

# Recreation Opportunities Analysis



## WESTERN SANDS REGION



## 6. WESTERN SANDS REGION

### BACKGROUND

#### *LANDSCAPE SETTING*

The Western Sands Region is in the west-central part of the state and encompasses Adams, Chippewa, Clark, Eau Claire, Jackson, Juneau, Marathon, Monroe, Portage and Wood counties. Outside of northern Wisconsin's abundant wilderness and water resources, the Western Sands Region has the third largest amount of public lands and water in the state. These areas include the Black River State Forest, several County Forests, Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, and the Wisconsin, Chippewa and Black Rivers. Although the region remains largely rural, it is influenced by outside tourism demands from the Chicago and Twin Cities metropolitan areas. Easy highway access and relatively cheap land prices within the region have made it a popular location for seasonal home development. The region's Non-Metro Recreation Counties, Adams and Juneau, have experienced especially high housing growth, particularly along river flowages.

In the middle of this region is the vast, remarkably flat, sandy plain that was once the bed of Glacial Lake Wisconsin. This lake, ringed by the Driftless Area to the southwest and the glacier to the north and east, was 70 to 150 feet deep and covered over 1,800 square miles. Streams and rivers draining from the glacier into the lake carried enormous loads of sand, silt, and clay that settled onto the lake bottom. The lake is believed to have drained catastrophically when the ice dam along its southern end failed. This flush of water out of the lake carved the spectacular narrow, deep-sided gorges at Wisconsin Dells. Additional striking features across the region include castellated mounds scattered across the south-central portion of this landscape. These irregular bluffs are remnants of a sandstone escarpment and the result of the steady erosional forces of wind and water slowly wearing away the softer sandstone surrounding them. There are no large, naturally occurring lakes here, although there are a number of hydroelectric dams on the Wisconsin River that create large impoundments. The sandy plain is also characterized by sandy soils, dry forests, pine and oak barrens, large wetland complexes and significant tracts of public land. The center of the region has large concentrations of county forest, as well as state and federal lands. Combined with low population density, few roads, and a high percentage of forested cover, this provides for a different set of recreational opportunities.

The north tier of this region, the productive soils and moderate climate makes this the northern extent of predominantly agricultural land use. Remaining forests here tend to occur as fragments and are often quite small. Small kettle lakes are common on the moraines. These lakes are readily accessible to population centers in the Chippewa Valley and are experiencing increasingly intensive development pressure. In Clark and western Marathon counties, very few lakes exist, and the land takes on a more rolling nature. Many small creeks and rivers flow across this area, creating a dendritic drainage system. Soils are diverse and range from sandy loam to loam and shallow silt loam. In contrast, the southwest area is highly eroded and unglaciated.

#### *LOCAL ECONOMY*

The major land use in the Western Sands Region is forest, followed by agriculture. Much of the existing forest in the central and southern portions of the region is comprised of oak, aspen and pine. Timber management is focused on pulp production, giving rise to an abundance of pine plantations. Agricultural activities in the central sands are dominated by extensive commercial cranberry and crop production through the use of center-pivot irrigation on drained soils. Due to the abundance of bogs, the region is also a hotspot for the commercial harvest of sphagnum moss. Along with the extensive dairy operations in the northern part of the region, there is ginseng production centered around Wausau. Towards the western side of the Western Sands Region, agricultural activities, namely dairy and beef production, are available on valley floors and ridge tops.

Top employment sectors of the regional economy include trade, transportation and utilities, manufacturing, education and health services, government, professional and business services and leisure and hospitality.

## RECREATION USES AND PARTICIPATION

The Western Sands Region receives substantial public use for a variety of recreation activities, due largely to the amount of public land in the central forested area. The region boasts over 430,000 acres of county forest. Public forests offer opportunities for hiking and bird watching, which comprise a large portion of the recreational demand from local and out-of-town visitors. The eastern portion of the region is less densely populated than its surrounding areas and thus used heavily for hunting and fishing.

The northern part of the region has historically provided only limited public recreation opportunities. But, with the growth of the Fox Valley and several western and central Wisconsin cities, this area is under increasing pressure to meet growing recreation demands. Given the gentle topography and silt-loam soils, this landscape has great potential to provide off road biking, cross-country skiing, nature study, horseback riding, fishing, hunting and other outdoor activities. Access to the major rivers for boating and canoeing is in high demand. In the center of the region, an ample supply of trails helps foster other popular activities such as the use of all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles. Clark and Jackson counties are especially well known for their motorized recreation opportunities.

Many shallow-water areas within large public properties offer fishing, canoeing, kayaking, waterfowl observation, and hunting opportunities. The Black River is a popular canoeing destination. Coldwater streams found throughout the region also support high quality trout fisheries and receive substantial use by anglers.

Recreation participation rates for Wisconsin residents as a whole were presented on page 14 of the Introduction. The majority of participation rates of Western Sands Region residents are consistent with the state average or within five percentage points in variation. Notable differences to the state average are shown in the box to the right.

**Activities that residents of the Western Sands Region participate in at higher rates than the state average:**

- Hunting – big game

**Activities that residents of the Western Sands Region participate in at lower rates than the state average:**

- Sailing/stand-up paddle boarding
- Downhill skiing/snowboarding
- Visiting a dog park
- Personal water craft – jet ski

## EXISTING RECREATION SUPPLY IN THE WESTERN SANDS REGION

### PUBLIC LANDS FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION

The Western Sands Region has approximately 750,000 acres of public land available for outdoor recreation. The central forested areas and large river systems accommodate a variety of recreational activities. This section briefly describes the public conservation and recreation lands in the Western Sands Region. A description of all public lands in Wisconsin is provided in Appendix 3.

#### a) Federal

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages just nearly 97,000 acres in the Western Sands Region. The properties are largely used for waterfowl production, forest production, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, water quality and fisheries habitat.

#### b) State

The Department of Natural Resources owns just over 221,000 acres and holds public access easements on approximately 13,000 acres in the Western Sands Region. State properties in the region span the range of intended recreational settings and development levels (Map B3). At one end of the spectrum, properties such as Hartman Creek and Buckhorn State Parks provide well-developed recreation settings with developed campgrounds, miles of trails, picnic areas, swim areas and boat launches. In addition, properties like the Black River State Forest also contribute to the extensive trail network for hiking, biking, ATV/UTV riding and other activities.

At the other end of the spectrum are properties like Quincy Bluff and Wetlands State Natural Area, which boast a unique mosaic landscape of wet-mesic forest, sedge meadow, pine barrens, shrub-carr and sand prairie. These types of properties can provide some limited recreation opportunities for low-impact activities such as hunting, bird watching and nature study, but their primary purpose is not necessarily to provide recreation opportunities requiring development or infrastructure.

The State Board of Commissioners of Public Land (BCPL) owns over 400 acres in the region. These lands are scattered throughout the region in tracts typically several hundred acres or smaller in size. The BCPL manages its lands primarily for forest products. Many of the BCPL lands are isolated or contain wetlands and generally have limited recreation potential.

*c) County*

The Western Sands Region is home to over 430,000 acres of county forest located across the region, including those in Chippewa, Clark, Eau Claire, Jackson, Juneau, Marathon, and Wood counties. These large blocks of forest land provide a variety of benefits including forest products, fisheries and wildlife habitat, many types of outdoor recreation and water quality protection.

Most of the counties in the region manage parks that provide campgrounds, boat launches, and other types of infrastructure to support recreation.

*d) Other*

Many cities, villages and townships in the Western Sands Region own and manage parks, boat access sites, and other properties that provide opportunities for outdoor recreation. The Stevens Point area and City of Eau Claire each have extensive trail networks that continue to grow in urban areas. Other larger municipalities in the region are actively developing trails due to the demand in their communities. In addition, several school forests in the region are open to some forms of recreation, generally when they are not in use by school and community groups.

## *PRIVATE LANDS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION*

This section summarizes the privately-owned lands in the region that are open to the public for some types of recreation. A detailed description of private lands in Wisconsin open to the public is provided in Appendix 3.

*a) Forest Legacy program easements*

Approximately 12,280 acres in Adams County and another 1,300 acres in Marathon County are part of the Forest Legacy program, which is designed to identify and protect environmentally important private forestlands threatened with conversion to non-forest uses (such as subdivision for residential or commercial development). To help maintain the integrity and traditional uses of private forestlands, the Forest Legacy Program promotes the use of conservation easements.

*b) Managed Forest Law (MFL) and Forest Crop Law enrolled lands*

The amount of land enrolled in these forestry programs is found across the region, with the majority concentrated in Adams and Marathon Counties. Approximately 103,000 acres in the region are currently enrolled in these programs. Because these programs use 25 or 50-year contracts, the total amount enrolled changes from year to year as landowners enroll lands into the program (only the MFL program is open to enrollment) and contracts covering other lands expire.

*c) Land trusts*

These land trusts operate in the Western Sands Region: Ice Age Trail Alliance, North Central Conservancy Trust, The Conservation Fund, The Prairie Enthusiasts, Chippewa County Land Conservancy, West Wisconsin Land Trust, and Mississippi Valley Conservancy. These non-profit conservation organizations have protected over 1,600 acres in the region. Most of these lands are open to the public for some forms of recreation such as hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, snowshoeing and other similar activities.

*d) Voluntary Public Access Program*

The DNR Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program provides financial incentives to private landowners who open their property to public hunting, fishing, trapping, and wildlife observation. Funding was authorized in the 2008 and 2014 Farm Bills. 2014 funds are administered and provided by U.S. Department of Agriculture NRCS. To date, there are over 4,000 acres available in the Western Sands Region.

*e) Snowmobile Trails on Private Lands*

The state snowmobile trail network has been developed through the work of local clubs partnering with private landowners. Agreements with willing landowners allow trails to be located for the winter season, which enables snowmobilers to travel throughout the network. There are 3,816 miles of snowmobile trail in the Western Sands region, of which 93% (3,531 miles) on are private lands.

*EXISTING PUBLIC RECREATION INFRASTRUCTURE*

The department contacted representatives from county governments and regional organizations to gather information about the recreation opportunities available to the public across the Western Sands Region. In addition, department staff searched websites for additional data and descriptions of the recreation opportunities provided. Maps C and D show existing recreation infrastructure in the ten counties of the region.

The Western Sands Region contains a large amount of public land, largely forested. These properties provide a wide range of high-quality recreation opportunities. What follows are examples of infrastructure in the Western Sands Region that support a variety of recreation activities.

*a) Black River State Forest*

- 3 family campgrounds, 97 family campsites, 2 group campgrounds
- Designated swimming and picnic areas
- 34 miles of ATV, UTV and motorcycle trails
- 29 miles of biking trails
- 24 miles of groomed ski trails
- 48 miles of snowmobile trails
- Hunting and fishing opportunities

*b) Buckhorn State Park*

- 4 miles of trails
- 68 family campsites
- Picnic/day use areas, 300-foot swim area and boat launches
- Fishing, hunting, and trapping opportunities
- Skiing and ice fishing opportunities

*c) Lake Wissota State Park*

- Hiking, biking, and horseback riding trails
- 116 wooded, secluded family campsites
- Four picnic shelters, swimming beach and a boat launch
- Hunting, trapping, fishing and nature study opportunities

*d) Rib Mountain State Park*

- Picnic areas, amphitheater and observation tower
- Hunting and trapping opportunities
- Hiking and snowshoeing opportunities

*e) George W. Mead Wildlife Area*

- Trapping and migratory bird, small game and big game hunting opportunities
- Dog training and trialing areas
- Hiking, biking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing opportunities
- Bird and wildlife viewing, gathering/harvesting edibles and nature study opportunities

*f) Elroy-Sparta Trail*

- The first rail-to-trail in the United States – featuring three rock tunnels and five small towns
- Hiking, biking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing opportunities
- Snowmobiling trails
- Two non-reservable campgrounds

*g) Jackson County Forest*

- 5 campgrounds with almost 300 campsites
- Hiking, ATV, motorcycle, *snowmobile* and horse riding trails
- Scuba diving at the state’s deepest lake, Wazee Lake

*h) Marathon County Forest, Nine Mile Unit*

- Hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing opportunities
- Horseback riding trails
- **Range for trap, target shooting and archery**
- **Snowmobiling opportunities**

## PUBLIC INPUT ON RECREATION NEEDS IN THE WESTERN SANDS REGION

*INPUT GATHERED AS PART OF THE ROA.*

The department hosted four public open house meetings, in Eau Claire, Stevens Point, Onalaska, and Appleton between October 23 and November 1, 2017. These open houses were designed to both present information about the ROA and to gather public input on the types of recreation activities they pursued, what places they liked to visit (including what attributes drew them to these properties), and what additional opportunities they wished were available in the Western Sands Region.

In addition to these open houses, the department posted an online public input form to its web page. A downloadable version was also available for people who preferred to print, fill out, and send in the form. The public input period ran from October 6 to November 17, 2017. The department sent out information and press releases about the ROA project and encouraged people to share their perspectives through the online or hardcopy public input forms. Recreation groups, non-profit organizations, and others distributed links to the input form to their members.<sup>14</sup>

The department received comments in the following formats:

- 856 online public input forms
- 98 paper copies of the public input form
- 4 letters and emails

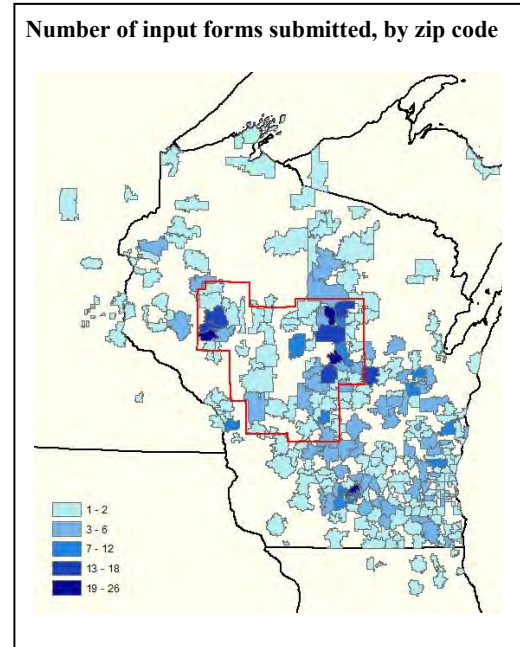
**It is important for readers to keep in mind that the public input received through the ROA process is simply information gathered at one point in time, using an open-access technique. It is not a representation of what the “average” resident believes or the range of perspectives that exist.**

<sup>14</sup> The public input form was available for anyone to complete and over 900 people did so. The department’s experience is that when it provides “open access” opportunities in which anyone can participate, the people that respond tend to be those that find out about the input opportunity and to have a particular or active, interest in a specific issue; that is, they care enough about an issue to take the time to find and fill out the form or write an email or letter. The responses received are valuable in providing the department with an understanding of people’s perspectives, reasoning and breadth of viewpoints. However, because there is no “defined population” from which these responses originate, from a statistical perspective there is no way to know how the respondents compare to a larger population (for example, how the 954 respondents compare to the population of the ten-county region or the state as a whole) and therefore no way that the results can be generalized with an associated error margin to a larger population.

Respondents were asked to list the zip code of their primary residence. Of those who provided this information, the map at right shows their distribution and frequency. For the most part, the primary residence of many people who provided input is within the ten-county Western Sands Region. The map to the right depicts that comments came from the more urbanized areas surrounding Eau Claire-Chippewa Falls, Stevens Point and Wausau. There was also a fair distribution of respondents from outside the region from southern and eastern Wisconsin.

Almost 19% of respondents identified themselves as living in in Dane County. About 8% of respondents were from Marathon County and all remaining counties represented 6% or less of the whole. Of all the regions in this analysis, the Western Sands Region had the fewest total number of respondents to the questionnaire.

The department sought and received the following feedback about recreation in the Western Sands region. From central forests to the rugged southwest areas of the region, visitors will find much to explore. Proximity to urban centers combined with the large amount of public land is slowly shaping the Western Sands Region into a recreation destination.



### Participation in outdoor recreation

Respondents to the public input form participate in many outdoor recreation activities. Popular activities that were selected by respondents are seen in the table at right. We can compare these results to the participation results from the recent Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) survey. The **bolded** activities in the table at right were the more popular activities that the SCORP survey indicated residents in the Western Sands Region participate. Respondents who engage in activities that are not bolded participated in this public input opportunity at a higher rate than what is reflected by the regional average. As can be seen, the activities that respondents to the ROA input form participate in resemble the results of the random sample of Western Sands Region residents generated by the SCORP survey.

#### Popular recreation activities in which respondents to the ROA input form participate

##### **Bicycling – surfaced trails**

Bicycling – mountain biking, single track

##### **Camping – tent**

Camping – RV/pop-up

##### **Canoeing/kayaking**

Cross-country skiing/ snowshoeing

##### **Fishing – from a boat, canoe or kayak**

##### **Hiking, walking, running on trails**

Horseback riding

##### **Swimming**

##### **Wildlife/bird watching**

### Properties that people visit

There are almost 750,000 acres in public ownership in the Western Sands Region between state, federal and county lands, third highest of all the ROA regions. Of the people that submitted information through the public input opportunity, over half had walked the Ice Age Trail and 40% had visited the Black River State Forest and Rib Mountain State Park in the last three years. About one third of respondents visited Hartman Creek State Park and the Elroy Sparta State Trail. Other popular properties included Marathon and Portage County Parks, the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, and Roche-a-Cri and Buckhorn State Parks.

### Factors important in determining favorite places to visit

Of the people providing input, the majority (71%) selected (1) the quality of trails as one of the top four most important factors in determining their favorite property to visit. This is expected, given that many respondents noted their participation in a variety of trail activities. In decreasing order, the next three most important factors are: (2) the desire to be in a quiet place, (3) good maps, signs or information about the property, and (4) the quality of the habitat.

## Additional outdoor recreation opportunities needed

Almost 80% of respondents believe that more recreational opportunities are needed in the Western Sands Region. Of the additional opportunities desired by respondents, five of the top six choices selected were trail-related. Again, this speaks to the respondents' participation in a variety of trail activities. The opportunity that was most frequently selected as needed in the Western Sands Region was more trails for hiking, walking or running, which was selected by 36% of respondents.

The recent SCORP survey of statewide residents found a correlation between the activities that people pursue and their perspectives on what additional opportunities are needed in their home county. For many activities, participants generally believed there was a need for more opportunities. The public input received as part of the ROA showed a similar pattern in the Western Sands Region. For example, a strong majority (80+%) of people who either ride single-track mountain bikes or horses believe there is a need for more single-track mountain bike or equestrian trails, respectively, in the Western Sands Region. Additionally, many horse trail supporters also noted a need for "horse campgrounds".

A growing voice within the Western Sands Region is that of rock climbers. Rock climbing fell just short of the top ten most frequently identified recreation opportunities needed in the Western Sands region. Once again, most of those who identified themselves as climbers noted a need for legal access to climbing opportunities.

**Top 10 most frequently identified recreation opportunities needed in the Western Sands Region, based on public input gathered during the ROA process**

Activity	# of responses
More hiking/walking/running trails	348
More natural surface (dirt) bicycling trails	226
More rustic/quiet campgrounds (pit toilets, no electricity or generators)	218
More horseback trails	200
More paved bicycling trails	184
More trails for motorized recreation (ATVs, UTVs, off-road motorcycles, etc.)	150
More public shore access to lakes & streams	123
More developed campgrounds (electric hook-ups, flush toilets, showers)	116
More local parks and playgrounds	83
More wildlife watching decks or platforms	78

## Department-managed roads and motorized access

Over 600 miles of roads exist on department properties in the Western Sands Region, most of which are either maintenance access drives. Generally, these roads are used primarily for management purposes, including primitive seasonal logging roads, natural resource management or other property service activities. About one-third (215 miles) of these roads are open to the public to drive "street-legal vehicles"—this includes cars, pick-up trucks, SUVs, motorcycles and other licensed vehicles. By state law, these roads are also open to horses, horse-drawn vehicles and bicycles. Many local units of government in the Western Sands Region have authorized some types of motorized recreational vehicles on designated local roads and trails, amounting to over 2,600 miles of access.

The department sought public feedback on potentially opening none, some, or all department roads that are currently open to "street-legal" vehicles in the Western Sands Region to motorized recreation vehicles.<sup>15</sup> About 42% of people that provided responses believed that all DNR roads should remain closed to motorized recreational vehicles. Of the 51% that supported allowing at least some motorized recreational vehicles on DNR roads, almost half thought that this access should be on a subset of roads that connect larger regional motorized recreation networks. In addition, 27% of these respondents supporting opening roads thought opening should occur to provide access during the fall hunting season (Sept 1 to Dec 31).

<sup>15</sup> For purposes of the ROA, "recreational vehicles" includes off highway vehicles, ATVs, UTVs and off highway motorcycles.



### *INPUT GATHERED AS PART OF THE WISCONSIN SCORP*

In 2016 as part of the development of the SCORP, the department asked a random sample of Wisconsin residents to identify additional outdoor recreation opportunities needed in their home county. The most frequently identified needs statewide were:

- hiking/walking/running trails
- bicycling trails
- public shore access to lakes, rivers and streams
- public shooting ranges
- local parks and playgrounds

Respondents living in the ten counties in the Western Sands Region identified the following needs, among others, at a higher rate than the state average:

- equestrian trails
- trails for motorized recreation
- public campsites

Western Sands residents identified the following needs, among others, less frequently than the state average:

- hiking/walking/running trails
- bicycling trails
- public shooting ranges
- outdoor courts for tennis, handball, basketball

### FUTURE RECREATION NEEDS IN THE WESTERN SANDS REGION

The Western Sands Region has a variety of existing opportunities for most types of outdoor recreation. The diversity of the country-side between agriculture, forest cover, wetland complexes and various water resources allows for this variety of opportunities. There are a few clusters of urban areas with a population searching for nearby places to recreate. The amount of public land available for outdoor recreation is less than regions to the north, but still sufficient to offer opportunities to recreate outdoors. The main large block of public land is in the central forested area composed of county forests, the Black River State Forest and the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Future recreation needs seem to be those that are more trail related, and in many cases, these needs appear to be for “loop trail” experiences on smaller public properties (1000 acres or less). There also seems to be a theme of developing access to unique natural resource areas. Being able to experience the outdoors in a variety of ways, whether it is by land or water. The growing popularity of smaller watercraft suggests that more and more people are finding ways to enjoy the water.

The department used the following sources to identify which recreation opportunities are most needed in the region:

- Public input on recreation needs submitted during the comment period (October 6 to November 17, 2017).
- Data on recreation participation and needs gathered in a 2016 survey as part of the development of the 2017-2022 SCORP.
- Data gathered in previous SCORP planning efforts.

From this information, department staff grouped the relative needs for recreation activities as high, medium or low. The groupings are as follows:

<b>Future recreation needs in the Western Sands Region – High</b>	<b>Future recreation needs in the Western Sands Region - Medium</b>	<b>Future recreation needs in the Western Sands Region - Low</b>
Bicycling - bicycle touring/road riding Bicycling - mountain biking/off-road biking Bird or wildlife watching Camping - developed Camping - primitive Canoeing or kayaking Cross country skiing Dog walking Fishing - lake fishing from a boat, canoe or kayak Fishing - lake fishing from shore or a pier Fishing - river fishing from a boat, canoe or kayak Fishing - stream or river fishing from shore or wading Hiking, walking, trail running, backpacking Horseback riding Hunting - big game Picnicking Snowshoeing Swimming in lakes and rivers	ATV/UTV riding Dog training Dog trialing Fishing - ice fishing Four-wheel vehicle driving Gather mushrooms, berries, etc. Hunting - migratory birds Hunting - small game Hunting - turkey Motorboating (waterski/tubing, personal watercraft) Nature photography Off-highway motorcycle riding Participating in nature-based education programs Rock climbing Target shooting - firearms	Bicycling - fat tire/snow biking Dog sledding/skijoring Geocaching Horse cart driving Sailing, windsurfing, rowing, stand-up paddling Scuba diving/snorkeling Snowmobiling Target shooting - archery Trapping Visiting a beach, beach walking Whitewater rafting

## OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET FUTURE RECREATION NEEDS IN THE WESTERN SANDS REGION ON DEPARTMENT-MANAGED LANDS

On behalf of Wisconsin residents, the department owns and manages properties in the Western Sands Region to meet a variety of ecological and recreation goals. Since the region has fewer large blocks of public land, many of these experiences tend to be less remote than in the regions to the north. The central forested region, however, plays an important role in meeting the demand for activities that require large land areas. Proximity to population centers makes many of the small and moderately sized department properties popular with local residents. These properties are quick and easy to get to and have good points of access.

Applying the regional needs listed above, the department evaluated the properties it manages in the Western Sands Region to identify places where it could potentially incorporate some activities or enhance existing opportunities to meet these needs. The identification of department-managed lands that appear to be “good fits” to provide different activities will be used to help focus the department’s work developing and updating property master plans. A description of opportunities to meet recreation needs in the Western Sands Region (on department-managed lands) follows.

*NON-MOTORIZED TRAIL RECREATION*

Non-motorized trail recreation has been and continues to be a primary outdoor activity throughout the year in the Western Sands Region. From hiking and biking in the summer to cross-country skiing in the winter, the region’s residents and visitors take advantage of the numerous opportunities that currently exist.

Participation in mountain biking has grown recently in the region and demand exists for trails suitable for a variety of skill levels. As opposed to recreational bicycle touring, where there are benefits to creating multiple connecting linkages, meeting the growing need for mountain biking and off-road biking opportunities can be created or expanded at multiple, stand-alone sites throughout the region. Mountain biking trails are constructed, narrow trails less than two feet wide.

Hiking, walking, and running on trails in the region remain very popular activities. Many opportunities currently exist on department properties throughout the region. Urban centers in the region are actively adding trails to meet the local demand in their communities. The Ice Age Trail runs through parts of the region and planning is underway to link to communities to supply services needed by through-hikers.

Horseback riding is in demand in the region and opportunities potentially exist to develop trails on department properties especially where camping is available and allowed with horses.

The following table lists current and potential future opportunities for non-motorized trail activities

Recreation Activity	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>expand this use</b>	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to expand</b> this use	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>add this use</b>	Activity currently <b>does not exist</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to add this use</b>
<b>Bicycling - mountain biking/off-road biking</b>	Black River State Forest Buffalo River State Trail	Brunet Island and Lake Wissota State Parks Chippewa River, Elroy-Sparta and La Crosse River State Trails Buckhorn, Mc Millan, Mead, Meadow Valley, Sandhill and Wood County Wildlife Areas	Rib Mountain and Mill Bluff State Parks Big Rib River Fishery Area Dewey Marsh, North Bend Bottoms, South Beaver Creek and West Taylor Wildlife Areas	Buckhorn and Rocky Arbor State Parks Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area Big Creek, Plover River and Emmons Creek Fishery Areas Augusta, Buena Vista, Colburn, Dell Creek, Leola Marsh, Paul Olson and Yellow River Wildlife Areas Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation River Area

Cooperatively Managed Trails

It should be noted that the department owns several state trails in the region. However, some of these trails are cooperatively managed by local governments, usually counties. In these partnerships, the department typically holds the land ownership while the partners develop, maintain and operate the trail. Also, the managing partner conducts planning processes to determine which recreational uses will be allowed on the property. Since use decisions are planned by the trail partners, cooperatively managed trails will not be listed below as potential “good fits” in this analysis. However, the information collected will be provided to the partners for their use in future planning efforts.

For the Western Sands Region, cooperatively managed trails include:

- Hillsboro State Trail
- Mountain-Bay State Trail
- Old Abe State Trail
- Tomorrow River State Trail

Recreation Activity	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>expand this use</b>	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to expand</b> this use	Activity <b>currently does not exist</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>add this use</b>	Activity <b>currently does not exist</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to add this use</b>
<b>Bicycling - bicycle touring/ road riding</b>	Black River State Forest	Brunet Island, Buckhorn, Lake Wissota, Mill Bluff, Rib Mountain and Roche-A-Cri State Parks  The 400, Buffalo River, Chippewa River, Elroy-Sparta and La Crosse River State Trails  Mc Millan, Mead, Meadow Valley, Sandhill and Wood County Wildlife Areas	Dewey Marsh Wildlife Area	Rocky Arbor State Park Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area Big Rib River and Big Creek Fishery Areas Augusta, Buckhorn, Buena Vista, Colburn, Dell Creek, Leola Marsh, Paul Olson, Tom Lawin and Yellow River Wildlife Areas Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area
<b>Cross-country skiing</b>	Black River State Forest Mill Bluff, Buckhorn and Roche-A-Cri State Parks Chippewa River State Trail	Lake Wissota State Park Augusta, Dell Creek, Buckhorn, Meadow Valley, Sandhill, Tom Lawin and Wood County Wildlife Areas Quincy Bluff & Wetlands State Natural Area Dells of The Wisconsin River State Natural Area	Rib Mountain State Park Big Rib River, Big Roche-a-Cri, Duncan Creek, Elk Creek, Hay Creek, Lowes Creek, Mccann Creek, Sand Creek and Upper Neenah Fishery Areas  Ten Mile Creek Streambank Protection Area  Buena Vista, Dewey Marsh, Mc Millan, Mead and Paul Olson Wildlife Areas  Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area	Rocky Arbor State Park Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area Buffalo River State Trail Colburn, Leola Marsh and Yellow River Wildlife Areas
<b>Horseback riding</b>	Buckhorn, Colburn, Leola Marsh and Yellow River Wildlife Areas	Lake Wissota State Park The 400 State Trail Buena Vista Wildlife Area	Black River State Forest Rib Mountain State Park Big Rib River, Elk Creek, Mccann Creek and Sand Creek Fishery Areas  Augusta, Lake Hallie, North Bend Bottoms, South Beaver Creek, Tom Lawin and West Taylor Wildlife Area	Brunet Island, Buckhorn, Mill Bluff, Roche-A-Cri and Rocky Arbor State Parks Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area Big Creek, Emmons Creek and Plover River Fishery Areas Dewey Marsh and Paul Olson Wildlife Areas Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area
<b>Hiking, walking, trail running, backpacking</b>	All department properties are open to hiking, although most fishery, wildlife and natural areas do not have designated trails. Designated trails are found on state park, trail, forest, and flowage properties. Nearly all department properties have opportunities to add at least some designated hiking/ running/backpacking trails.			
<b>Dog walking</b>	Dog walking has similar characteristic as hiking. Dogs must be leashed on department properties except where the hunting season allows for using dogs. Nearly all department properties have opportunities to add trails designated for hiking. Properties closer to urban areas may provide better access to more people searching for dog walking opportunities.			
<b>Snowshoeing</b>	All department properties are open to snowshoeing, regardless if department properties have designated trails or not. Snowshoe use on groomed cross-country ski trails is usually not allowed.			

## WATER RELATED RECREATION

There is fair demand for water related recreation in the Western Sands Region, including swimming, fishing and a variety of types of boating.

This region contains large rivers and several flowages created by hydroelectric dams that are popular for boating. There is also an abundance of tributary streams in the region to fish or to simply enjoy a day on the water. Although there are many existing boat launches that accommodate trailers with motorboats as well as carry-in access for canoes and kayaks, there are several opportunities for additional access sites on underserved waterways on department properties to meet regional demand.

The following table lists current and potential future opportunities for water related recreation.

Recreation Activity	
<b>Canoeing or kayaking</b>	<p>Although not every property with open water has formal boat access sites (or access sites on all waterbodies) many of the lakes, rivers, and larger streams on department-managed lands have some opportunities to carry in a canoe or kayak. The following properties may have the potential to add more walk-in trails to access waterbodies with canoes or kayaks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Black River State Forest</li> <li>Big Rib River Fishery Area</li> <li>Big Roche-A-Cri Fishery Area</li> <li>Little Roche-A-Cri Fishery Area</li> <li>Mc Millan Wildlife Area</li> <li>Mead Wildlife Area</li> <li>North Bend Bottoms Wildlife Area</li> <li>Ten Mile Creek Streambank Protection Area</li> <li>Upper Neenah Fishery Area</li> </ul>
<b>Fishing - lake fishing from a boat, canoe, or kayak</b>	<p>The department currently maintains improved boat launches throughout the region. However, there are a limited number of lakes in the region and many of those are small kettle lakes. Department properties connecting to these waterbodies either already have boat accesses or have no feasible way to create more. As such, there are few department properties that would be able to address this recreation activity. Other public land managers may be able to provide additional access. The following property may have potential to add more improved boat access sites (ramps for trailered boats):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>North Bend Bottoms Wildlife Area</li> </ul>
<b>Fishing - lake fishing from shore or a pier</b>	<p>All department lands with lakes are open to shore fishing and as such there are not significant opportunities to expand this opportunity. There are some fishing docks or piers on department lands and there are some opportunities to add new ones, particularly at those properties near cities and villages and with easy road access. The following properties may be able to provide opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chippewa River State Trail</li> <li>North Bend Bottoms Wildlife Area</li> <li>South Beaver Creek Wildlife Area</li> </ul>

Recreation Activity	
<b>Fishing - stream or river fishing from shore or wading</b>	<p>All department lands with streams or rivers are open to shore fishing and as such there are not opportunities to expand this opportunity at existing properties. There may be opportunities to expand shore fishing opportunities through the acquisition of key parcels or to create disabled accessible fishing areas on the following properties:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Black River State Forest</li> <li>Big Rib River Fishery Area</li> <li>Big Creek Fishery Area</li> <li>Chippewa River State Trail</li> <li>Emmons Creek Fishery Area</li> <li>North Bend Bottoms Wildlife Area</li> <li>Plover River Fishery Area</li> <li>Richard A Hemp Fishery Area</li> <li>Sand Creek Fishery Area</li> <li>South Beaver Creek Wildlife Area</li> </ul>
<b>Motorboating (waterski/tubing, personal watercraft)</b>	<p>The department currently maintains improved boat launches throughout the region. However, the number of large waterbodies in the region that would be able to accommodate motorboating is limited. Department properties connecting to these waterbodies either already have boat accesses or have no feasible way to create more. As such, there are no department properties that would be able to address this recreation activity. Other public land managers may be able to provide additional access.</p>
<b>Swimming in lakes and rivers</b>	<p>All department properties adjacent to public waters allow swimming. Many department properties, especially state parks and forests, have beaches, changing rooms and other amenities to accommodate swimming. The following department properties may be able to either add new opportunities for swimming access or expand existing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Black River State Forest</li> <li>North Bend Bottoms Wildlife Area</li> </ul>

### *OTHER FORMS OF RECREATION*

There appears to be demand for many other types of outdoor recreation in the Western Sands Region, including camping, picnicking, and big game hunting.

Camping in general is becoming more popular in this region. Being closer to urban centers, this region provides access to outdoor recreation with less time required to reach their destination. Primitive camping areas for those hiking the Ice Age Trail are in demand. Places to go for the day and picnic, or simply going for a walk to experience wildlife are also appearing to increase in popularity in the region. Local public land managers may be able to also meet the need for camping and picnicking areas.

Department properties here see a fair amount of use for hunting. There are occasions where higher hunter numbers lessen the quality of the experience, especially during the deer gun season. The blocks of county and state forest tend to see less competition.

The following table lists current and potential future opportunities for other forms of recreation.

Recreation Activity	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>expand this use</b>	Activity <b>currently exists</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to expand this use</b>	Activity <b>currently does not exist</b> at the property; there are opportunities to <b>add this use</b>	Activity <b>currently does not exist</b> at the property; there are only <b>limited opportunities to add this use</b>
<b>Camping – developed</b>	Black River State Forest	Buckhorn, Brunet Island, Lake Wissota, Mill Bluff, Roche-A-Cri and Rocky Arbor State Parks Elroy-Sparta State Trail	Chippewa River State Trail	Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area Big Rib River Fishery Area Augusta, Buena Vista, Colburn, Dewey Marsh, McMillan, Mead, Paul Olson and Tom Lawin Wildlife Areas
<b>Camping – primitive</b>	Black River State Forest Brunet Island State Park Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area	Buckhorn State Park Roche-A-Cri State Park Meadow Valley Wildlife Area Wood County Wildlife Area	Chippewa River State Trail State Ice Age Trail Area properties Big Rib River, Duncan Creek, Elk Creek and Mccann Creek Fishery Areas Augusta, Dell Creek, Dewey Marsh, Lawrence Creek, McMillan, Mead, North Bend Bottoms, South Beaver Creek, Tom Lawin and West Taylor Wildlife Areas	Buena Vista Colburn, Leola Marsh, Paul Olson and Yellow River Wildlife Areas Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area
<b>Picnicking</b>	Black River State Forest Rib Mountain State Park Big Rib River Fishery Area Elroy-Sparta and La Crosse River State Trails Meadow Valley Sandhill and Wood County Wildlife Areas	Chippewa Moraine State Recreation Area Chippewa River State Trail Brunet Island, Buckhorn, Lake Wissota, Mill Bluff Rocky Arbor and Roche-A-Cri State Parks Dells of The Wisconsin River and Ohmart Wetlands State Natural Areas	Dewey Marsh, McMillan and Mead Wildlife Areas	Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area Augusta, Buena Vista, Colburn, Leola Marsh, Paul Olson, Tom Lawin and Yellow River Wildlife Area
<b>Big game hunting</b>	Nearly all department properties are open to big game hunting, at least some part of the season. State parks and trails have special regulations pertaining to when and where hunting is allowed in designated areas on the property. Hunter walking trails are sometimes desired to reach different parts of the property, so adding trails could provide better opportunity for some hunters. In some cases, properties may be able to add parking to improve access for hunters.			
<b>Bird and wildlife watching</b>	All department properties are open to bird and wildlife watching. Trails are sometimes desired but not necessary. In some cases, properties may be able to add viewing platforms that would provide better vantage points from which to view wildlife. Nearly all department properties have opportunities to add at least some designated hiking trails or viewing platforms that would aide this activity.			

## SUMMARY OF THE WESTERN SANDS REGION ROA

With a diversity of public conservation lands within the diverse landscape, the Western Sands Region provides outdoor recreation for those looking for a mix of developed recreation facilities. Much of what recreationists look for can all be found here—regional trail networks for various forms of trail use, large properties for migratory bird and big game hunting, state and county park properties with camping, picnic areas and hiking trails, as well as waterways for boating and canoe/kayak use.

Although the region is rich in current opportunities, many needs were expressed by residents. Topping the list of needs are: hiking, walking, and running trails, developed and rustic campgrounds, picnic and wildlife viewing areas, as well as horseback riding, bicycle touring and mountain biking trails.

The department believes there are opportunities to meet many of the desired recreational experiences on some of the properties it manages in the Western Sands Region. In general, the department believes the following property groups are well-suited to provide the identified needs in the region:

### *STATE PARKS, FORESTS AND RECREATION AREAS*

- Hiking/walking/running loop trails of varying lengths. Properties in proximity to cities and villages likely would be most popular.
- Mountain biking trails that expand existing opportunities and create new destinations. These trails could provide single-track, constructed trails of varying difficulties (including potentially skills areas).
- Cross-country ski trails could be established and/or expanded on existing trails.
- Equestrian trails that either connect a network and/or are loop trails contained wholly in the property.
- Developed camping, including adding electrified sites to significant portions of campgrounds.
- Primitive camping to serve long-distance trail users and/or isolated sites in larger properties for wilderness-type camping for hunting, hiking and canoeing/kayaking.
- Picnic areas and wildlife viewing areas could be developed to meet the demand of day-users.
- Walk-in access to waterways for canoe/kayak users could be developed.

### *STATE TRAILS*

- Hiking/walking/running loop trails of varying lengths.
- Cross-country ski trails could be established and/or expanded on existing trails.
- Primitive camping to enable trail users to take multi-day trips.
- Picnic areas could be developed or expanded at trailhead areas.

### *STATE WILDLIFE AND FISHERY AREAS*

- Hiking/walking/running loop trails of varying lengths.
- Mountain biking trails that expand existing opportunities and create new destinations. These trails could provide single-track, constructed trails of varying difficulties (including potentially skills areas).
- Equestrian trails that either connect a network and/or are loop trails contained wholly in the property.
- Cross-country ski trails could be established and/or expanded on existing trails.
- Primitive camping to serve long-distance trail users and/or isolated sites in larger properties for wilderness-type camping for hunting, hiking and canoeing/kayaking.
- Picnic areas and wildlife viewing areas could be developed to meet the demand of day-users.
- Walk-in access to waterways for canoe/kayak users could be developed.