

Niagara Escarpment, A Natural Wonder in Wisconsin

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Eastern Wisconsin is graced with a number of rare geographic features that create a dream landscape for outdoor enthusiasts. We have the Kettle Moraine which runs the length of western Sheboygan County. We have Lake Michigan, a veritable inland sea, which forms the eastern boundary of the county.

And we have the Niagara Escarpment. Though lesser known, it is equally impressive in the things it offers in the areas of science, history and education. The escarpment is actually a cuesta which is defined as a ridge with a gentle slope on one side and a steep slope on the other. It extends about 250 miles through the area beginning with a few isolated outcrops in Waukesha County on the south.

The ridge then disappears under glacial sediment until it re-emerges in Dodge County. Well exposed in Fond du Lac County, and locally known as the Ledge, it is best seen in the area of St. Mary's Hill on Highway 23 just east of the city of Fond du Lac.

In Calumet County, it is most visible at the northeastern end of Lake Winnebago near Sherwood. From there it continues into Brown County and winds northeast along Green Bay and up the west side of the Door County peninsula. Disappearing under the Great Lakes, it reemerges in Ontario, and continues on into New York State where it forms the steep drop that is Niagara Falls.

Contrary to popular belief, the Niagara Escarpment is not a fault line or the result of glaciation. It was formed by the settling and hardening of limy ooze at the bottom of an ancient sea which covered much of Wisconsin. The limestone layer created was called Niagara dolomite, and is a veritable timeline of fossil life. Ancient in age, the Ledge is 400 million years old. In comparison, the Appalachian Mountains are 300 million years old, and the Rockies, a young 70 million.

Today, much of the land either side of the Niagara Escarpment is protected. High Cliff State Park in Calumet County is perhaps the best-known site showcasing the treasures of the escarpment. Within the 1,187-acre park is a 125-acre state natural area, protecting the cliff environments, forest area and more than a mile of Lake Winnebago shoreline. The park also contains effigy mounds and other important archaeological features.

Ledge Park in Dodge County lies along the natural rock ledge and provides a breathtaking overlook of Horicon Marsh. Research has shown it to be a significant site for ancient religious ceremonies with navigational landmarks used to make astronomical observations. It also contains petroglyphs (Native American rock art) and markings associated with the solstices and lunar cycles.

A projectile point more than 11,200 years old, evidence of the oldest known humans living in Wisconsin, has been found on the Oakfield Ledge in Fond du Lac County.

Evidence of our earliest European settlers also exists. They used the escarpment for economic purposes. Lime kilns were built on the ridges; rock was burned to produce the white lime powder that settlers needed for mortar, plaster and paint. Iron ore deposits near Iron Ridge Dodge County were mined to produce the cast iron for kitchen stoves and other modern conveniences.

Important scientific phenomena are found along the entire length of the escarpment. The Neda Mine, an abandoned iron mine located just north of Iron Ridge, Dodge County, is the site of the largest bat hibernaculum, or bat abode, in the Midwest. Managed by UW-Milwaukee, an estimated 150,000 bats live there today.

Caves abound on the escarpment. Eagle Cave in Peninsula State Park on Green Bay lies high in the bluff, formed when lake levels were much higher during the last ice age. Sea caves at Cave Point County Park are still being created by the wave movement of Lake Michigan. Underground cave tours are available at Ledge View Nature Center in Calumet County and Maribel-Cherney Caves County Park in Manitowoc County.

A total of seven large waterfalls are known to exist along the Escarpment corridor, mostly in Ontario, the most impressive being Niagara Falls. Here in Wisconsin, smaller or seasonal waterfalls exist. In spring, the flow from Wequiock Creek forms a picturesque waterfall which gradually slows through the dry summer season. Located in Brown County it offers a close up of the Ledge. Fonferek's Glen, another Brown County gem, features a 30-foot waterfall, dolomite cliffs and stone archway.

Here at home we have North Point and the exposed shelf rock located just offshore. This Niagara limestone bedrock is part of the same substratum as the outcropping that forms Niagara Falls. The scratches we see today on the rocky ridge at North Point give evidence of the passage of glaciers more than 10,000 years ago.

North Point has been important since the first light beacon was constructed there in 1838. Made a public park in 1916, it's been a place for swimming and parties, boating and romance; and recently a rendezvous for a pod of pelicans.

Wisconsin is full of wonders that are close to home. This summer, gas up your car, and check out the Niagara Escarpment in your own backyard.



Map courtesy of Wikipedia.org - The Niagara Escarpment, marked in red.