access points to public lands for the promotion of clubs and businesses related to the sport of hunting.
- Identify "gateway" communities to prime hunting areas where business attraction efforts can be targeted to create "all inclusive" hunter retreats.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Partner with DNR, County Forestry Departments, and local clubs to develop a "Sportsmen's Atlas", which identifies public lands, hunting restricted areas, and other facility or business information (as determined by the clubs) to allow an individual to see all information in one place for the Region.
- Collaborate with the State to develop marketing campaigns around hunting, promoting the quality of game, such as white tail deer.

Key Performance Indicators

- Increases in memberships for sportsmen's clubs and rod and gun clubs
- Increases in the amount of public land available for hunting, with particular attention paid to Buffalo, Dunn, and Pepin Counties
- Development of a Sportsmen's Atlas for the Region
- Increases in the number of permits pulled in the Region

H. WILDLIFE VIEWING & ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Wildlife viewing and conservation of land go hand-in-hand. In order to see wildlife, you have to give it habitat to thrive in. Wisconsin is well known for its scenic and natural beauty, and its importance to the outdoor recreation economy that this remain true for generations to come. The Region is well suited for wildlife viewing opportunities across a myriad of habitats. Shorelands, rivers, forests, meadows, lakes and prairies each offer their own experiences.

The confluences of the Chippewa, Buffalo, Trempealeau, and Black Rivers with the Mississippi River provide year-round habitat for bald eagles, large mammal species such as bear and wolf roam the wilderness, and elk are slowly being re-introduced in forests to the north and south. It would be advantageous to develop strong ecosystems within which these animals can thrive, without compromising the ability for communities to develop and grow.



Wildlife corridors are a suitable balance between the built and natural environments. They can serve as highways for animals moving between larger, undeveloped areas. Communities should identify, protect, and plan around environmental corridors so that development can occur as needed, and both the natural and manmade environments benefit from having access to natural areas. Many times, these corridors can be as attractive to people as they are to the animals that live within them.

The same groups that undertake conservation efforts provide programming to educate and encourage engagement with the outdoors. Within our Region, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, Wisconsin DNR, Landmark Conservancy, and The Mississippi River Valley Conservancy are the largest organizations acquiring and conserving land. County governments also preserve large areas for parks or utilize them as productive forests. Friends groups operate at more localized levels, either running their own conservation and education efforts, such as the Friends of Beaver Creek at the Beaver Creek Reserve, or supporting efforts of larger organizations. As a result of each of these groups' efforts, protected lands are scattered throughout the Region.

Beaver Creek Reserve is a great example of grassroots conservation organizations serving a rural area with outdoor education opportunities. Their campus provides recreational and educational programs; kayak, GPS, ski, and snowshoe rentals; a public observatory; and a butterfly house, which attracts visitors from across the state. Additionally, their Citizen Science program has conducted 20 years of migratory bird projects, and they partner with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, DNR, and Lake Associations on aquatic and terrestrial invasive species removal. Supporting and developing these organizations provide higher-quality facilities and experiences for the Region.

Regionally Significant Assets

The planning team attempted to compile protected lands into a database to identify regionally significant natural areas, which double as stations for viewing wildlife. Large, contiguous areas of land provide more ecological benefits, efficient utilization of resources for maintenance, and appeal to larger audiences. Therefore, we identified areas where the highest densities of public lands are provided. Figure 39 shows the concentrations of publicly held land within the Region. Three areas were identified as having high concentrations of publicly held land and designated natural parks, wilderness, and recreation areas.

Chippewa Moraine

» The Chippewa Moraine is a glaciated landscape with a high concentration of kettle lakes. Several state designated areas are situated here, including the Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area, Chippewa Moraine Lakes State Area, Ice Age National Scientific Reserve, Town Line Lake & Woods State Natural Area, and Tealey Creek Cedars State Natural Area, amongst others. In total, seven different agencies from the state level down to towns and conservation groups manage 30,000 acres in this area. This area provides a similar natural environment to popular Wisconsin tourist destinations like Hayward and Minocqua. The focal point for this area is the David R. Obey Ice Age Interpretive Center.

Lower Chippewa River Valley

» The lands within the lower Chippewa River Valley (southwest of the City of Eau Claire to the Mississippi River) contain roughly 34,000 acres of public land that is managed by 19 agencies at the federal, state, local and organizational levels. The area includes Caryville Savanna State Natural Area, Five-Mile Bluff Prairie State Natural Area, Nine-Mile Island State Natural Area, Tiffany Bottoms State Natural Area, and several more. The impact glacial rivers have had in shaping the environment are a major feature along this corridor and the confluence of the Chippewa and Mississippi rivers marks the northern extent of the Upper

Heat Map of Public Lands

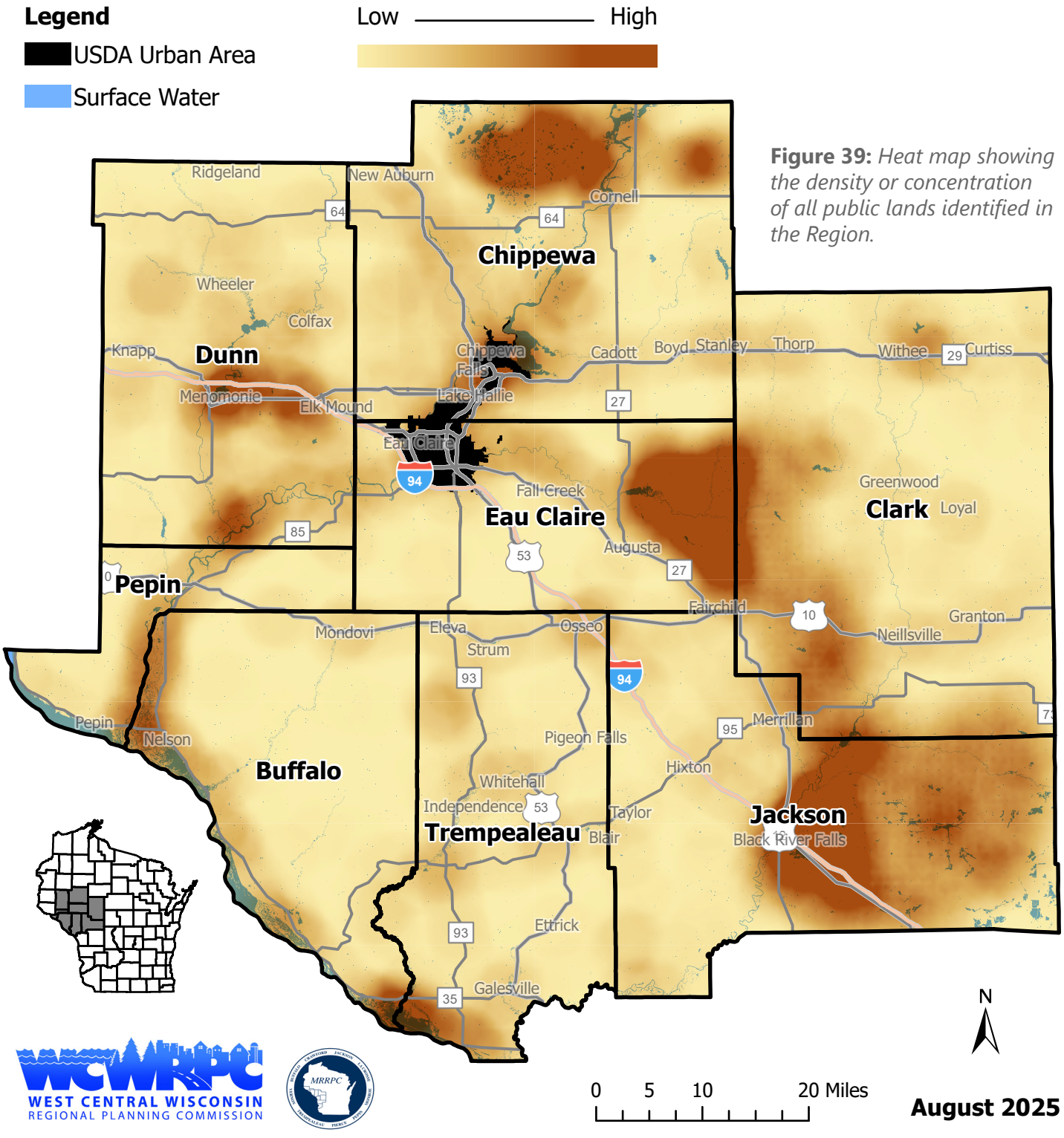


Figure 39: *Heat map showing the density or concentration of all public lands identified in the Region.*

Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge, which extends over 250 miles south into Illinois.

» There are several opportunities for wildlife viewing along the river. Buena Vista Park in the City of Alma provides a great location for viewing eagles. Located along the namesake of the Mississippi Flyway, birding opportunities are frequent along the entire span of the Chippewa River.

Tri-County Forest Lands

» The Clark, Eau Claire, and Jackson County forest areas are the largest concentration of publicly held land in the Region. With over 370,000 acres of managed lands in the Region, this area is larger than Acadia, Cuyahoga, and Voyageurs National Parks combined. Augusta State Wildlife Area, Blue Swamp State Natural Area, and Coon Fork Barrens State Natural Area are some of the designated natural sites. While the county-owned land is managed as productive forests, they are all open to recreational activities as well. Eau Claire County manages an additional 7,000 acres along the Eau Claire River that is near, but not contiguous with, the larger area.

» Much of the area is proposed to be used for elk herds, which are currently being reintroduced in Jackson County via the Black River Elk Range. The tri-county forest area is deemed suitable habitat for elk, providing a potential increase in the opportunities to view elk and develop programs around them.

» Beaver Creek Reserve's WISE Nature Center is the only facility in this area. A facility in Jackson County could provide additional programming opportunities and pull interest from users of the I-94 corridor.

Assessment/Methodology

The planning team looked at existing infrastructure within each of these lands to identify their quality for wildlife viewing. While the land itself provides the opportunity, trails, wayfinding signage, and facilities (centers, restrooms, observation decks, towers) enhance the quality of the experience.

In addition to the physical assessment, the team noted that these consolidated areas lack a larger, unified identity. They are managed by four to nineteen agencies. Conversations with stakeholders identified coordination across agencies is not common practice. For example, the three County Forestry departments do not share resources or coordinate management efforts. Increasing collaboration across these agencies and establishing a larger, cohesive identity these conservation clusters would improve their marketability, regional draw, and provide efficiency in management.

Business Assessment

Supplemental recreation facilities, lodging, gas stations, grocery stores, restaurants, and sporting goods stores were identified as the essential facilities for water-based recreation. Most of these businesses will provide visitors with accommodation, supplies, or equipment to enjoy the outdoors. While not directly related to conservation and wildlife activities, gas stations make visits more convenient and refueling will be necessary if visitors want to experience the entirety of the assets identified.

Given the size of regionally significant assets and the potential for multiple points of entry, the team looked generally at the proximity of these services to the assets rather than identifying those within a specific distance of a single point of entry.

Chippewa Moraine

» The Chippewa Moraine is five miles east of U.S. Highway 53 and is surrounded by State Highways 40, 64, and 27. There are support services along these routes and found nearby in the Cities of Cornell, Bloomer, and the Village of New Auburn.

- Situated along the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, the Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area offers visitors views of kettle lakes and many glacial features. Hiking, snowshoeing, backpack camping, fishing and bird watching are popular activities. The David R. Obey Ice Age Interpretive Center houses first-class glacial, cultural and natural history displays. The Chippewa Moraine segment of the Ice Age National Scientific Reserve includes 23 miles of marked trails for foot travel only. Motorized vehicles, horses, or mountain bikes are not permitted in the Chippewa Moraine.
- The asset inventory did not identify camping or lodging options directly within the Chippewa County Forest. However, there are county parks at major lakes surrounding this area such as Morris-Erickson County Park (Long Lake) to the west, and Pine Point County Park (Lake Holcombe) to the east. Within the Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area there are three outpost campsites for primitive camping.
- Existing sporting goods businesses appear to be tailored for specific activities such as hunting and fishing equipment or ATV/UTV sales. There is potential for more generalized retail sales or rental of sporting goods equipment given the diversity of recreation opportunities in the Chippewa Moraine.

Lower Chippewa River Valley

- Most businesses are in communities along the Chippewa River. Durand and the Urban Area are the most likely stops for visitors to the Lower Chippewa River Valley. Menomonie, Mondovi, Pepin and Alma are also within close proximity to the recreational areas.
- Supporting recreation amenities are scattered along the Chippewa River. Most of the amenities identified include boat ramps, canoe/kayak launches, and popular birding sites along the river that are concentrated in the Dunnville and Tiffany Wildlife Areas. These facilities are undeveloped and any supporting services such as guides and tours are not located on-site, if available in any capacity.
- Outside of the Urban Area, there are minimal options for lodging or camping on the lower Chippewa River. Lodging identified includes a single hotel in Durand and campgrounds at Tarrant Park in Durand and in Holden Campground southwest of Durand.
- Access to gas stations can be found along the Chippewa River in Durand and Nelson. Additional gas stations options include nearby cities or villages, such as Menomonie, Mondovi, Pepin, Alma. The same communities provide convenience stores, grocery stores, and restaurants in the area.
- One sporting goods store is located in the area in Durand, with additional options in Menomonie.

Tri-County Forest Lands

- The area is surrounded and bisected by several major roadways including Interstate 94, US Highway 10, and State Highways 95 and 54. There is access to support services all along these routes and in several of the cities and villages that surround the county forest.
- The Forest Lands themselves offer several supporting services. Levis Mound has a trail center that provides accommodations for visitors. Trails for mountain biking, ATV/UTV, equestrians and hikers are available, and hunting is permitted within the Forest Lands.
- There are several campgrounds scattered throughout the county forest along with hotels, motels, lodges, and inns surrounding this large recreation area.
- Based on the asset inventory of sporting goods establishments identified in this area, the existing businesses appear to be tailored for specific activities such as hunting and fishing equipment or ATV/UTV sales. There is potential for more generalized retail sales or rental of sporting goods equipment given the diversity of recreation opportunities in the county and state forest.

Thematic Recommendations

Improvements / Development

Regionally Significant Wildlife & Conservation Assets

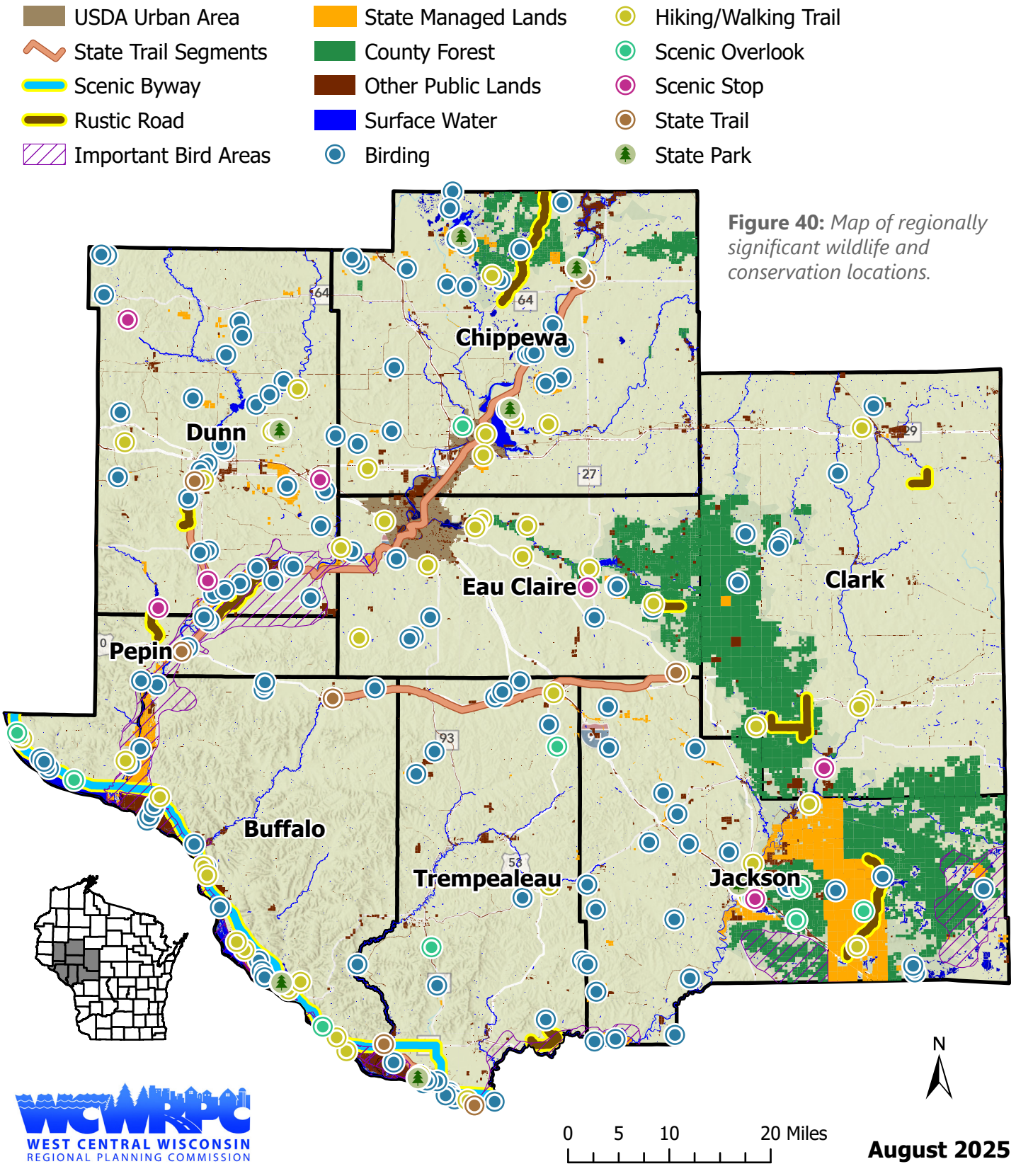


Figure 40: *Map of regionally significant wildlife and conservation locations.*

- Improve habitats for sought-after wildlife (rare birds, raptors, large mammals, etc.).
- Conduct an environmental corridor assessment to identify opportunities to connect natural areas.
- Install cameras to showcase wildlife in the area and develop interest.
- Support efforts to develop and implement strategic plans for parks, nature centers, and public land(s).

Regional Organization

- Collaborate with conservation organizations to develop a regional approach for conservation efforts.
- Focus on supporting conservation efforts within the Chippewa Moraine, Lower Chippewa River Valley and Tri-County Forest areas to increase the impact and functionality of conservation organizations.
- Develop a regional network of nature centers, with proposed centers in the Lower Chippewa River Valley and eastern Jackson County.
  - Coordinate efforts between the David R. Obey Ice Age Interpretive Center, Beaver Creek Reserve, and future centers to provide a Region-wide program highlighting the different topographies and ecologies within the Region.
  - Develop a partnership with Universities of Wisconsin.
  - Coordinate research needs with DNR.
  - Hold forums between the nature centers, Universities of Wisconsin, DNR, and conservation groups to network, share ideas, and identify areas of coordination for programming / research.
- Develop research and fieldwork partnerships between educational institutions, conservation groups, nature centers, and government agencies to inventory, preserve, and promote the Region's ecosystems.

Economic Development

- Encourage businesses to embrace and promote regional assets.
- Develop a service-based economy to enhance visitor experiences.
  - Promote existing service providers and fill identified gaps to provide rentals, guides, and tours.
- Develop a passport program to support attendance at centers and conservation areas.
- Identify methods by which centers can activate their spaces to provide additional services / revenue.
  - Examples would include gear rental, tours, and/or leaseable tenant space for supporting services.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

- Invest in educational programming through conservation agencies, helping to increase awareness of conservation efforts and the groups involved.
- Develop a regional identity for each of the identified areas to aid in branding and sense of place initiatives.
  - Encourage community buy-in and promotion to generate additional tourism and economic activity.

Key Performance Indicators

- Increases in conservation land acreage
- Increased wildlife diversity
- Facilitation of conservation forums
- Establishment of a passport program
- Increases in educational programming

I. AGRICULTURAL TOURISM

Agricultural tourism is a form of tourism allowing visitors to engage with farms and often their products directly in an agricultural setting for both recreation and education purposes. Farms engaged in agricultural tourism can diversify their income to support operations costs, and visitors benefit from experiencing rural farm life, local food systems, and learning agricultural practices.

Along with providing an economic boost to farmers and rural communities or businesses, agricultural tourism increases community engagement, preserves agricultural heritage, and supports rural economic development.



The Region's rich agricultural landscape offers a strong foundation for agricultural tourism. This ever-increasing sector of family farms, orchards, farmers' markets, and vineyards offer diverse experiences and opportunities through activities such as farm tours, educational field trips, pick-your-own experiences, farm-to-table events, and special events or festivals. Along with seasonal festivals and retail stores with featured products, many family-owned farms throughout the Region also host weddings and other special events through a combination of newly built structures or renovated historic barns or buildings. As shown on the map in Figure 41, the following asset types were mapped throughout the Region that are categorized by the following:

- **Dairy or Creamery**
- **Family Farm (sales, events, rentals)**
- **Farm-to-Fork or Dinner Farm**
- **Farmers Market**
- **Greenhouse**
- **U-Pick (orchard, berry farm, flowers)**
- **Winery**

Regionally Significant Assets

To determine regionally significant assets, we looked at the density of various asset types to see if there were enough locations to facilitate development of "tours" wherein visitors could have several experiences over an extended trip. We identified the following regionally significant clusters:

Dairies/Creameries

- Based on the asset inventory, the largest concentration of dairies and creameries are in northern Clark County, concentrated mostly along State Highway 29 which is a major east-west corridor that connects major population centers, job markets, and tourism destinations such as Green Bay, Wausau, and Chippewa/Eau Claire. Many of these businesses include retail stores or farms that often participate in the Clark County Dairy Breakfast as a part of June Dairy Month. Spanning June 1 through June 29, the countywide celebration features farm-style breakfasts at local dairies or community locations throughout the month to celebrate Wisconsin's world-class dairy farms and offer visitors a chance to meet local producers and enjoy rural life firsthand.

Cranberry Farms

- Wisconsin is the top producer of cranberries in the U.S. and Jackson County is a major center for cranberry production with the highest concentration in the southeast portion of the county. Jackson is also home to the Wisconsin Cranberry Research Station and there are many opportunities for visitors to celebrate the fall harvest through hosted events and festivals.

Orchards & Pick-Your-Own Farms

- There are dozens of orchards and pick-your-own farms throughout the Region with the highest concentration identified in southcentral Chippewa County and southwestern Trempealeau County. In Chippewa County, these include a cluster of five large apple orchards that are no more than 4.5 miles away from one another.

Wineries

- There are several wineries in the Region offering unique experiences to visitors including tasting rooms,

scenic settings, and special harvest events in the late summer/early fall. Most notable are wineries in the Region that are part of the Great River Road Wine Trail. This is a collection of wineries located near the Upper Mississippi River in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Five of the ten wineries included in this tour are found in the Region along The Great River Road, Wisconsin's National Scenic Byway and an All American Road.

Greenhouses

- While there are greenhouses found throughout the Region, there are over 40 located in Clark County, which supports its distinction as the "Greenhouse Capital of Wisconsin". The Clark County Economic Development Corporation has developed the Clark County "Bloomin' Greenhouse Tour" that runs from April to October and helps support not only greenhouse businesses in the Region, but the many specialty cheese and meat shops, farmers markets, restaurants and supper clubs, roadside stands, orchards, wineries, honey, and maple syrup shops that are found throughout the county's predominantly agricultural landscape.

Assessment/Methodology

During the public engagement process, we learned that many farmers are interested in expanding their operations to incorporate agricultural tourism but are concerned over the risk involved in starting a new operation that would take away from their productive land to provide the necessary parking, facilities, and accommodations. To help encourage and support new farms interested in agricultural tourism, the planning team recommends identifying new regional tours based on the significant asset clusters previously identified. Utilizing these existing and well-established agritourism farms as anchor points, there are opportunities for additional farms to connect with one another and identify the essential improvements needed to become a successful agricultural tourism enterprise.

There are also a wealth of resources through local, state, and federal programs to support farmers interested in exploring, planning, and launching agricultural tourism ventures. This includes tools and resources for conducting farm infrastructure and facility assessments, exploring products and visitor experiences, identify business readiness and needs, and developing goals and outcomes. With agricultural tourism contributing to Wisconsin's $25.8 billion tourism economy, improved infrastructure is essential.

Thematic Recommendations

Improvements

- Accessibility Upgrades or Offerings: Identify solutions and opportunities to accommodate diverse visitors.
- Visitor Amenities: Additional restrooms, signage, and shaded seating at agricultural tourism sites to enhance visitor comfort.
- Digital Resources: Comprehensive online guides and maps for agritourism attractions.
- Infrastructure Support: Improved parking and road access for high-traffic sites to manage peak-season crowds.

Regional Organization

- Facilitate educational workshops to show interested producers how to set up an agricultural tourism business.
- Survey existing agricultural tourism businesses for their needs and struggles to further develop programming and identify regional trends to address.

Regionally Significant Agricultural Tourism

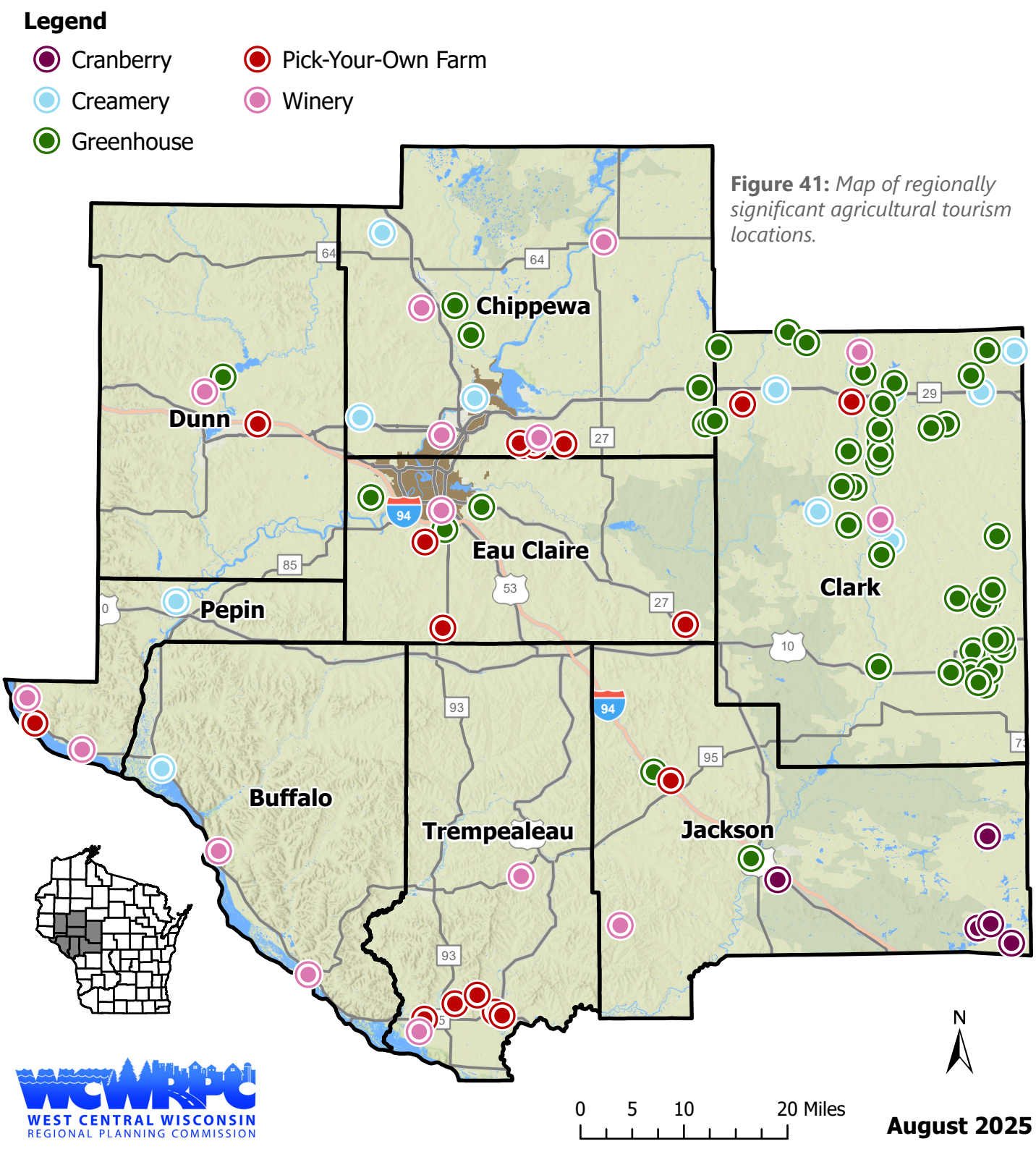


Figure 41: *Map of regionally significant agricultural tourism locations.*

Economic Development

Agricultural tourism supports rural economies, and the Region has significant potential for growth. These opportunities align with the Office of Outdoor Recreation's mission to strengthen rural economies and include:

- Expand guided farm tours focusing on local or regional commodities and unique experiences.
  - WEDC training programs can support new operators.
- Establish or expand pick-your-own fruit, vegetables, flowers, or related operations in the Region, catering to families.
- Encourage farm-based restaurants or pop-up dining events in the Region, supported by WEDC resources.
- Develop farm stays or B&Bs near agricultural tourism hubs in the Region, with CDI Program grants.
- Create retail for farm products like cheese, maple syrup, or wine in the Region, leveraging local branding.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

Marketing can leverage the Region's agricultural heritage to boost agricultural tourism visitation. Opportunities include:

- Partner with Travel Wisconsin to promote agricultural tourism in the Region via social media, targeting families and urban visitors from Minneapolis-St. Paul.
- Develop a "West Central Wisconsin Farm Trail" brand, highlighting top sites like orchards, dairies, greenhouses, and wineries.
  - Promote agricultural tourism in the Region via the Wisconsin Outside newsletter and through local chambers or tourism offices.
- Market organic and farm-to-table experiences, aligning with Travel Green Wisconsin's eco-tourism initiatives.
- Promote farm festivals and harvest events through local tourism boards, social media, and Travel Wisconsin.
- Bundle agricultural tourism with outdoor activities like hiking or biking in marketing materials or in scenic areas to attract diverse visitors.

These strategies aim to increase visitor numbers and highlight the counties' unique agricultural tourism offerings.

Key Performance Indicators

- Increasing number of agricultural tourism businesses
- Increasing number of visitors to agricultural tourism sites
- Establishing workshops for agricultural tourism enterprises, then assessing the attendance for these workshops annually.
- Growth in the agricultural tourism economy across the Region.
- Increasing the number of trails.
- Sales of passports / trail guides

J. OUTDOOR CULTURAL SPACES

Outdoor cultural spaces serve as venues for celebration, creative expression, heritage preservation, and economic activity. These spaces host fairs, festivals, concerts, open-air markets, agricultural shows, rodeos, community art installations, and a variety of multi-generational gatherings. With their scenic settings, these venues draw residents and tourists alike, catalyzing arts, entertainment, and small business growth.



Often hubs of activity during the spring and summer months, these spaces tend to decrease activity or shut down during the fall and winter. Embracing a year-round mindset would enable additional economic activity and provide residents with social interactions during a time when little else is offered.

Within the Region, the team identified fairgrounds, bandshells and amphitheaters, concert grounds, community art spaces, and farm- or market-based venues. Additionally, public input identified rodeos and motorsports grounds as popular open-air venues that hosted similar events. These venues are included for a more robust definition of “outdoor spaces”.

Regionally Significant Assets

Regional assets include both outdoor spaces and outdoor events. The following types of locations stand out for their scale, infrastructure, programming, and consistent regional draw. These assets are capable of drawing large crowds and play a central role in the cultural life and economic impact of the Region.

Venue Type	Size/Capacity	Amenities	Typical Attendance
Fairgrounds	**5,000–20,000+**	**Stages, restrooms, covered seating, parking**	**Tens of thousands per year**
Festival Grounds	**2,000–10,000+**	**Camping, food, event security, restrooms**	**Thousands per event**
Bandshells	**500–3,000 (lawn/park)**	**Stages, concessions, easy access**	**Hundreds per event**
Art & Heritage Parks	**Open/public**	**Displays, ADA pathways, guided tours**	**Ongoing visitors**
Rodeo Arenas	**1,000–5,000**	**Bleachers, concessions, livestock pens**	**Hundreds per event**
Farmers’ Markets	**Varies**	**Vendor stalls, music, seating**	**Dozens to hundreds**

Identifying large-scale events within the Region helped identify significant assets. Events such as Ashley for the Arts, Country Jam, and Rock Fest draw tens of thousands of people each year. These events require space, infrastructure, and supporting amenities to successfully host large crowds. The following events are known to draw large crowds to the community:

- **Ashley for the Arts (Memorial Park, Arcadia, Trempealeau County)**
- **Blues on the Chippewa (Veteran’s Memorial Park, Durand, Pepin County)**
- **Country Jam (Eau Claire Event District, Eau Claire, Eau Claire County)**
- **Force Fields Festival (Chippewa Valley Music Festivals, Cadott, Chippewa County)**
- **Hoofbeat (Chippewa Valley Music Festivals, Cadott, Chippewa County)**
- **Rock Fest (Chippewa Valley Music Festivals, Cadott, Chippewa County)**

These events are unique for their spikes in visitors to the Region over brief periods, typically a week or a weekend at a time. However, several other venues within the Region can facilitate larger events and draw smaller crowds more regularly throughout the year. These sites include:

- **Buffalo County Fairgrounds (Mondovi)**
- **Clark County Fairgrounds (Neillsville)**
- **Dunn County Fairgrounds (Menomonie)**
- **Jackson County Fair Park (Black River Falls)**
- **Pepin County Fairgrounds (Durand)**
- **Menomonie Bandshell (Menomonie)**

Assessment/Methodology

A unique challenge in assessing this asset type is the range in scale, facility type, and activities provided. The planning team met with various tourism and economic development organizations in a stakeholder meeting regarding outdoor cultural events and spaces. Outside of identifying those events and spaces capable of drawing larger events and crowds, the team does not have the data necessary to assess the quality or needs for each location listed. It was further determined that having this data would be an impactful tool in both the development and marketability of sites throughout the Region. Many of the recommendations involve surveying, generating, and organizing data for the existing capacity of event locations and the needs for event organizers and promoters.

Additional discussion around cultural spaces highlighted the drop off in activity during the fall and winter months. Identifying methods of drawing attendance and continuing the economic activity at these and local sites aids in the development of year round outdoor recreation activities.

Thematic Recommendations

Improvements / Development

- Consider small-scale investments that can improve the quality of event spaces.
  - For locations featuring regular or annual events with temporary structures, consider capped ground sleeves to improve the functionality of the site.
- Collaborate with property owners, event organizers, and users to develop improvement plans to enhance the use, user experience, and marketability of event grounds.
- Inventory sites for ADA compliance and support implementation of ADA improvements.

Regional Organization

- Develop a list of event venues across the Region with data on their capacity, capabilities, and services provided.
- Identify significant and unique cultural characteristics throughout the Region and develop events and activities around those assets.
  - Encourage adoption of these events and activities at a regional level to develop a tourism experience unique to the Region.
- Encourage development of a regional task force consisting of local tourism organizations, historical and cultural groups, and community representatives to develop, support, and promote local and regional art and culture.

Regionally Significant Outdoor Cultural Events & Spaces

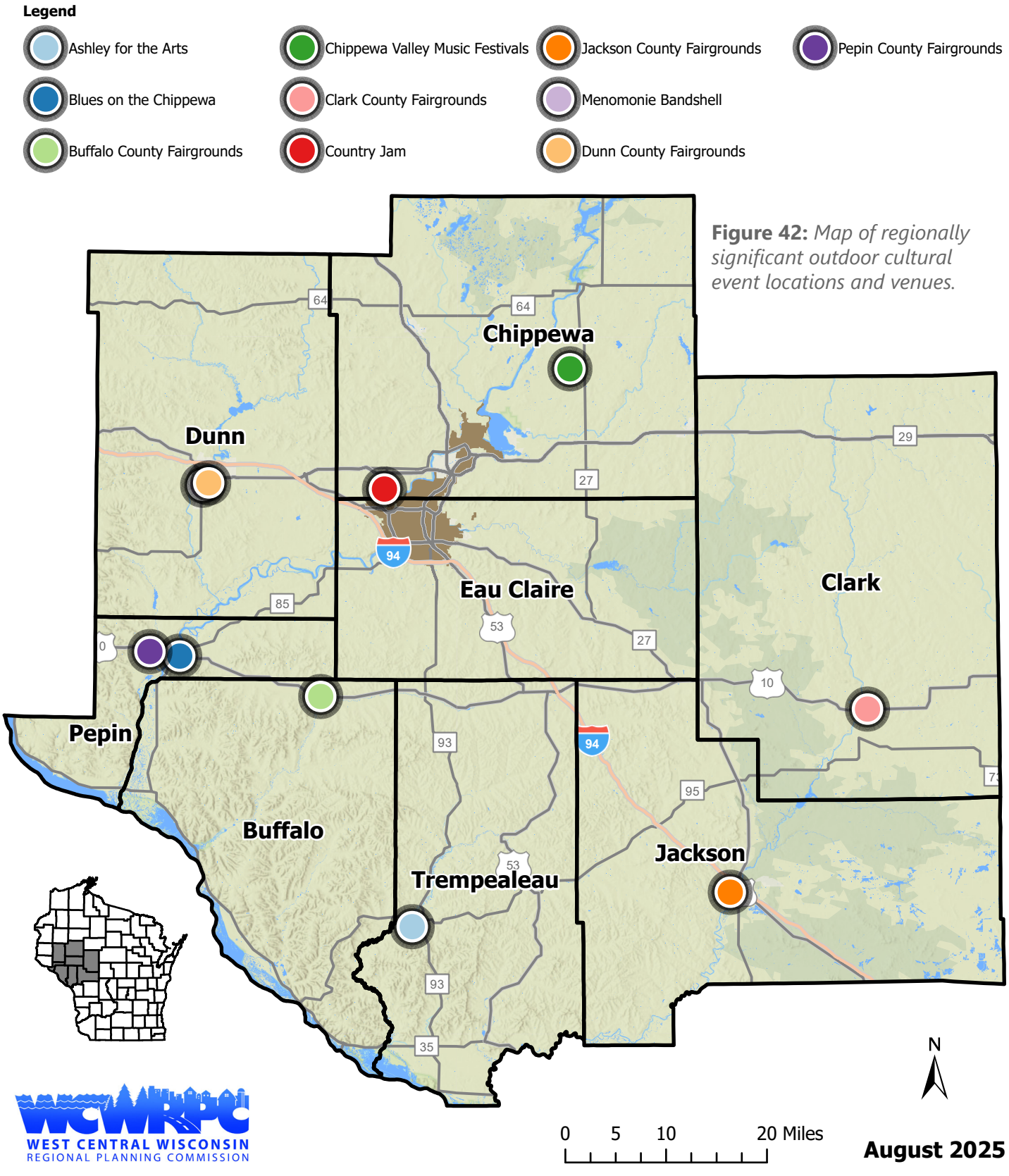


Figure 42: *Map of regionally significant outdoor cultural event locations and venues.*

» Develop a calendar of events across the Region and, when possible, work with event organizers to avoid competitive or overlapping event schedules to increase attendance across all events.

Economic Development

» Work with local, regional, and national promoters (for concerts or other desirable events) to develop a list of criteria essential to site selection.
  - o Utilize the list to develop a portfolio of "stage-ready" sites to help expedite site selection and provide an advantage to the Region in attracting events.
  - o Utilize the list to inform development of additional sites and to improve existing sites.

» Encourage the development of "maker" sites to develop local artists and enhance cultural activities throughout the Region.

» Survey attendees of regional events to identify strengths, weaknesses, and future demand for venues and activities.

» Invest in, or partner with organizations that have, location intelligence and/or foot traffic data software to identify attendance, markets, and trends for events in the Region.
  - o Utilize this data to inform planning, development, and marketing strategies.

Marketing, Events, Promotion

» Develop a regional calendar of events to highlight the range of activities available throughout the Region throughout the year.

» Encourage off-season activities at public sites to keep generating interest and activity.
  - o Consider passive activities that encourage the public to visit the site and provide supporting services via vendors.
    - ■ A common holiday example is a "festival of trees" where Christmas trees are decorated by local groups to be voted on, while food trucks and stalls provide ancillary services to attendees throughout the event.
    - ■ Partner with the City of Eau Claire to develop satellite sculpture tours.

» Utilize community comprehensive plans, historical societies, artistic communities, and cultural groups to develop unique place-based cultural events that provide unique experiences for visitors and marketing.

Key Performance Indicators

» Development of an inventory of venues

» Development of a regional event calendar

» Increases in the number of events

» Increases in the number of "off-season" events

K. BRANDING, MARKETING & TOURISM

One of the clearest messages from both community stakeholders and business owners was that the Region needs to present itself as one destination, not eight separate counties. While each county has unique strengths, visitors rarely plan trips based on administrative boundaries—they plan based on experiences. Without a unified brand, the Region risks being overlooked in favor of destinations with stronger, clearer identities.

A shared brand also helps residents take pride in their region. Local businesses, tourism bureaus, and community organizations can rally around a consistent story, reinforcing the sense that “we’re stronger together.”



Core Branding Elements

The plan proposes the development of a regional brand identity that is recognizable, flexible, and rooted in the authentic character of the Region.

Key components include:

- **Logo and Visual Identity:** A unified logo, color palette, and design standards that counties and communities can co-brand with.
- **Tagline:** A simple, memorable phrase that conveys family-friendly adventure and the natural richness of the Region.
- **Voice and Tone:** Messaging that emphasizes inclusivity, authenticity, and accessibility, avoiding overly commercial language while highlighting quality experiences.

The brand should balance regional unity with local distinctiveness. For example, Black River Falls may emphasize ATV and snowmobile trails, while Pepin may highlight its river heritage—but both should fit within the shared regional identity.

Storytelling and Content

Branding is not just visual—it's about stories. Residents expressed a desire for the plan to highlight local voices, traditions, and landscapes. The strategy calls for:

- **Local Story Features:** Sharing profiles of family-owned outfitters, youth trail crews, Indigenous cultural perspectives, and long-standing community events.
- **Photo and Video Assets:** Developing a regional image library for consistent, high-quality use in marketing campaigns.
- **Seasonal Campaigns:** Promoting year-round recreation—from summer paddling to fall foliage to winter skiing and snowmobiling.

This approach creates an emotional connection, helping visitors see the Region not just as a place to visit, but as a community to support.

Marketing Channels and Strategies

The plan outlines a multi-channel marketing approach:

- **Digital Hub:** A central website integrating the asset inventory, interactive maps, itineraries, and trip-planning resources.
- **Social Media Campaigns:** County tourism offices coordinate posts under shared hashtags and themes.
- **Print and On-Site Materials:** Trailhead signage, visitor guides, and maps carry the shared brand identity.
- **Partnership Marketing:** Collaboration with Wisconsin Tourism, outdoor retailers, breweries, and festivals to expand reach.

Special emphasis is placed on mobile-friendly platforms. Visitors increasingly rely on their phones to plan in real time, so ensuring the hub and maps are easy to use on mobile devices is essential.

Tourism Growth and Visitor Experience

Marketing is not only about attracting visitors—it's about managing their experience. By aligning branding with infrastructure improvements, the Region can ensure visitors have seamless, positive experiences. This includes:

- Consistent wayfinding and signage across counties.
- Visitor services (lodging, dining, gear rentals) that are easy to locate.
- Clear safety and stewardship messaging integrated into maps and campaigns.

If executed effectively, branding and marketing will not only increase visitation but also extend stays, spread visitors across counties, and increase spending in local communities.

Building a Recognized Identity

In five years, success will be measured by whether the regional "brand" is widely recognized as a destination. Indicators will include:

- Adoption of the brand by all eight counties.
- Increased web traffic and digital engagement.
- Growth in tourism-related business revenue.
- Recognition in state and national tourism materials.

A regional brand changes the flow of information; where outdoor recreation enthusiasts currently have to discover the Region's assets, a brand allows the Region to call out to enthusiasts.

SECTION V: GOALS, OBJECTIVES & POLICIES



As mentioned in Section I.A, the Steering Committee prepared a vision statement:

The Region is a top destination offering diverse, quality, year-round outdoor recreation and arts opportunities for residents, visitors and guests of all ages and abilities, while supporting recreation related businesses and job growth, so that the Region benefits from a strong outdoor recreation economy, vibrant communities, a healthy environment and a wide array of outdoor activity options.

The vision statement helped the Steering Committee identify the following priorities for the planning team:

- Providing year-round recreational opportunities
- Providing activities for all ages and abilities
- Providing a variety of activities
- Supporting existing businesses and pursuing business opportunities
- Identifying the framework for a regional branding initiative

Section IV provides activity-specific recommendations, achieving the priorities above, generally organized around four categories:

- Asset Development
- Regional Organization
- Economic Development
- Marketing, Events, and Promotion

Finally, this plan is the first phase of an intentional, long-term effort to organize around and develop the outdoor recreation economy within the Region. The recommendations and strategies of this plan are meant to inform that prolonged effort.

Utilizing all these factors, the following goals, objectives, and policies are meant to inform the ongoing efforts of stakeholders in the regional outdoor recreation economy to create a unique, thriving, and collaborative outdoor recreation network.

The goals and objectives identified in this Section are loftier and more generalized in nature than the recommendations in Section IV. Many of these goals and objectives are achievable through the implementation of Section IV's recommendations.

Goal 1: Expand Access to Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor recreation opportunities should be available to all residents and visitors, regardless of geography, income, age, or ability. Expanding access means reducing barriers and ensuring that every county offers meaningful recreation options.

Objectives:

- Develop new trailheads, boat launches, and community parks in underserved rural areas.
- Ensure that at least 90% of residents in the Region live within a 15-minute drive of a recreation opportunity by 2030.
- Incorporate ADA-compliant features into all new projects and retrofit existing facilities where feasible.

Policies:

- Prioritize projects in areas identified by the asset inventory as “gaps” in service.
- Incorporate equity assessments into funding decisions.
- Partner with schools, libraries, and community centers to promote awareness of local recreation opportunities.
- Adopt design standards that emphasize sustainability, safety, and universal access.
- Incorporate lighting, safe road crossings, and emergency access points into trail upgrades.
- Encourage multimodal connections (bike lanes, transit stops) that link communities to recreation assets.

Goal 2: Improve Infrastructure, Safety, and Connectivity

High-quality infrastructure is essential to delivering positive recreation experiences and ensuring safety. Connectivity between counties is equally important for branding the Region as a cohesive destination.

Objectives:

- Fill 75% of missing trail links between established corridors to create continuous regional corridors.
- Standardize signage and wayfinding systems across all eight counties to improve consistency.

Policies:

- Adopt design standards that emphasize sustainability, safety, and universal access.
- Incorporate lighting, safe road crossings, and emergency access points into trail upgrades.
- Encourage multimodal connections (bike lanes, transit stops) that link communities to recreation assets.

Goal 3: Support Outdoor Recreation Businesses and Workforce

Recreation not only attracts visitors—it drives rural business growth. From lodging and dining to gear rentals and guiding services, small businesses are essential to maximizing the economic impact of recreation.

Objectives:

- Facilitate partnerships between county economic development corporations (EDCs) and tourism bureaus to align business support with recreation growth.
- Launch an Outdoor Business Incubator Program to support entrepreneurs in lodging, guiding, and outfitting.
- Provide annual training for at least 100 workers in hospitality, customer service, and recreation management.

Policies:

- Offer technical assistance and mentorship for new businesses tied to recreation.
- Develop loan or microgrant programs to help outfitters and small operators expand services.
- Encourage “trail town” models where businesses align hours and services with recreation use patterns.

Goal 4: Enhance Public Awareness,Stewardship, and Interest

Building a strong recreation economy requires not just assets, but also a culture of stewardship and awareness. Residents and visitors alike must understand the value of recreation and their role in maintaining it.

Objectives:

- Launch a regional education campaign on responsible recreation (e.g., Leave No Trace principles, safety).
- Establish annual volunteer trail maintenance days in every county.
- Partner with schools and youth organizations to engage the next generation in outdoor activities and conservation.

Policies:

- Create a stewardship recognition program for volunteers and businesses that demonstrate leadership.
- Require stewardship and conservation messaging in all marketing materials.
- Integrate cultural storytelling, including Indigenous perspectives, into awareness campaigns.

Measuring Progress

Each goal is paired with measurable indicators: number of residents with access, miles of trail gaps developed, businesses incubated, workers trained, and volunteers engaged. Annual monitoring will allow the steering committee to track progress, adjust strategies, and report outcomes to funders and the public. Section IV provides several methods for tracking successful implementation of the recommendations in this plan. Annual monitoring will allow the steering committee to track progress, adjust strategies, and report outcomes to funders and the public.

In summary, these four goals strike a balance between building new opportunities, improving existing infrastructure, supporting the local economy, and fostering a culture of stewardship. They reflect the values expressed by residents during the engagement process and provide a practical roadmap for counties, businesses, and community groups to follow.

SECTION VI: RECOMMENDATIONS



The Regional Outdoor Recreation Plan is designed to be more than a vision—it is a practical blueprint for action. The recommendations outlined here translate community input, asset mapping, and stakeholder priorities into strategies that counties, municipalities, and partners can implement over the next five years. These recommendations are organized into seven categories:

- General Policies for Selected Recreational Activities
- General Strategy Recommendations
- Recreational Linkages
- Business and Economic Development
- Branding, Marketing, and Tourism
- Outdoor Recreation Funding
- Next Steps

A. GENERAL POLICIES FOR SELECTED REGIONAL ACTIVITIES

While each county brings unique assets and traditions, several themes emerged from the engagement process that apply Region-wide.

Trails: Support for trail development was nearly universal among survey respondents. Policies should emphasize sustainable design, routine maintenance, and multiple uses (walking, biking, snowmobiling) where feasible. Trail planning should align with best practices in erosion control, wildlife protection, and universal accessibility.

Water Access: With the Mississippi, Chippewa, and Black Rivers forming regional anchors, policies must prioritize safe, sustainable water access. Recommendations include: expanding boat launches and canoe/kayak put-ins, improving signage for paddling routes, and monitoring water quality to protect public health.

Youth Engagement in Hunting and Fishing: Hunting and fishing remain culturally significant in the Region. Programs that engage youth in these activities are recommended, both to preserve cultural traditions and to support local guiding and outfitting businesses. Partnerships with schools, 4-H, and conservation clubs should be expanded.

B. GENERAL STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

Beyond activity-specific policies, the plan calls for regional strategies that ensure coordination and efficiency.

Cross-Region Collaboration: Establish a regionally-based entity, with balanced representation from member counties and business leaders, to oversee implementation and share best practices.

Centralized Asset Mapping: Maintain and update the GIS database of assets, integrating new projects and condition assessments annually.

Regional Coordinators: Designate regional staff or liaisons to bridge local projects with state/federal resources.

Trail Maintenance Crews: Explore shared maintenance crews or regional funding pools to reduce costs and improve consistency across counties.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RECREATIONAL LINKAGES

Connectivity emerged as a top priority during the planning process. Residents want recreation opportunities that feel connected, not fragmented.

Trail Connectivity: Complete missing links in the Chippewa and Buffalo River State Trails, and explore opportunities to connect the Black River State Forest trails with county networks. A continuous multi-county trail system would be a major draw for visitors.

Water Trail Continuity: Ensure paddling routes have consistent access points, signage, and amenities across counties. The Chippewa River Water Trail is a prime candidate for regional investment.

Multimodal Integration: Connect recreation assets to broader transportation systems—bike lanes leading into towns, safe crossings linking neighborhoods to trails, and transit stops at major gateways.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Recreation assets create economic value only when they are paired with businesses and workforce strategies. The plan includes targeted recommendations to support rural entrepreneurship.

Business Incubator Programs: Establish incubator hubs for outfitters, guiding services, and lodging. These hubs would provide technical assistance, mentorship, and shared marketing resources.

Outdoor Events Support: Festivals, races, and cultural events tied to recreation should be supported through streamlined permitting, promotional assistance, and business partnerships.

Workforce Development: Counties should partner with technical colleges and workforce boards to create training modules in hospitality, recreation management, and outdoor guiding. Apprenticeships and internships for young adults are recommended.

"Trail Town" Initiatives: Encourage communities to adopt trail-friendly business practices—extended hours, bike racks, signage, and discounts for trail users.

Become a Data Resource: Outdoor recreation datasets are limited. Identifying opportunities to develop new data will enable the Region to justify its efforts and present the evidence needed to enhance the outdoor recreation economy.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BRANDING, MARKETING & TOURISM

For the Region to succeed as a destination, it must present itself under a unified brand identity.

Shared Regional Brand: Develop and adopt a regional logo, tagline, and brand guidelines that all counties can use. Branding should emphasize family-friendly adventure, cultural richness, and natural beauty.

Storytelling Campaigns: Highlight local stories—such as family-owned businesses, Indigenous heritage, and community events—through regional marketing channels.

Mobile-Friendly Asset Maps: Integrate the GIS inventory into a digital trip-planning hub that allows users to filter by activity, difficulty, and nearby amenities.

Regional Itineraries: Create sample itineraries (e.g., "Weekend in Trempealeau County," "Family Paddling Adventure," "Multi-Day Biking Loop") that encourage visitors to explore multiple counties.

F. OUTDOOR RECREATION FUNDING

Implementation of these strategies will require diverse funding sources. The plan identifies potential pathways:

Federal Grants: USDA Rural Development, Economic Development Administration (EDA), and Department of Transportation (DOT) grants for infrastructure.

State Programs: Wisconsin DNR's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, Wisconsin Economic Development Council (WEDC) workforce development, and state tourism grants.

Private Philanthropy: Foundations focused on conservation, health, and community development.

Public-Private Partnerships: Collaborations with outdoor retailers, breweries, and local businesses that benefit from increased visitation.

User Fees: Where appropriate, modest fees for boat launches, camping, or parking can support maintenance.

G. NEXT STEPS

The recommendations are designed to move quickly from paper to practice. The strategy outlines:

Formal Adoption: Each county board adopts the plan as a guiding document by the end of 2026.

Early Wins: Launch branding and digital hub in Year 1, signaling momentum.

Pilot Projects: Begin with trail connectivity and business incubator pilots to demonstrate success.

Annual Review: The regionally-based entity should publish annual progress reports.

Plan Update: Conduct a full review and update after five years (2030).

Conclusion

The recommendations outlined here represent a balanced approach—expanding assets, improving infrastructure, supporting businesses, building a brand, and securing funding. They are ambitious but achievable, rooted in both data and community priorities. With strong implementation, the Region can establish itself as a premier destination and a model for rural recreation-driven economic development.

SECTION VII: IMPLEMENTATION



A. Community Engagement & Workforce Development

Community Engagement as a Core Value

From the start, this project was designed to be community-driven. The eight counties emphasized that a regional plan would only be meaningful if it reflected the voices of residents, businesses, and organizations across the Region. Community engagement was therefore woven into every stage of the process.

Surveys gathered input from more than 1,700 residents, capturing both quantitative priorities (e.g., trail connectivity, water access) and qualitative stories ("I take my grandchildren to the river, but we need safer access points").

Public Meetings provided spaces for dialogue and transparency, ensuring that residents saw how their input was being used.

Focus Groups gave a platform to youth, seniors, tribal members, and small business owners, who might otherwise be overlooked.

The result was a plan that reflects the lived experiences of rural communities. Engagement also fostered a sense of ownership: residents now see themselves as co-creators of the Region's outdoor future.

Advancing Diversity

The plan recognizes that recreation is not equally accessible to all. Barriers such as cost, transportation, physical ability, and cultural relevance can prevent some residents from participating. By centering around opportunities, the plan seeks to create a more welcoming and inclusive outdoor system.

Key strategies include:

- **Accessibility:** Incorporating ADA design standards into all new projects and upgrading existing facilities where feasible.
- **Affordability:** Encouraging counties to keep entry fees low and supporting community programs that provide free or discounted gear rentals.
- **Cultural Inclusion:** Partnering with tribal nations to integrate Indigenous history and cultural perspectives into trail signage and interpretive materials.
- **Representation:** Ensuring marketing materials reflect diverse users—families, seniors, youth, people of color, and people with disabilities.
- **Equitable Investment:** Prioritizing underserved communities identified through the asset inventory for new projects.

By embedding accessible principles into policy, the plan ensures that outdoor recreation is a right, not a privilege.

Workforce Development for the Outdoor Economy

As outdoor recreation grows, so does the need for a skilled workforce—from hospitality workers and guides to trail builders and conservation professionals. Workforce development is therefore a central pillar of the plan.

Recommended strategies:

- **Hospitality Training:** Partner with technical colleges and workforce boards to create short-term training programs in customer service, lodging, and food service.
- **Guiding & Outfitting Certification:** Develop certifications for paddling, fishing, biking, and outdoor safety, allowing local residents to turn their skills into businesses or employment.
- **Trail Building & Stewardship Training:** Establish regional training programs for volunteer leaders and paid crews, ensuring high-quality, sustainable trail construction and maintenance.
- **Youth Employment Programs:** Create summer youth corps or internship opportunities focused on conservation, guiding, or hospitality.
- **Leadership Development:** Train local champions—residents who can advocate for projects, lead volunteer efforts, and serve as liaisons between counties and communities.

By aligning workforce development with recreation growth, the plan ensures that economic benefits stay local. Jobs are created, small businesses are supported, and young people see opportunities to build futures in their home communities.

Community-Led Stewardship

Beyond jobs, the plan emphasizes volunteerism and stewardship. Annual volunteer trail days, adopt-a-park programs, and partnerships with schools and civic groups will build a culture of shared responsibility. This approach ensures that the Region's natural resources are protected even as recreation grows.

Measuring Success

Progress in this area will be tracked through metrics such as:

- Number of residents trained in hospitality or guiding.
- Number of youth engaged in workforce or stewardship programs.
- Number of facilities upgraded to meet accessibility standards.
- Diversity of participants in public engagement activities.
- These measures will help ensure that implementation remains accountable to the principles of inclusion, equity, and community empowerment.

A People-Centered Plan

Ultimately, outdoor recreation is not just about trails and rivers—it's about people. By embedding community engagement, DEI, and workforce development into its framework, this plan positions the Region to build not only stronger economies, but also healthier, more inclusive, and more resilient communities.

One youth participant emphasized: 'A trail isn't enough on its own — people need to feel welcome and included when they use it.'

B. Conservation, Sustainability, & Monitoring

Conservation as a Guiding Principle

The Region's natural resources—its rivers, forests, wetlands, and trails—are the foundation of the

Region's outdoor economy. Protecting these resources is essential to ensuring recreation can grow without undermining the very assets that make the Region attractive. Throughout engagement, residents consistently emphasized that conservation and stewardship must go hand in hand with development.

This plan positions conservation not as an afterthought, but as a guiding principle. Every recommendation—whether it involves building new trails, expanding water access, or developing tourism—has been evaluated for environmental sustainability.

Sustainability Practices

The plan identifies a series of practices to ensure projects are designed and managed responsibly:

- **Sustainable Trail Design:** Adopt International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) guidelines for sustainable trail building, including proper drainage, grade reversals, and erosion control.
- **Habitat Protection:** Require environmental assessments for projects near sensitive ecosystems, ensuring recreation development does not degrade wildlife corridors, wetlands, or riparian zones.
- **Water Quality Safeguards:** Promote best practices in stormwater management, buffer zones along rivers, and monitoring of nutrient runoff.
- **Green Infrastructure:** Encourage the use of permeable surfaces, native plantings, and natural materials in recreation infrastructure.
- **Carbon Footprint Reduction:** Support active transportation options (bike trails, walking paths) to reduce vehicle dependency and emissions.

These practices ensure that recreation growth aligns with the long-term health of the land and water.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

Equally important is the ability to track progress over time. The plan includes a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework that will allow the Region to measure both outcomes and impacts.

Key indicators include:

- **Environmental Indicators:** Miles of trail built or upgraded with sustainable standards; number of projects incorporating habitat protection; water quality measures in recreation corridors.
- **Economic Indicators:** Growth in recreation-related businesses; increases in local tax revenue; tourism spending trends.
- **Social Indicators:** Number of residents with access to recreation within a 15-minute drive; participation in volunteer stewardship programs; diversity of users engaged.

Data will be collected annually by county staff and aggregated regionally. Findings will be published in a public "State of Outdoor Recreation" report to ensure transparency and accountability.

Adaptive Management

Sustainability also means flexibility. Conditions will change—climate patterns, population shifts, economic trends—and the plan must adapt accordingly. The M&E framework is designed to feed back into decision-making, allowing counties to refine strategies based on what is working and where gaps remain.

Examples of adaptive strategies include:

- Redirecting investment to underserved communities if access targets are not met.
- Adjusting trail maintenance approaches if erosion or overuse becomes an issue.
- Revising workforce development programs if industry needs shift.

By embedding adaptive management, the plan avoids becoming a static document and instead functions as a living strategy.

Building a Culture of Stewardship

Beyond technical monitoring, the plan emphasizes the role of people in conservation. Volunteer programs, school partnerships, and public education campaigns will foster a culture of stewardship. Residents who participate in trail building, river cleanups, or conservation projects develop a sense of ownership, increasing the likelihood that resources will be cared for over the long term.

Long-Term Vision

The ultimate measure of success will be whether the Region can grow its outdoor economy while preserving the landscapes and waters that define its character. By integrating conservation, sustainability, and monitoring into every stage of the plan, the Region is positioned not only to expand recreation opportunities but also to ensure that future generations can enjoy them.

As a conservation advocate remarked: ‘We need to ensure today’s growth creates opportunities that will endure for generations.’

C. Outcomes & Next Steps

Immediate Outcomes of the Project

The completion of the Regional Outdoor Recreation Plan represents a major milestone for the Region. The Region now has, for the first time, a shared vision and strategy that unites eight counties under a single framework.

Key outcomes delivered during the grant period include:

- **Comprehensive Written Plan:** A fully developed, region-wide plan adopted by the steering committee and prepared for formal adoption by county boards.
- **Asset Inventory and GIS Mapping:** Documentation of more than 1,100 outdoor assets, mapped with 2,000 business assets reveal strengths, gaps, and opportunities.
- **Branding Framework:** A draft brand identity and marketing strategy positioning the Region as a five-star outdoor recreation destination.
- **Community Engagement:** Input gathered from more than 1,700 residents, plus targeted focus groups with youth, seniors, tribal members, and businesses.
- **Policy and Strategy Recommendations:** Detailed guidance on infrastructure, connectivity, accessibility business development, and conservation.
- **Five-Year Implementation Roadmap:** A timeline that identifies key milestones, responsible parties, and potential funding sources.
- Collectively, these outcomes provide the foundation for implementation. The Region now has the tools to move from planning to action.

Indicators of Success

While the plan itself is a success, its ultimate value will be measured by how well it is implemented. Success indicators include:

- **Access:** Percentage of residents with recreation opportunities within 15 minutes of their home.
- **Connectivity:** Miles of new trail linkages completed between counties.
- **Business Growth:** Number of new or expanded recreation-related businesses.
- **Workforce Development:** Number of residents trained through incubator, hospitality, or guiding programs.
- **Equity:** Investments directed to underserved communities, ADA compliance improvements, and diverse participation in recreation.
- **Stewardship:** Number of volunteers engaged annually in conservation and trail work.
- **Economic Impact:** Increases in tourism revenue, property values, and local tax receipts.

These indicators will guide annual monitoring and allow the Region to track progress toward long-term outcomes.

Building Momentum

The project has already generated momentum. Counties are actively discussing how to align local budgets and projects with the regional plan. Nonprofit organizations and chambers of commerce are preparing to incorporate the regional brand into their own materials. Businesses have expressed interest in participating in incubator and marketing initiatives.

Most importantly, residents have expressed pride and optimism in seeing their counties work together. Community input showed a strong appetite for collaboration, and the adoption of this plan signals to the public that leaders are listening.

D. Regional Leadership

Moving forward, the plan calls for the establishment of a regional entity to oversee implementation, track progress, and report to the public. This entity will be responsible for coordinating across counties, securing funding, and ensuring accountability. It would operate in conjunction with existing local, county, and state governments and organizations to create synergy between established efforts and the recommendations of this plan. Rather than replace existing groups and their momentum, this entity would allow groups to focus on their specific strengths or core competencies, while it identifies, supports, and promotes efforts that align with the regional vision. In this effort, the following additional recommendations are intended to help advise the creation of that entity.

The entity should prioritize four strategies to enhance outdoor recreation:

1. Becoming an information hub.
2. Building a regional network and asset-based coalitions.
3. Fostering grassroots efforts and organizations.
4. Integrating a culture of outdoor recreation.

Be An Information Hub

One of the most difficult aspects of this plan was consolidating and analyzing data. Every agency, county, or activity develops data differently. This entity can conduct the research, compare data sets, and coordinate with the various groups to develop a standardized data set that is rich, accurate, and user-friendly.

Additionally, this entity should identify what data is needed. Many of the recommendations in Section IV identify a need to establish a baseline in terms of visitors, users, or other measurables (such as rounds played, or miles traveled). Working with partners and gaining an understanding for what is possible allows the entity to be proactive in data collection and analysis, which can provide an advantage to the Region's communities or organizations pursuing competitive grants, attracting new outdoor recreation businesses, and emphasizing the importance of outdoor recreation to policy makers.

Mapping is the natural "next step" in data evolution. Utilizing standardized and detailed data will allow the entity to generate better maps for future outdoor recreation plans or programming. Enhancing the quality of mapmaking within the Region improves the marketability to visitors through catchy, easy-to-use, and detailed visuals – providing yet another advantage in the competition for foot traffic.

Collaborate and Build Regional Coalitions

Coordination amongst organizations is a focal point of the recommendations in this plan. Conversations with stakeholders show that most organizations are operating in silos for a myriad of reasons. The regional entity can provide the support needed to engage organizations, coordinate conversations, and develop reports while specialized organizations focus on completing their missions and "doing what they do best". The entity can use forums, annual events, and task forces to bring experts together while also outlining the framework to conduct useful discussion and generate progress towards regional initiatives.

Public engagement was a priority during this planning process and will continue to be an essential component in advancing outdoor recreation promotion in the future. The regional entity can conduct comprehensive and consistent reporting and presentations across municipal boundaries to ensure all residents get equal access to information and participation. They can also schedule outreach efforts in a timely manner to generate as much momentum around a given project as possible. If everyone is discussing the same issue at the same time, the ripple effect or echo chamber around that issue grows much larger than having individual meetings occurring throughout the year and in different locations.

Foster Grassroots Efforts and Organizations

The purpose of the regional entity is to foster appreciation for outdoor recreation and maintain momentum around regional collaboration and investment. To get the physical improvements completed, or to carry out field work, the entity should rely on a network of partners and coordinate their efforts around this plan. To that end, the entity will need to spur the Region's residents and businesses into action themselves, rather than tackling all the projects identified in this plan alone.

A recurring challenge throughout this plan's development was the struggle to find, educate, and maintain volunteers and volunteer groups throughout the Region. This regional entity can help address that issue by developing programs and materials to support the creation and administration

of non-profit groups. Individuals that came together around a common interest find themselves burdened with navigating the reporting and administrative requirements of incorporation. This burden results in burnout and turnover, which further hinders progress as new volunteers have to be trained and then brought up to speed on progress.

By developing materials, standards, and programs around the process of incorporation, this entity can train volunteers and ensure they have a solid foundation from which their organizations can focus on the real issues they want to tackle. It also provides an initial round of engagement between the regional entity and local organizations – enhancing the network the entity needs to maintain to keep this plan's momentum moving forward.

Integrating Outdoor Recreation

As mentioned previously in the plan, there are opportunities to increase exposure to the outdoors and outdoor recreation through non-traditional means. This can be done by hosting social or cultural events in outdoor settings, encouraging outdoor-themed activities (without necessarily requiring participants to be outdoors), and developing economic ties between businesses and the natural environment.

Each of the previous strategies – providing data and information, developing coalitions, and fostering interest and action – help generate support around outdoor recreation. While advances in those efforts are developing the physical infrastructure, drawing in users, and generating interest, the regional entity will want to improve the services available to a growing number of visitors and underscore the importance to local businesses in engaging this potential market. The regional entity should partner with state agencies, such as the Department of Tourism or Office of Outdoor Recreation, to develop reports and marketing materials on the impact of outdoor recreation on the economy at both county and local levels. They should also work with local economic development officials to seek out outdoor recreation businesses and industries that align with the assets and infrastructure in place within the Region. Finally, the entity will want to work with elected officials at the local and state levels to support outdoor recreation-based initiatives through funding and policy mechanisms.

By identifying positive trends about outdoor recreation and its users, the entity can promote the need for outdoor-oriented businesses and services. As the saying goes, "necessity is the mother of invention". If business leaders are shown a gap in services and the potential for return on investment, they will develop methods for addressing the gap. Promotion can be done through data and analytics, reports on surveys or needs assessments, and spotlighting efforts in the industry through recognition and awards.

To advance efforts in business attraction, the entity should assist in developing a trained, local workforce. Surveying outdoor recreation organizations and enthusiasts about their desired services or needs can be leveraged to create partnerships with business development groups, the Department of Workforce Development, and higher education institutions to create training and internship programs that teach the skills required within the related service industry or industries. Encouraging outdoor recreation-affiliated startups and entrepreneurs with training and financial support can also create positive interest in developing an outdoor recreation economy.

By pursuing each of these strategies with a collaborative mindset, the regional entity can maximize its efficacy as a networking and coordinating body, while leveraging the skills and specializations of

local groups. The entity's focus on collaboration and capacity-building supports on-going efforts rather than competing with them. Through the recommendations within this Plan and the stewardship of the regional entity, the Region can increase its prestige as an outdoor recreation destination.

Immediate tasks for the entity include:

- Setting up an implementation dashboard to track progress.
- Aligning county-level budgets with regional priorities.
- Seeking funding opportunities from USDA, EDA, DOT, Wisconsin DNR, and private foundations.
- Hosting quarterly meetings to maintain alignment among counties.

Conclusion

From state parks to singletrack trails and riverfront boardwalks, outdoor recreation in Wisconsin is driving jobs, tourism, and community resilience. With $11.2 billion in annual GDP impact statewide and growing interest and collaboration in the Region, the future of Wisconsin's outdoor economy looks bright. Strategic investments in trail infrastructure, river access, and regional coordination—especially through the Rural Partners Network—will help ensure that outdoor recreation remains a powerful economic force in rural and urban communities alike.

The completion of this plan is not an endpoint but a launching pad. It provides the Region with a unifying vision and a practical roadmap for building its outdoor economy, improving quality of life, and protecting natural resources. With continued collaboration, the Region is well-positioned to become a model for how rural communities can leverage outdoor recreation as a driver of prosperity and pride. While the assets have always been here—rivers, trails, forests, and communities who care deeply about them—there lacked a way to pull everything together. This plan aims to achieve that purpose.


Rock Falls
Red Cedar
DUNN COUNTY
PEPIN COUNTY
EAU CLAIRE COUNTY
Lima
Tarrant
BUFFALO CO
EAU CLAIRE CO
Bear Creek Swamp
Mirror Lake
Mondovi
Eleva
Strum
Cleghorn
Cem
Radio Tower